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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ELLS BY RACIAL IDENTITY: A PILOT STUDY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY

HA TRAN

CHICAGO, IL

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INTRODUCTION

As their name implies, English language learners (ELLs) often require additional educational, cultural, and linguistic support and resources from their teachers in order successfully navigate White-dominated spaces, such as public education and society at large (Au, 2011; Knight, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gibbons, 2002). These additional, but critical resources are vital to ELL success, yet are something that their English-speaking monolingual peers, teachers (Gutierrez & Orellana, 2006; Suarez-Orozco, 2001), and even administrators (Levine & Lezotte, 2011; Wrigley, 2000) sometimes do not consider, as they themselves did not require those additional resources in order to be successful (Pettit, 2011). And thus, it has become increasingly common for negative misconceptions of ELLs to arise within educational and political spaces (Krashen, 2003; Levine, Howard, & Moss (2014); Pappamihiel, 2007; Tse, 2001), particularly regarding the need to provide extra funding, training, and resources for this student population (Mellom et al., 2018; Reeves, 2004; Youngs, 1999).

The number of ELLs in the United States schooling system continues to grow (NCES, 2023; Wolf, Kao, Griffin, Herman, Bachman, Chang, & Farnsworth, 2008), making it increasingly common for teachers without any previous ESL coursework or certification to have English language learners (ELLs) in their mainstream classrooms (Crawford, 1997; Hansen-Thomas, Richins, Kakkar, Okeyo, 2014; McCloskey, 2002; Walker, Shafer, & Liams, 2004). McCloskey (2002) found that only 12% of K-12 teachers in the United States have any training

or experience in working with English language learners or any linguistically diverse students. In the same vein, Hansen-Thomas (2014) found through a survey of rural teachers that they felt unprepared to handle ELLs in their classroom due to lack of training. The teachers in the study also cited difficulties in communicating with ELLs and their families as a main point of concern. More recently, Stairs-Davenport (2023) observed that nearly nine out of ten (~87%) teachers in their study population either had no preparation or one day's equivalent of preparation to teach ELLs in their classroom. This alarming trend of sending underprepared teachers to teach and engage with ELLs has resulted in the poor academic progress of these students (Callahan, 2006; Major, 2006; Mellom et al., 2018; Menken & Kleyn, 2009), in some cases, contributing to the widening of the achievement gap between ELLs and their English-only speaking counterparts (Lopes-Murphy, 2012).

In an effort to hold teachers, schools, and districts more accountable for the academic progress of ELLs, federal regulations imposed funding-linked English achievement testing on ELLs through No Child Left Behind (Li, 2007). The widespread promotion of accountability based, high-stakes testing in English for ELLs proved to be detrimental as ELLs are tested in “a language that [they] by definition have not yet mastered” leading to “these students and the schools serving them [to be] disproportionately likely to be to be penalized” (Menken, 2010b, p. 125). English language learners must simultaneously learn and translate English while also making sense of the novel subject-based classroom material when placed in their mainstream classes, making their experience in the American school system twice as challenging as compared to their English-speaking counterparts, who are learning new material in a language they already understand. The strict policies within No Child Left Behind gave way for struggling school districts, administrators, and specifically, teachers, to unfairly shift the blame towards

ELLs themselves if they were not able to perform well on English language achievement measures (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2009; Ovando, 2003), ultimately hurting the very students that these policies aimed to elevate.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was replaced by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 (Knight, 2017). Even though ESSA lifted the ‘one size fits all’ educational assessment strategy previously implemented by NCLB and have given teachers more freedom on how they will test and assess their ELLs, teachers and school districts are still held accountable for their students’ achievement gaps (Adler-Greene, 2019; Knight, 2017). While the policies within No Child Left Behind that punished underperforming schools are no longer active, its lingering effects are still present (Knight, 2017). Negative perceptions and “othering” of ELLs and culturally diverse students are still evident within the body of literature pertaining to teacher perceptions of ELLs (Cummins, 2001; Fitts & Gross, 2012; Knight, 2017; Pappamihel, 2007). These misconceptions about ELLs only serve to harm this already vulnerable population as teacher perceptions have a large influence over teachers’ motivation to engage with their students, which ultimately affects student performance and success (Karabernick & Clemens, 2004; Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly & Driscoll, 2005; Garcia, 2015). Unfortunately, “in this time of high stakes testing, teachers’ work with ELLs [can] become...a high-stakes teaching act” (Hite & Evans, 2006, p. 89).

BACKGROUND & SIGNIFICANCE

In the years between 2000 and 2019, the English language learner population grew by nearly one and a half million students nationally. The ELL population went from 3.8 million students and making up 8.1 percent of the student population in 2000 to 5.1 million students and making up 10.4 percent of the student population in 2019 (NCES, 2019). ELLs have been predicted to be

the fastest growing student population segment across the nation and have grown 60% in the past two decades (NEA, 2020). It was at one point estimated that the population of ELL students was growing four times faster than that of native English-speaking students (McCloskey, 2002). It has been further estimated that one out of every ten public school students in the United States is actively learning how to speak English in school (NPR, 2017). Moreover, sources have predicted that by 2025, the ELL population in the United States will grow to 25%, or 1 out of every 4 children (NEA, 2020).

In addition to being one of the fastest growing segments within the public education population, it is also important to note that the ELL population is far from homogeneous and varies largely from one geographic location to another. Out of the 5 million ELLs, it was found that around 76 percent or 3.8 million students reported using Spanish as their primary language at home, making it the most commonly reported language used by ELLs (NCES, 2019). Arabic and Chinese were reported to be the next common languages spoken at home by ELLs, with approximately 131,550 speakers (3%) and 100,100 (2%) speakers respectively (NCES, 2019). Other languages reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019) also included French/Haitian Creole (2%), Arabic (2%), Yiddish/Jewish (1%), Korean (1%), Tagalog (1%), German (1%), and (but not limited to) Hmong (1%). As a collective group, English language learners speak nearly 400 different languages in their homes (Batalova & McHugh, 2010).

When aggregating ELL population data by state, there is considerable variability observed with a larger concentration of ELLs in some western states (NCES, 2019). Twelve states reported having higher than 10.0 percent of ELLs in their public-school student population: Alaska, California, Colorado, Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Texas, and Washington (NCES, 2019). The highest population of

ELLs was reported by Texas, 19.6 percent of the student population in 2019, followed by California with 18.6 percent and New Mexico with 16.5 percent (NCES, 2019). Twenty-two other states reported their ELL population to be between 6.0 and 10.0 percent, while another 10 states reported their ELL population to be between 3.0 and 6.0 percent (NCES, 2019). At the other end of the spectrum, six states reported to have less than 3.0 percent of ELLs in their student population, with the bottom three being Montana with 2.4 percent, Vermont with 2.2 percent, and West Virginia with 0.8 percent (NCES, 2019).

When looking at ELL populations within states, the percentage of ELLs tend to be higher in denser, urbanized areas than in less urbanized, rural areas. On average, ELLs make up 14.8 percent of the overall public-school enrollment in cities, as compared to making up only 4.4 percent of the overall student population in rural areas (NCES, 2019). The ELL population for suburban areas and towns fell in the middle, with 10.0 percent of the student population and 7.0 percent of the student population, respectively (NCES, 2019).

Moreover, most English language learners tend to be in elementary school. In a 2015 study, it was reported that up to two thirds (67%) of the ELL population were enrolled in grades K-5, while only 33% of ELLs were in grades 6-12 (MPI, 2015). Similarly, when aggregating ELL population data by grade level, 16% of kindergarteners in the U.S. were reported to belong to the ELL population while only 4% of 12th graders were ELLs (Saunders & Marcelletti, 2013). This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that students are often assigned ELL status when first entering school but as some students eventually achieve English language proficiency, they are no longer considered ELL (Saunders & Marcelletti, 2013).

However, due to factors such as lack of financial resources, insufficient teacher training and professional development, inadequate English instruction, or a combination of other

institutional obstacles, some ELLs can take more than six years to achieve academic language proficiency, while some do not reach proficiency at all (Menken & Kleyn, 2009). Labelled as ‘long-term ELLs’, it was estimated that up to 60% of ELLs in grades 6-12 fall into this category (Grantmakers in Education, 2013; Menken & Kleyn, 2009; NEA, 2020) This population is characterized by inconsistent language instruction, below grade-level performance in reading and writing, having poor grades, and are often required to repeat grades, thus making this subset highly susceptible to dropping out (Callahan, 2006; NEA, 2020; Menken & Kleyn, & Chae, 2007; Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002).

One popular misconception about ELLs is that they are illegal, undocumented, or otherwise ‘un-American’ and thus do not deserve federal or institutional resources because they do not ‘belong’ here (Breiseth, 2015; MPI, 2015). Although legal status should not be a sole determinant of equitable educational access, this nationalistic assumption projected on to ELLs as a whole is simply incorrect and can be quite detrimental if left unchecked. While it is certainly true that some ELLs are immigrants and are newcomers to the U.S., a large majority of ELLs are American-born (Breiseth, 2015), and thus have just as much constitutional right to equal education as their monolingual English-speaking peers. Indeed, around 85% of ELLs in grades K-5 and 62% of ELLs in grades 6-12 were born in the United States, making them just as ‘American’ as their native English-speaking peers (Zong & Batalova, 2015).

Simply put, harboring gross misconceptions and generalizations about the ELL population to the point of preventing these students from having fair access to education is unjust, unfair, and quite frankly, ‘un-American’. Lingering negative perceptions and misguided assumptions about ELLs, especially by their teachers (who arguably spend the most time with them, instructional or not), is highly concerning and should be a point of collective apprehension

by all parents, educators, policymakers, and everyone else in between. As such, it is imperative to further dissect, explore, and understand teachers' perceptions of ELLs and the factors that may affect their beliefs. In doing so, teachers will not only be able to reflect on the reasoning behind their perceptions, but also understand how their behavior can affect their ELL students. Furthermore, educational researchers can use this information to identify points of weakness and modify current professional development practices to reflect a more culturally relevant and effective approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher Perceptions of ELLs

Previous literature and research studies pertaining to mainstream teachers' perceptions of ELLs have illustrated a picture of general ambivalence (Cummins, 2001; Garcia, 2015) and even unwelcoming (Beck, 1994; Olsen, 1997; Pang & Sablin, 2001) or directly oppositional attitudes (Krashen, 2003; Walker et al., 2004) towards the inclusion and support of ELLs in their classrooms. As the population of ELLs continues to grow in the U.S., more and more teachers report that they do not have any experience or professional training on how to meet the diverse linguistic needs of ELLs (McCloskey, 2002; Mellom, Straubhaar, Balderas, Ariail, & Portes, 2018; Youngs & Youngs, 2001).

While it is certainly not a viable excuse for ignorance, a lack of exposure to diverse cultures and ELLs in general can certainly contribute to teachers' misconceptions and concerns about teaching this population. One reason for this is that as refugees and immigrants settle in districts that have an overwhelming homogeneous population with little to no experience in cultural or linguistic diversity, their academic needs end up unmet or simply ignored as these teachers are ill-equipped (McCloskey, 2002; Mellom et al., 2018), or even unwilling, to teach language

minority students (Beck, 1994; Daviss, 2002; Walker et al., 2004). As Valdes (2001) observed, “some teachers feel angry...feel[ing] cheated at not having the ‘good’ students they once had”, while some principals “wish that the new children would simply go away” (p. 31).

Some studies suggest that teachers may have very real fears about (a) feeling pedagogically inadequate or incapable of teaching ELLs (Verplaetse, 1998), (b) not having enough time to individually address ELLs’ unique linguistic needs in the mainstream classroom (Youngs, 1999), and (c) the assumed escalation of their personal workload when ELLs are put into their mainstream classes (Gitlin, Buenda, Crosland, & Doumbia, 2003). In general, teachers voiced their concerns about ELLs potentially slowing down progress within the mainstream classroom (Youngs, 1999), while some go as far as to conflate the presence of ELLs in their classrooms with being a disservice to their monolingual English-speaking students, citing possible inequity in educational opportunities for all students as a result of ELL inclusion (Platt, Harper, & Mendoza, 2003; Reeves, 2004).

Similarly, Walker and colleagues (2004) found that teachers “often feel overwhelmed when an ELL is first placed in their classroom” (p. 142). Teachers in this study generally agreed that they “are burdened enough with adapting for everyone else” and that they “have enough on [their] plates already” (p. 141). Teachers commonly attributed lack of time as the main determinant as to why they are unwilling to adapt their curriculum and instruction for ELLs (Walker et al., 2004).

Without additional time and the appropriate resources, the task of teaching English language learners alongside their English monolingual peers can seem Herculean and quite frankly, impossible. In a survey of 83 in-service and 88 pre-service teachers, Polat’s (2010) findings suggest that mainstream teachers feel unprepared and simply not ready to effectively

teach their ELLs. Another survey of K-5 teachers found that one of the common themes was that teachers did not know where to start when it came to teaching ELLs in their mainstream class (Stairs-Davenport, 2013). Additionally, another study observed that teacher self-efficacy was directly related to the amount of ELL-related trainings and courses previously taken and that teachers with low self-efficacy were not able to provide adequate mentorship to other teachers (Durgunoğlu & Hughes, 2010). These findings across different studies suggest that the common theme of the lack of time and training resources can result in lower levels of teacher self-efficacy.

Together, these feelings of professional inadequacy, misdirected anger, and fear of the unknown cumulated in what researchers have labelled as a deficit model of thinking towards ELL students (Garcia, 2015; Rizzuto, 2017; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001), with some teachers holding the belief that ELLs could simply learn English “if they really wanted to” (Pappamihiel, 2007, p. 44). Moreover, in Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco’s (2001) study, they found that mainstream teachers shifted the blame towards ELLs and attributed ELLs’ academic failures as their own personal fault, implying that failures were something that they deserved and had brought upon themselves. Some teachers in Walker and colleagues’ (2004) study also displayed this deficit model of thinking, openly characterizing ELLs as poor academic achievers. This type of problematic thinking can lead to long-lasting and detrimental effects on students.

The Effect of Teacher Perceptions on Teaching

Teacher perceptions are shaped by their beliefs and the values that they hold (Thompson, 1992; Nieto, 2013) and these perceptions play a critical role in classroom behavior and influence teachers’ approach to pedagogy (Richardson, 1996; Song, 2016). As Karabenick and Noda

(2010) succinctly state, “attitudes are important because they affect teachers’ motivation to engage with their students, which can translate into higher student motivation and performance” (p. 56). Indeed, Peregoy and Boyle (1997) agree that teachers who have not yet self-reflected on their biases towards having ELLs in their classrooms are likely to subconsciously discriminate against them, even if these teachers claim to want the best for them. On the other hand, Pajares (1992) notes that holding ELLs to the same standards and expectations as the other mainstream students in the classroom can have a positive effect on ELLs’ overall school experience.

When left unchecked, poor teacher attitudes towards culturally diverse students was observed to have a negative effect on the teachers’ sense of pedagogic efficacy (Pang & Sablin, 2001), which, in turn, could have a detrimental effect on student outcomes. In Pang and Sablin’s (2001) survey of 175 pre- and in-service teachers, they concluded that negative teacher attitudes could be contributed to prejudiced and racist beliefs about diverse student populations. Moreover, they found that teachers who adhered to this racist ideology tended to believe that low-class diverse students only served to detract from the academic success of other students, and that no amount of resources or human capital could properly educate these students (Pang & Sablin, 2001). The most shocking discovery was that in-service teachers reported a lower sense of efficacy for teaching diverse populations than pre-service teachers (Pang & Sablin, 2001), implying that experience with and exposure to diverse students did not counteract with internalized racist beliefs, but instead exacerbated them.

Several other recent studies have also documented similar effects that negative teacher perceptions can have on their pedagogic practices (Nieto, 2013; Sandvik, van Daal, & Ader, 2013). For instance, one study observed that lack of critical classroom support for ELLs was attributed to teachers’ “underlying, deep-seated beliefs” about ELLs’ ability to learn (Sanvik et

al., 2013, p. 13). A comprehensive literature review on mainstream teachers' beliefs towards ELL students found that many teachers possessed misconceptions about their ELL students and also self-reported that they were vastly unprepared to teach ELLs (Pettit, 2010). Pettit (2010) concludes that the strongest indicator for positive attitudes towards ELLs was the amount of ELL-related training previously received by the teacher.

A lack of time, training, and positive beliefs about ELLs can lead exhausted teachers to 'do what they can' in regard to teaching linguistically diverse populations. Teachers have been observed to focus their instruction during class time on certain students that they perceive to either be capable of mastering the material or deserving of their attention and time (Nieto, 2013). As such, several educational researchers have suggested that biases and negative assumptions about ELLs account for disproportionately high numbers of ELL students placed in low-level reading groups within the classroom (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2010). This type of grouping or 'ability tracking' is not a foreign concept within educational spaces, particularly as a response to limited time and resources by overworked teachers. (Lau & Law, 2006). Unfortunately, creating groups of 'higher ability' students and 'lower ability' students can harm ELLs in their mainstream classrooms, due to a lack of exposure to 'higher level' linguistic ability for ELLs placed in 'lower ability' groups. According to Vygotsky's (1978) theory of linguistic scaffolding, the rate of novel linguistic acquisition is improved through exposure to knowledgeable peers that aid in making new connections in language learning. In line with this, a study conducted by Arias (2016) found that including native-speaking peers in learning groups with ELLs "had a positive impact on ELL engagement and achievement, particularly in communicative competence" (p. 555).

Overall, it can be seen that teachers' perceptions of their students and their own ability to teach their students can have a profound impact on student results. Though not meant to be outright malicious, negative perceptions of ELLs by their teachers can be insidious and result from: (1) lack of experience in dealing with and training regarding ELLs or (2) being put into situations with ELLs where teachers feel unprepared and unable to teach them. Some learning theories insist that in order to learn at their full potential, students must be exposed to challenging material. Negative teacher perceptions of ELLs could limit ELLs in classrooms due to unfair stereotyping that does not allow for ELLs to be put in positions to be engaged and challenged appropriately.

Teacher Professional Development in Language and Diversity Courses

Professional development for teachers, particularly in the realm of language and diversity, play an important role in the pedagogy and intellectual development of ELLs. Karabenick and Noda (2010) suggest that "teachers' attitudes toward ELLs can also affect teachers' receptivity to professional development efforts to improve ELL-related capabilities and to dispel unwarranted beliefs about language and cognition" (p. 56). Indeed, previous participation in classes during graduate or undergraduate courses that directly related to language minority students have been shown to have a positive effect on teachers' general attitudes towards ELLs (Byrnes, Kiger & Manning, 1997; Dekutoski, 2011; Pettit, 2010; Walker et al., 2004; Youngs & Youngs, 2001).

Dekutoski (2011) noted a positive association between teachers' current professional development and past coursework involving ELLs. Furthermore, teachers' attitudes towards professional development also correlated with the number of credit hours taken during graduate and undergraduate courses that directly related to language minorities (Dekutoski, 2011). In sum, past exposure to courses pertaining to language minority students were found to have a

significant statistical effect on three teacher variables: (1) professional development, (2) attitudes towards professional development, and (3) attitudes towards ELLs in general (Dekutoski, 2011).

These findings support previous literature on the relationship between previous coursework in ELL-related professional development and negating negative teacher attitudes towards ELLs. Walker and colleagues (2004) reported that teachers in their study with some ELL training were statistically more like to: (1) believe in curriculum or instruction adaption by mainstream teachers for their ELL students, (2) actually want ELL students in their classroom, and (3) be more welcoming to institutional diversity initiatives involving ELLs.

Moreover, there is evidence that links a teacher's qualification levels with their students' reading achievement scores (NCES, 2015). That is, students tend to perform the best when their teachers are better certified and highly educated (Au, 2011; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2010). This can be explained in part by the fact that these teachers are more likely to have had extensive professional development that highlighted best practice pedagogy for all students (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In sum, it can be said that teachers that spend more time studying the practice of teaching inevitably become more effective teachers than those who do not. This observation of highly trained teachers also being highly effective teachers can be seen in teachers that teach ELLs (Durgunoğlu & Hughes, 2010; Song, 2016), but also for mainstream teachers (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2006).

While it is known that professional development practices can improve teachers' overall efficacy, some researchers have found that the amount of training received plays a critical role in whether or not professional development efforts are indeed effective and that most teachers have never had training. In a study of professional development methods, Darling-Hammond and

colleagues (2009) concluded that any training or development program under 14 hours did not change teaching practices of the teachers involved, nor did it have any impact on student achievement. Even more troubling, they discovered that in the past three years, over 67% of teachers nationally had never even had one day of ELL-related training (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Unfortunately, this identification of seemingly unprepared teachers is not uncommon in the literature on ELL professional development. Eighty-seven percent (n = 368) of 422 K-12 teachers reported to have never had any professional development or training on proper classroom support methods for ELL students (Walker et al., 2004). Moreover, a survey of 279 mainstream high school teachers in a southeastern city concluded that 90% of these teachers had no additional training on how to best educate ELLs or any other special student population (Reeves, 2006). These findings are in line with McCloskey's (2002) observation that only a mere 12% of K-12 teachers had any training or experience working with students with linguistically diverse backgrounds. This recurring theme of inadequate teacher training as it relates to ELLs is not an issue fixated in the past, as there continues to be ongoing evidence of limited teacher training. Much like previous studies, a more recent study of K-5 teachers in a state with growing ELL numbers found that almost 90% of teachers surveyed had little (20%) to no (70%) training regarding ELLs (Stairs-Davenport, 2023).

The high percentages of teachers who have never had any ELL training is incredibly alarming, yet the most alarming aspect of these reported statistics is that most of the teachers without training did not want any training offered to them. Over half (51%; n = 212) of the teachers surveyed by Walker and colleagues (2004) expressed that they "would not be interested in training, even if the opportunity was available" (p. 140). In an even more problematic finding,

17% percent of teachers went as far as to say an ELL teaching certificate was completely unnecessary (Walker at al., 2004). Similarly, 45% of 279 teachers reported having zero interest in receiving any more training to work with ELLs (Reeves, 2006). Furthermore, when given the opportunity to participate in ELL training workshops, all three teachers in Clair's (1995) study promptly declined, boldly citing that "teaching is the same no matter what kind of kids you have" (p. 191).

RESEARCH QUESTION

Examined together, the above body of literature reaffirms how commonplace teachers' negative perceptions of ELLs truly are and the increasingly detrimental effects that negative perceptions can have on this already vulnerable population of students if left further left unexplored or confronted. Fueled by underlying racist beliefs that ultimately contribute to deficit models of thinking, teachers' dismissive perceptions of ELLs only serve to harm as it influences teachers to reject further professional development or training involving ELLs. This counterproductive cycle of false beliefs and rejection of productive and informative training methods outlines the current urgent need for careful and deliberate research about what factors may affect teacher perceptions of ELLs, professional diversity, and professional development.

While the previous literature about teachers' perceptions of ELLs have certainly provided substantial insight on the drivers of these negative beliefs, it must be noted that there are gaps to be filled within the current body of research. Previous studies on teachers' perceptions of ELLs have been limited to general conclusions about a very diverse ELL population. Operating under the assumption that the ELL population in the United States is an ever-growing subset of the student body (NCES, 2023), with reports of students speaking over 400 different languages at home (Batalova & McHugh, 2010), it is advantageous for future studies about teacher

perceptions to disaggregate the ELL population and to not view them as a homogenous whole. This is not to say that previous studies about teacher perceptions have not attempted to create subgroups, but that these studies were limited to dividing by geographical location or types of schools/community context (Walker et al., 2004), and not by variables within the ELL population specifically, such as racial identity or language spoken.

In dividing ELL populations by language spoken or racial identity, future studies on teacher perceptions will be able to pinpoint identity-specific concerns or misleading beliefs that teachers may have about a certain subgroup of ELLs and thus be able to provide identity-specific and therefore, effective recommendations for future professional development courses. As Byrnes and Kiger (1994) suggest, “to the extent that teachers’ attitudes can facilitate or be a barrier to learning English for [ELL] children, it is important to understand the structure of teachers’ attitudes to work towards constructive change” (p. 234). Surely, to be able to delve deeper into teachers’ beliefs about ELLs, an important first step will be to see how teacher perceptions of ELLs can vary by ELLs’ differing racial identity or languages spoken.

As such, our current study will attempt to provide a unique angle on teacher perceptions of ELLs by seeking to explore: (1) the differences in teacher perceptions of ELLs between (a) a Spanish-speaking ELL student population and (b) an Asian-language speaking ELL student population, (2) how various teachers perceive racially differing ELLs, and (3) to identify and explore the factors that may influence teachers' perceptions of various ELLs.

The present study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the differences in mainstream teachers’ perception of ELL students, if any, between the Spanish-speaking ELL population and Asian language-speaking ELL population?

RQ2. What is the variability within mainstream teachers' perceptions towards English language learners?

RQ3. What factors may influence teachers' perceptions of ELLs?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Pilot Study

In addition to the three research questions that guide this study, another overarching purpose of this study is to perform as a pilot study with a goal of determining the feasibility of conducting a full-scale study of the same research purpose in the near-future. This pilot study will serve to test several different aspects of the research lifecycle in preparation for the full-scale study, such as interviewing methodology (ex. types of interview questions, session length), recruitment process (ex. effective sampling methods, teacher availability), data analysis process, among other things.

One main difference between this pilot study and the proposed future full-scale study is population size. The small population size of this pilot study was purposefully chosen as a means of testing out the research study factors listed above in a quick and efficient manner, before extrapolating any findings to the larger full-scale study. The future full-scale study will utilize a larger population size, along with any lessons learned from this current pilot study.

Participants

The participants in this study were mainstream teachers that had ELLs in their classroom and taught in various middle and elementary schools within one suburban school district in the Midwest. In this case, a mainstream teacher is defined as someone who is either a core content teacher at the middle school level or an elementary classroom teacher. Of the four teachers who volunteered to be interviewed for this study, one was male and three were females and all four identified as Caucasian/white. Three of the four teachers were in their second year of teaching

and the other was in their third year. Two teachers reported mainly teaching ELLs of White/Asian backgrounds, while two teachers reported teaching ELLs of mainly Hispanic backgrounds.

The suburban school district that this study took place in reported a 9% ELL student population district-wide for the year 2018, while the population of ELL students within the schools that the participants taught at ranged from 9% at one school, to two schools with nearly 18%, and to another school with over 25%. As a whole, this school district reported a student population that, on average, included 80% white students, 9% Asian students, and 8% Hispanic students. Of the schools that the participants taught at, three schools report demographics close to the district average, but one school stood out from the rest, reporting 69% white students, 15% Asian students, and 11% Hispanic students.

Sampling Method and Recruitment

The inclusion criteria for the participants to qualify for the study were that: (a) teachers had to be an active and certified teacher within the district, (b) they had to have taught for at least 2 years within that district, (c) had to have taught in the previous school year, (d) and have ELL students in their current classroom. After IRB and school district approval was received, recruitment of participants was done through email and a recruitment letter was sent to qualifying teachers in the district by district officials. Teachers who expressed interest in the study were then contacted via email to set up availability.

The sampling method used in this study was a mix of convenience/snowball and stratified sampling. Teachers that qualified for the study were interviewed based upon the order of their availability, were requested to recommend their peers, and was also made sure that there would

be parity between the two groups: (1) teachers that taught and interacted with mainly Asian ELL students and (2) teachers that taught and interacted with mainly Spanish-speaking ELL students.

Data Collection and Instruments

The data collected in this study mainly consists of qualitative data, that is, each teacher participated in a semi-structured in-depth interview that consisted of 13 core questions adopted from Rizzuto's (2017) study on teachers' perceptions of ELLs. Teachers in this study were interviewed over a two-week period that was several weeks into the current school year. Teachers were interviewed separately, with each interview lasting around one hour.

The core questions covered basic information on teaching experience (e.g., How many years have you been teaching?; How many years at each grade level?; How long have you been teaching in this school?) as well as prompts about classroom behavior towards ELLs and perceptions of them (e.g., What are your learning expectations for the ELL students in your classroom?; How much assistance do you provide the families of ELLs?; What do you think about students speaking their home language in school?).

As the term semi-structured implies, in addition to these core questions teachers were also asked appropriate follow-up questions that stayed within the theme of perceptions of ELLs, but varied interview to interview as each teacher was given the space to direct the conversation towards the points that they were most passionate about. As a general probe, teachers were asked to elaborate on areas about ELLs that they felt needed the most attention, what advice they would give to ELL policymakers, and what they would change in their school if they could.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews was analyzed by following the six steps of thematic analysis as defined by The Interaction Design Foundation (2019): (1) becoming familiar with the data through taking notes, (2) assigning preliminary codes to the data with the goal of describing the content, (3) searching for patterns or themes within the codes across all the interviews, (4) reviewing the themes identified, (5) finalizing, defining, and naming the themes, and finally (6) using the themes to create a coherent findings section.

RESULTS

Overall, the themes identified within the interview data illustrated that the teachers in the study expressed very similar ideas and perceptions about their ELL students across both racial identities examined. Surprisingly, while there was little variance within the themes and ideas between teachers' perceptions of Spanish-speaking ELLs and Asian language-speaking ELLs, it was evident that there were two significant patterns/themes in how all of the teachers, across both ELL groups, perceived (1) ELLs at large and (2) ELLs within their classrooms. Moreover, when comparing and analyzing these two themes, a third theme emerged: (3) personal deflection of ELL responsibility. Thus, after analyzing the qualitative data, three distinct themes emerged across both groups: (a) ELLs in theory, a struggling group based on perceptions of policy and statistics, (b) ELLs in practice, a group painted as hardworking American Dream-types, and (c) ELLs as, ultimately, the responsibility of ELL program/classroom language aide.

ELLs in Theory: Policy and Statistic Driven Perception

When talking about ELLs as an abstract concept that existed within the realm of the American public education system, the teachers often gravitated towards using policy and statistics-driven language that portrayed ELLs as the “struggling and forgotten” students who

were “consistently behind their peers” and required the utmost attention from their teachers. The teachers referred to the achievement gap between ELLs and their monolingual peers as a point of major concern and expressed their anger towards the system for not being more accommodating or supporting of ELL students.

You know, sometimes I think it’s just really unfair for these students (ELLs). They are the ones that need the most help, but most of the time they don’t get that support. They don’t get the help they need, because of how the school system is. They’re not prioritized. They’re the ones that need the most help but are the first ones to be forgotten.

The gap between ELLs and other students exists because of how these students are typically excluded...they need extra help, they need extra instruction. I don’t know. Teachers just don’t pay attention to ELLs as much as they should.

I’ve read a lot of studies and articles online about ELLs and it hurts me that the achievement gap is still there— that they’re still consistently behind their peers on a national level. I know we’ve made progress, but there’s so much more to be done for ELLs.

Teachers’ perceptions of both Spanish-speaking and Asian language-speaking ELLs painted a federal-level picture of struggling ELL students in dire need of help, support, and teacher attention. Most commonly, the teachers talked about ELLs here as a whole, and often touched on the overwhelming need to direct resources and attention towards ELL students and their respective support programs in order to make more progress at closing the achievement gap. Unanimously, the teachers agreed that the ELLs that needed the most help were at faraway schools and other districts across the United States, but surely, the struggling ELLs were not at the schools they were teaching at. In part, they claim, is because the ELLs at their schools have the support of pull-out ELL programs and ELL classroom aides, with whom the teachers work with and have meetings about their ELL students’ progress.

ELLs in Practice: Idolized, Yet Surface-Level Perceptions Across Racial Identity

As a method of teasing apart perceptions of ELLs by racial identity, teachers were asked to situate some answers within the context of their current ELL students, but as the conversation shifted towards their perceptions of ELLs that were specifically in their classroom, the teachers' perceptions of Spanish-speaking ELLs and Asian language-speaking ELLs maintained a generally positive and sometimes even idolized characterization of the ELL students in their classroom.

I have no complaints about my (ELL) kids. They're honestly angels. So sweet and always smiling. They don't talk much, but every interaction I've had this school year has been good.

[name redacted] is just the greatest kid. I think he's incredibly smart and has made so much progress in the past two months alone. Amazing kid.

My two (ELL) students are very hard working. In fact, some of the most hardworking in the whole classroom. I literally cannot tell you more positive things about them, they're great.

When asked to discuss their current ELL students in class, the teachers' description of their students, while positive and well-intended, tended to mainly default towards stereotypical immigrant tropes, such as their ability to "work incredibly hard" and their pathway to achieving the American Dream. This phenomenon was observed to happen across both student population groups. That is, when questioned specifically about both their Spanish-speaking ELLs and Asian language-speaking ELLs, teachers described both groups as equally hardworking. Although the teachers were asked to describe what stood out most to them about their current ELL students, they tended to only focus on their ELLs' academic abilities and work ethic.

All I can say is that she is not afraid to get in there and do the work. She has struggled in the beginning, but she never fails to keep trying. She works harder than a lot of the kids in class.

I've had such joy teaching them so far this year. They never give me any trouble and are all just such hard workers. They work incredibly hard, all the time. I mean, I just can't imagine how much more effort it is for them.

Across the board, teachers in both groups expressed sentiments about their ELL students that stayed very general, even when probed deeper about their students, some teachers expressed that they do not see their ELL students as any different than the other students in their class.

But how are my ELLs different than any other student in my class? I don't think they are. I really don't. See, aside from their background— which is important, I'm not saying that it's not important. But— what I'm saying is, I think they have the same hopes and dreams to be successful and what not, as all the other students in my class. So, I try to not treat them so differently. I want to hold everyone in my class to the same standards, you know? So it's fair. I think having the same standards for everyone, ELL or not, is important.

For the most part, teachers in both groups agree that ELLs do contribute to the culture of their classroom, but often have a hard time giving specific examples or answers that did not include school, classroom, or societal diversity as a catch-all reason. The teachers talked about how ELLs are beneficial to the classroom ecosystem because ELLs bring different viewpoints, cultures, and ideas to the classroom, but in another question, none of the teachers had ever heard their ELLs speaking their home language in class, nor had any of the teachers ever personally modified classroom content to be culturally relevant for their ELL students, because they claimed to not know how.

Furthermore, when asked if any of the teachers had ever thought to ask the ELLs in their classroom directly how to modify the classroom content for them in a culturally relevant way, all four teachers expressed mild shock that the idea had never even come to them to do so. Both teachers of Spanish-speaking ELLs and Asian language-speaking ELLs admitted that they had never even thought about asking their ELL students how to make their classroom content more

relevant because the teachers either did not have the time to do so, did not think about that idea, or simply assumed that the classroom language aide had already done so.

ELLs as Responsibility of the Aide

Talking more closely about their current ELL students and their specific classroom achievements or even what their extra language support looked like, the teachers often cited their aide as the liaison for their ELLs' language progress and deferred many questions to the aides themselves. Across both ELL student population groups, their mainstream teachers only had a very general knowledge of their ELLs' language classes, or what type of work they did for their extra classes.

Well...I don't really know the structure of their (ELLs') language programs. That's something that the language program teachers and aides takes care of. I'm sorry, I should know more, but I don't.

I meet with the classroom aide before class to discuss how they're doing (ELLs) and the progress that they're making with their pull-out classes, so yes I know how they're doing, but their helper spends more one-on-one time with them than I do. I would say they know more details about my ELLs than I do.

I haven't had the chance to modify any of the classroom content to my ELLs yet this year, but I do think that the lessons from their language classes are made to be like that already (culturally relevant). I'm sure their teachers there have done something, I just don't know much of the specifics, you know?

As the probing around their ELLs' language programs increased, the teachers demonstrated a subtle division in responsibility of their ELLs' progress with the classroom aide and the extra language support that the school provided. While there were several instances of diverting the responsibility of keeping track of their ELLs' progress or extra language support to the classroom aide, for the most part, the teachers actively referred to their aide when it came to the specifics and the future of their ELLs' language support. The teachers often painted themselves as secondary teachers when it came to their ELL students.

I actually have never met with the parents of my ELLs, but that would be a good idea for the future. That's something the aide would probably be able to do.

After this, I think I might talk to my aide about doing more inclusive activities for the whole classroom. She's good about stuff like that. She would know more about it more than me.

I hate to admit it but, it's hard to keep track of their (ELLs) work (extra language support) outside of my classroom, I don't know it as well as their support teachers do.

We haven't done anything like that (ask ELLs what culturally relative content they would like to see in class), but I think that is a great idea and something I can bring up to (the student's) ELL teachers.

As the direction of the conversation headed towards what specifically was being done for their current ELL students, the teachers often deferred to the knowledge and expertise of their ELL classroom aides, as they were mainstream teachers and not ELL trained. Upon further probing, the teachers revealed that they each had not had any ELL-specific training, with maybe an exception of one teacher having one ELL-related chapter in one of their college classes. All four teachers indicated that professional development days at their schools has not covered ELLs or any ELL-related topic, but rather covered more general student topics, such as standards-based grading or socio-emotional learning.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study may be specific to its locale yet are able to provide some insight into teachers' perceptions of their ELL students, as well as ELLs in general. After analysis of the data, three findings emerge:

1. Similar teacher perceptions of students across both populations of ELLs, Spanish-speaking and Asian language-speaking.

2. General perceptions of ELLs are covertly negative/pessimistic and revolve around policy/statistics, while direct perceptions of ELLs are overtly positive and revolve around their ability to “work hard”.
3. Teachers proclaim to help ELLs in class, but often defer direct responsibilities to their language/classroom support aide.

Research Question #1 and Finding #1

RQ1. What are the differences in mainstream teachers’ perception of ELL students, if any, between the Spanish-speaking ELL population and Asian language-speaking ELL population?

Finding #1: Similar perceptions of ELLs by their mainstream teachers, across both student population groups. These perceptions ranged from neutral to positive.

While the teachers taught and interacted with ELLs from Spanish-speaking backgrounds and Asian language-speaking backgrounds, their perceptions of ELL students, both in practice and in theory, did not differ that much from each other at all. Surprisingly, teachers from both student population groups had the same general perceptions of ELLs, regardless of which racial identity of ELLs the teachers most commonly taught and interacted with in their classrooms.

Though it was assumed that teachers would express different perceptions about ELLs dependent upon which racial identity of ELLs they taught and interacted with most often, their perceptions of ELL students were essentially indiscernible from each other. The teachers all expressed neutral to positive, yet generic, sentiments about ELLs, even when probed deeper about their perceptions of their current ELL students. Their similar generic perceptions could imply the possibility of these teachers perceiving their ELLs as a conglomerate, where racial identity does not play a part in their perception of ELL students. In doing so, teachers’

perceptions of their ELLs stay surface level, and do not promote insensitive or racist perceptions, which many argue is a positive outcome.

On the other hand, teachers viewing their ELLs as a racial conglomerate could also have negative implications on their students. Each ELL student is unique and has their own language, culture, customs, and worldview and should be viewed as such. Indeed, being integrated into a new school system is automatically traumatizing at baseline but having teachers who celebrate and integrate cultural differences into the curriculum would enhance the transition in a positive manner. In order to cultivate inclusive perceptions of ELLs, teachers must be able to also recognize and celebrate racial individuality, in addition to their current neutral-positive sentiments about ELLs.

Unlike observations by Krashen (2003) and Walker (2004), the perceptions of ELLs from teachers in the current study were found to not be oppositional, nor overtly racist or unwelcoming. If anything, it was clear that the teachers expressed neutral to positive, yet generic, sentiments about ELLs, but never anything directly negative like previously observed. Similarly, Cummins (2001) and Garcia (2015), observed that the teachers were ambivalent in nature when referring to ELLs, however in the current study, teachers were confident in their neutral-positive perceptions of ELLs, though those perceptions were often shallow and generic in nature.

While it is surprising to conclude that our findings of neutral-positive teacher perceptions of ELLs were contradictory to previous literature detailing staunchly negative teacher perceptions of ELLs, it is implied that there is work that still needs to be done in terms of teachers' perceptions of ELLs. Particularly, although teachers' perceptions of ELLs have shifted from overtly negative to neutral or slightly positive, their perceptions of ELLs still lack depth,

which could suggest that teachers have limited awareness of ELLs, due to lack of training or other reasons.

Research Question #2 and Finding #2

RQ2. What is the variability within mainstream teachers' perceptions towards English language learners?

Finding #2: Teachers across both student population groups had different perceptions of ELLs in theory (macro and mezze level) vs ELLs in practice (micro level); their understanding of ELLs shift when referring to students within their classrooms. When looking across student population groups, teachers had similar perceptions to other teachers regardless of which student population they commonly taught.

Although the perceptions of ELLs by teachers in the current study were found to be generally similar when compared across ELL racial identity groups, it is evident that when dissecting their perceptions of ELLs as collective, a pattern of thought emerges. Specifically, when analyzing perceptions as a whole across both student groups, perceptions of ELLs by teachers only varied dependent upon if they were referring to ELLs in theory or ELLs in practice.

For this study, ELLs in theory vs. in practice is defined by using a model similar to socio-ecological models used within social work, where there are three levels of systems: micro, mezzo (middle), and macro. Micro-level is defined as the day-to-day interactions between the subject and their surroundings, in this case, it would be the relation level of an ELL and their teachers in a classroom setting. Mezze-level, or the middle level, is defined as the relations between the subject and a broader, yet mid-level, system, which in this case is the interactions between ELLs and their institution, i.e. school or school district. Macro-level is defined as the broadest picture

of the systems that interact with the subject, in this case, it would be the relationship ELLs have on a federal level, i.e. federal policies, laws, statistics, etc.

With the above in mind, the concept of ELLs in theory within this study is defined as being at the mezze and macro level, or also the institutional/district level and federal level, respectively. Whereas the concept of ELLs in practice within the scope of this study is defined as the micro level of interaction, since perceptions analyzed in this study stem from teachers, who exist in the micro level within their classrooms along with the ELLs.

Utilizing the breakdown of ELL perception above, it was found that at a macro federal level, teachers are able to clearly express their perceptions and understanding of ELLs in theory. That is, they expressed adequate awareness of ELLs in the federal space and also demonstrated a knowledge of best next steps to aid in the educational development of ELLs (i.e. ELLs nationally are struggling, ELLs need more federal money and programs, federal programs are failing ELLs) However, when discussing ELLs in this space, both groups of teachers fell back on using anecdotal statistics and overgeneralizations to progress their story, perhaps suggesting that their understanding of ELLs on a federal level is governed by policy, statistics, and assumptions, rather than personal encounters or direct experiences.

Similarly, when discussing ELLs at the institutional/school or mezze level, teachers all expressed knowledge and awareness of the issues that ELLs face at their school (i.e. teachers at this school need ELL training, not enough time spent on ELLs, ELLs at this school need more programs and more attention, etc). Teachers continued their perception from the macro level that ELLs at an institutional level are still struggling, need help, and lack the full attention that they deserve. Furthermore, the teachers still utilized overarching assumptions similar to the macro level and did not refer to any personal encounters that resulted in their conclusions. Thus, it can

be said that at a mezze and macro level, teachers' perceptions of ELLs are of a general theoretical sense in such that ELLs are struggling and need help.

On the other hand, when discussing ELLs in in their classroom, or at a micro level, a dramatic shift of perceptions can be observed for across both student groups. Straying away from generalizations, the teachers make direct and overtly positive claims about the ELLs in their classroom (i.e. their ELL in class is wonderful, works hard, and doesn't appear to need much help, ELL works harder than anyone else in class, ELL is smart, etc). Across all four teachers, none of them had anything negative to say about the ELLs in their classroom. Ironically, nor did the teachers allude to how their classroom addressed topics they called out as harmful to ELLs on a federal and institutional level, such as low literacy rates, not enough resources for ELLs, not enough time spent on ELLs, etc. Instead, the teachers fixated on overtly positive perceptions of ELLs, characterizing the ELLs in their classrooms as incredibly smart and hardworking, often bringing up the concept of the American dream.

The concept of being "hard working" thrust upon immigrants and first-generation students in an almost knee-jerk reaction way, is not an incident that is unfamiliar or new. In fact, Lee (1996) has observed this phenomenon of Asian-Americans being labelled the as hard-working, model minority, who through hard work can achieve anything. On the surface, some may argue that this positive stereotype does not hold any ill will, but indeed the opposite rings to be true, as unnecessarily putting certain groups on a pedestal can create lasting, insidious effects on that group. Labelling an entire group as hardworking and successful (ELL students, or Asian-Americans, or in this case, an intersection of both groups) has two main issues: (1) overlooking and ignoring individuals in said group that actually need help and support and (2) implying that

there must be a comparable group that is not hardworking, thus making the initial group more deserving of success than other groups.

When extrapolated onto the context of this study, being instantaneously labelled as “hard working” for simply existing as an ELL within a mainstream teaching space, can have very detrimental effects on the ELLs’ intellectual and language ability development. This is such because ELLs being generalized as immensely hard working glorifies their language learning struggle as part and parcel of learning English as a second language in a mainstream classroom, but that pattern of thinking is not conducive to providing ELLs the support they need to thrive, and not just merely survive. Moreover, ELLs that are stereotyped to be hardworking by their mainstream teachers are often assumed to be doing fine and may continue to be overlooked in terms of additional support. Such thinking by their mainstream teachers may manufacture situations in which ELLs continue to fly under the radar even though they are truly in need of language support.

The dichotomy between teachers’ perceptions of ELLs in theory versus in practice could suggest that the teachers themselves are unable to connect their wider perceptions of ELLs as struggling and in need of help to their everyday classroom environment. The teachers understood what needed to be done for ELLs at a federal and institutional level, but at a classroom level, could not connect on how to help ELLs, but rather focused on how hardworking their ELLs were. Any time teachers were probed closer on what can be done for their ELLs in class, the teachers would refer to their classroom aide or ESL teacher’s expertise and reassure that they were not their ELLs’ main teacher. Through the observations and analysis above, it is apparent that the mainstream teachers in the study were looking everywhere but themselves when it came

to who was at fault or responsible for ELLs' success, both on a federal/institutional level and at a classroom level.

Research Question #3 and Finding #3

RQ3. What factors may influence teachers' perceptions of ELLs?

Finding #3: Inadequate ELL training and coursework result in teachers' habitual deferment of direct ELL responsibility to classroom aide

As the teachers were probed further about what specific activities that they were doing to support their ELLs linguistically and culturally in their classroom, the teachers often deferred to their language aide as the main support for their ELLs. Anytime a suggestion about culturally responsive classroom content that could happen for their ELLs, teachers would defer responsibility off to the classroom aide, as if to "pass off" any ELL related activities to the aide. Moreover, most teachers were not able to answer direct questions about their ELLs' language and literacy progress or academic areas that require attention, a clear point of the teachers' fixation while discussing ELLs in a federal and institutional space.

The teachers' inability to take direct responsibility of their ELLs' academic progress and inclusion of culturally relevant content in their classroom resulted from their lack of training in ELL needs, at an institutional level (teachers reported that their school/district did not provide ELL-specific training during professional development days) and at the federal level (colleges/universities that the teachers attended did not require ELL-specific training or coursework). Therefore, when ELLs are placed in a mainstream teacher's classroom with their language aid, it is understandable that the mainstream teacher would automatically defer to someone with ELL-specific training, as the teachers themselves have none.

Deferment of responsibility in this setting and fear of teaching ELLs is not uncommon. In fact, other studies have cited teachers as feeling incapable or inadequate of teaching ELLs (Verplaetse, 1998). Echoing a fear of a few of the teachers in the study, Youngs (1999) also reported that a common fear of mainstream teachers was that they would not have enough time to address the individual linguistic needs of ELLs in their classroom. Teachers in the study also shared another fear: that their personal workload would increase as more ELLs were placed into their classroom, something also observed in teachers by Gitlin (2003) and colleagues. Collectively, these fears, when coupled with having an in-classroom language aid and no personal ELL-specific training, create a vehicle for mainstream teachers to defer responsibility of their ELLs on the basis of having no training.

The teachers' lack of training in ELL-specific coursework is alarming, as their school district has a considerable percentage of ELL students in attendance. Previous literature has historically supported ELL-related training and coursework as a means of providing academic support to ELLs. Teachers who had some ELL-related training were more likely to: be more welcoming of institutional diversity initiatives involving ELLs, have desire for ELLs to be in their classroom, and to support curriculum adaption by mainstream teachers for ELLs (Walker et al., 2004). Thus, for mainstream teachers at a school district with a high percentage of ELLs to self-report zero ELL-specific training, is something that needs to be addressed.

ELL-specific training, while helpful, must be consistent and reoccurring in order to have the desired positive academic outcomes on ELLs. Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2009) cite that any ELL-related training, coursework, or training program must be over 14 hours long, or risk being ineffective. As a result, in order for ELL students to truly thrive, extended ELL-

specific training and coursework must be mandatory for all mainstream teachers, not just for language aides.

CONCLUSION

Surprisingly, teachers' perception of ELLs by their racial identity were found to be generally similar across both student groups (Asian language-speaking and Spanish-speaking ELLs), though their perceptions across both groups were surface-level and guided by statistics and assumptions. There were not many differences in perception that stood out between the two groups; teachers held a very general, similar, and almost stereotypical, view of their ELLs across both groups: hardworking as a result of needing to overcome barriers. However, when analyzed as a conglomerate (not by racial identity), a pattern of ELL perceptions began to emerge.

That is, teacher perceptions of ELLs at a federal and institutional level tended to be guided by policies and statistics and painted a picture of struggling ELLs with little resources and help. The teachers claimed ELLs were in constant need of help, still had low literacy scores, and needed extra funding and educational support in order to catch up to their monolingual counterparts. Perceptions of ELLs in this space were commonly neutral to doubtful, all guided by common statistics of low ELL literacy and achievement scores.

On the other hand, when discussing ELLs at the classroom level, teachers fixated upon their (ELLs') intelligence and ability to work hard and overcome obstacles, yet were unable to answer questions on ELL student progress and literacy scores, something almost all teachers focused on as an important topic at the federal level. In the classroom space, teachers' perceptions of ELLs were overtly positive, painting a picture of hardworking students who were near perfect, a complete contrast from their perceptions of ELLs in a federal or institutional space. When probed further on the academic achievement of their ELLs in class, more often than

not, teachers diverted direct questions about their ELLs' academic progress to their in-classroom language aide, claiming to have less training and knowledge than the language teachers.

The disconnect between teachers' perceptions of ELLs in theory, at a federal and institutional level, and ELLs in practice, at a classroom level, can be explained by lack of knowledge, training, and coursework about ELLs. While teachers in the study were able to clearly understand and communicate the struggles of ELLs at a federal and institutional level, their lack of training served as a roadblock to their understanding of their role as an ELLs' mainstream teacher and how to properly teach and serve ELLs in productive and progressive manner.

Of note, when discussing how teachers' perceptions of their ELL students is influenced by a lack of teacher training, one must consider the geographical location and racial demographic of teachers and students in the school district in question, and how these factors influence the viewpoints of the district, and thus the rules, requirements, and overall culture imposed upon the teachers employed within this district. In other words, while teachers' perceptions of their students can be influenced by the amount of ELL training required in their school district, however, it must be acknowledged that these types of training requirements can (1) vary between school districts and (2) be influenced by external factors in which the school district is situated in, such as: geographical location (urban, rural, etc.), demographic aspects (racial diversity, linguistic diversity, etc.) or geo-political aspects (red vs blue states, southern states, Hawaii/Alaska, etc.).

In the current study, the school district in which data was collected from is classified as being part of school districts across America with a low population of ELLs (9% ELLs in this

school district). Located in a suburban area of the Midwest, where ELL populations of <10% is commonplace, it can be stipulated that the perceptions of ELL students made by the teacher participants in this study was directly influenced by their school district's deprioritization of ELL-related training and courses due to the low population of ELLs. On the other hand, school districts in high ELL populated areas, states such as in Texas or California, have seen percentages as high as 53% in the La Joya ISD in Texas and 45% in the Los Angeles Unified School District in California. In these high ELL school districts, prioritization and emphasis of ELLs and ELL-related training can be seen through increased training requirements and novel linguistic learning models, such as immersion schools where 50% of classes are taught in English and 50% classes are taught in L2 (i.e. Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese, etc).

To move forward, policies must be written to encourage states to mandate more than 14 hours of ELL-related training and coursework for all teachers, not just teachers specializing in ELLs or just in states with high ELL populations. In order for all ELLs across America to thrive, mainstream teachers need to feel confident in their training to connect and teach with their ELL students. Instead of feeling like a back-up teacher to the language aide or shying away from their ELLs, future mainstream teachers should aim to close the gap and be motivated to include and understand their ELLs culturally.

In a country built by the labor of immigrants who arrive in pursuit of the American Dream, everyday Americans owe it to the concept of the American Dream to strive to provide fair and equitable education for immigrant children, regardless of which state or city their parents chose to (or did not choose to) reside once they have immigrated to America.

One way of prioritizing our ELL youth is through emphasizing the importance of extensive ELL-related training and coursework for all teachers in all states, and not just for

teachers who are specializing in ELLs or within specific states or school districts. It is not sustainable nor realistic to expect immigrant parents to move school districts, or even states, in order to attain equal language education for their children.

LIMITATIONS

While this study aimed to uncover new insights to teachers' perceptions of ELLs across racial identity groups, an ancillary goal of this study was to serve as a pilot study for a future, more extensive, research study of the same topic. As such, some anticipated limitations of this pilot study include its sample adequacy, a key aspect of determining the quality of qualitative studies, which takes into the consideration the "appropriateness of the sample composition and size" (Vasileiou et al., 2018, p. 2). Some unanticipated limitations identified within this pilot study include participant bias and researcher bias as it relates to qualitative research, or in this case, as it relates to interviews in particular.

To adequately analyze this pilot study's sample adequacy, it is necessary to look towards the sample size and sampling method. Being that the sample size of teachers in the pilot study was quite small ($n = 4$), there was not much room for nuance in analysis when it came to comparing within and across ELL student racial identity groups, as there were only two teachers that fell within each group. Moreover, the sampling methodology used (a combination of convenience and snowball sampling), especially when paired with a small sample size, also posed as a limitation to this pilot study. The combination of convenience and snowball sampling to attain a small sample size implied that the sample composition might tend to be more similar to each other than a true random sample. This could attribute to the similar perceptions of ELLs observed in the pilot study, as participants recommended participation in this study to their peers within the school district.

Another limitation of this pilot study though unanticipated, was participant bias, or more specifically, the self-reported and biased nature of interview data, especially about topics generally perceived as taboo, such as racial stereotypes and how that may influence perception. Sometimes referred to as social acceptability bias (Grimm, 2010), this phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that participants might feel subconsciously pressured into producing the types of answers that they (1) believe the interviewer is looking for or wants to hear or (2) think is the morally-correct or politically-correct thing to say, even though it may not actually reflect their day-to-day behaviors or actions towards ELLs within their classroom.

Researcher bias in qualitative data analysis could also be considered a limitation within this pilot study, as the researcher could be exhibiting confirmation bias while reviewing data to produce themes. Specifically, confirmation bias occurs when the researcher subconsciously omits information that might not align with their initial hypothesis, and thus is only looking for information that confirms their original line of thought. This type of bias can be prevalent within qualitative studies, as the results of such studies stem directly from the researcher's analysis of the data.

Similar to researcher bias, researcher positionality is another factor that may influence or provide limitations on this pilot study. Researcher positionality refers to the position in which the researcher has chosen to occupy in relation to the study. In other words, the researcher's personal identity and relation to society can impact the entire lifecycle of a study; from the conception of a research topic, to the study design, to data collection, and even the results, analysis, and conclusion of the project can be affected by researcher positionality. For example, if a researcher discloses information that they were previously employed as a teacher while collecting interview data from other teachers, it would increase the participants trust in the researcher as part of the

“insider” group. This increased trust in the researcher could lead to different or more nuanced interview answers, as now the participant believes they are disclosing information to someone relatable to them. Specific examples of researcher positionality as it relates to this current pilot study will be subsequently addressed in the implications for further research section.

In sum, the main limitations of this study include the small sample size of teachers that were willing to be interviewed about their perceptions of ELLs, the methodology in which these teachers were identified for the study (convenience and snowball sampling), potential participant bias through social acceptability bias within the interview process, and potential researcher bias through confirmation bias within interview data analysis. Additionally, researcher positionality is another factor that may influence and limit the current study. While it is good to note that these limitations may exist within this current study, it must also be understood that this study served its purpose as a pilot study, identifying areas that could be reworked or improved upon when creating the foundation for the future, full-scale study of the same topic.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As the name implies, the pilot nature of this current study seeks to lay the foundation and groundwork for the development of a larger, full-scale study on teachers’ perceptions of ELLs by racial identity. In doing so, the limitations identified from the pilot study will be treated as lessons learned, and thus be used to inform and develop a research plan that ensures that these limitations will be better addressed within the full-scale study that will be taking place at a later date. Current limitations that will be addressed include: (1) addressing sample size, sample composition, and sampling methodology, (2) participant bias within interviews, i.e. social acceptability bias, and (3) researcher bias, more specifically, confirmation bias within interview

data analysis. Further, we will discuss researcher positionality and its effects on the current study and on future studies.

Addressing Sample Size/Composition and Sampling Methodology

As results from qualitative studies can be affected by sample adequacy (Vasileiou et al., 2018), the full-scale study should aim to (1) have a larger sample and (2) a sample that more closely reflects the diversity within the teacher population and the larger community and social context in which the schools they teach at are located in. For instance, in addition to having a larger sample size, it might be beneficial to deliberately survey and interview teachers from both rural and urban districts, both small and large schools, pre-service, novice, and experienced teachers, and in both schools with large and small ELL populations, and as well as populations of ELLs with varying ethnic and racial make-up and cultural backgrounds. For example, future studies could be replicated in school districts within California or Texas, states known for having high ELL populations. In doing so, the collected data will allow for a more nuanced analysis and understanding of all the different types of variables that could shape or affect teacher perceptions of ELLs while also shedding a light on the variability of ELL populations across schools in America and what their individual needs look like.

Similarly, the sampling method can also affect the outcome of qualitative research studies if many participants have been recruited from the same social, political, or educational group, as similar answers to the same interview questions might actually reflect in-group cohesion or group-think, and not actually reflect similarities across a larger group. To combat this, the full-scale study should stray away from convenience and snowball sampling as utilized in the pilot study, and instead utilize stratified sampling. As alluded to in its name, stratified sampling requires segmenting the population into subpopulations (i.e. teacher racial identity, education

level, urban vs rural teachers, etc.), as to ensure that there will be sufficient representation of the population within the sample. Once strata have been established, random sampling can be used to select participants within each subgroup.

Addressing Participant Bias Within Interviews: Social Acceptability Bias

In addition to having a larger and more representative sample, the full-scale study about teachers' perceptions of ELLs should include extensive classroom observations on multiple occasions for each teacher during their English Language Arts class. While interview data can certainly provide a substantial amount of data on teacher perceptions, having data that is not self-reported, such as classroom observations would provide a deeper picture of how teacher perceptions of ELLs then affects teachers' actions towards ELLs within a classroom setting on a day-to-day basis. Though it is not necessary to completely eliminate self-reported data due to the social acceptability bias that can be observed within participants in interviews, such data can be used in conjunction with observable data as a method of bypassing an overreliance on self-reported interview data to make conclusions about teachers' perceptions.

In tandem with observational data, the full-scale study could also collect student achievement data, particularly in English related subjects, whether that be from national standardized test scores or given as an assessment at the beginning and then again at the end of the school year by research assistants. Student achievement data could be analyzed in conjunction with teacher perception interview data and observational data in order to identify any significance within the relationship between how teachers self-report that they perceive their ELL students (their intelligence, if they are hardworking or not, etc.), what their actions towards ELLs in their classroom are, as observed by a third-party (the researcher), and how their ELL students actually perform in light of those assumptions made by their teachers.

Another piece of the puzzle that could be useful for the full-scale study would be collecting interview data from ELLs' parents, or even from ELLs themselves, as this would provide additional insight into the gaps that exist within ELLs and their families' needs from the American public-school system and how to alleviate those pain points. The viewpoints of student and parents can often be overlooked within education research in favor of more quantitative metrics, such as student literacy scores, but being able to understand the issue from a qualitative standpoint would 'fill in the color' of nuanced topics within an issue that can sometimes be portrayed as extremely 'black or white'. Moreover, interviewing different actors within the educational space would allow for the conception of a more comprehensive and holistic professional development strategy for teachers that will directly serve ELLs and their families.

Addressing Researcher Bias Within Interview Data Analysis: Confirmation Bias

When analyzing interview data and searching for themes that may arise, this process can be vulnerable to researcher bias, or more specifically confirmation bias. Furthermore, confirmation bias within qualitative data analysis can become exacerbated when only one researcher is working on the data. With only one researcher, it becomes harder to catch any confirmation bias as there is no other person to compare notes with or to provide external data validation that is independent from the themes already found. As such, it is recommended that within the full-scale study, to recruit team of data analysts that will analyze interview data for themes individually, without being informed which themes/supporting data to look for. In this manner, researcher bias through confirmation bias can be alleviated for future studies with the addition of additional team members to make the data analysis process more impartial.

Thusly, the full-scale study should seek to utilize not only teacher interview data, but also classroom observational data, additional data analysts, and a larger and more robust sample of mainstream teachers in America, in order to fully understand the big picture of ELL needs. Operating under all of the suggestions above, results from the full-scale study on ELLs will be able to provide guidance for educational policy recommendations, particularly policies towards ELLs, in a more informed, well-rounded, and community-centric manner.

Addressing Researcher Positionality in Current Study

In addition to researcher bias, researcher positionality can have a profound effect on the study, from study conception, to design, to data collection, and even to the results and discussion.

Researcher positionality is understanding that the researcher's position in relation to society can influence the type of research done, how data is collected/how the participants view the researcher, and ultimately, how the findings get interpreted and analyzed. Being able to understand a researcher's positionality allows others to understand the study findings in a larger context than what the researcher posits in their analysis.

In the context of this study, I identify as an Asian-American (Vietnamese) graduate student within educational policy. As such, it is implied that I am college-educated and have experience working with educational research. In addition to this, I attended public school from an immigrant, war refugee family, and was placed into extensive ELL testing throughout early education, but was ultimately never designated as an ELL or received additional linguistic support. In sum, my combined experience working in educational research and in coursework as a graduate student in educational policy has guided my current research study ideation and design. Coupled with personal familiarity in ELL testing and with ELL peers, this study was created from the lens of a former student on the fringe of ELL-status.

My unique position as a graduate student and researcher with some personal ELL experience allowed me to be seen as an ‘inbetweener’ to the participants, which could have affected how they chose to respond to me as opposed to if I was seen as an ‘outsider’. While I have never been a teacher or taken teacher training courses, my position as a researcher in educational spaces and current field of study was made known to the participants during my introduction. I also shared my past experiences going through extensive ELL testing as a child and my shared cultural background with some of their current ELLs. This positioned me to be seen as someone who has credibility as a researcher, but also someone who has a personal connection to this research. Additionally, my past experience conducting research in schools shaped my study design to be shorter and more concise, due to understanding how busy teachers’ schedules can be.

While my positionality can result in participants feeling more comfortable sharing information with me, it also shaped my desire to conduct this study, which could be seen as biased. Being on the fringe of ELL-testing, yet never designated as an ELL nor given ELL support, made me question why I was not selected, even though I continued to struggle with English in kindergarten and 1st grade. My past personal experience ultimately drove my desire to know how teachers viewed students like myself (Asian-American bilingual students) in the context of ELL testing and classroom support.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What subject do you teach?
2. How many years have you been teaching?
3. How many years at each grade level?
4. How long have you been teaching in this school?
5. How many ELL students do you have in your classroom/have you taught?
6. What is the racial make-up of the ELL students you have taught or interacted with?
7. What do you think about students speaking their home language in school?
8. What are your learning expectations for the ELL students in your classroom?
9. How much assistance and/or instructional time do the ELL students in your classroom require?
10. What instructional needs arise most when you work with ELL students in your class?
11. How much assistance do you provide the families of ELLs in your classroom or school?
12. How do the language backgrounds of your ELL students contribute to the culture of your classroom?
13. What areas of expertise do you wish you had to best meet the literacy instructional needs of your ELL students?
14. What do you think are the most pressing issues regarding cultural and linguistic diversity in your school?

VITA

Ha Tran was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois and attended Chicago Public Schools from K-12, which sparked her interest in research within educational spaces. Before attending Loyola University Chicago for graduate school, she received her Bachelor of Science in Psychology with a distinction in Research also from Loyola University Chicago in 2017.

In her time at Loyola, Tran was a McNair Scholar and a finalist for the Undergraduate Leadership Award through The Gannon Center for Women and Leadership. As a graduate student, Tran worked in several research labs while at Loyola and has published work alongside some of her professors in the areas of linguistic development for bilinguals and school choice.

Currently, Tran works as a business management consultant for the research enterprise at a global consultancy firm in Chicago. Some of the clients she serves includes universities, academic medical centers, and research hospitals across the nation.