Teachers’ Self-Efficacy When Differentiating Between Language Acquisition Difficulties Or Possible Learning Disabilities In English Language Learners

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TEACHERS’ SELF-EFFICACY WHEN DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION DIFFICULTIES AND POSSIBLE LEARNING DISABILITIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

By

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TEACHERS’ SELF-EFFICACY WHEN DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION DIFFICULTIES OR POSSIBLE LEARNING DISABILITIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

ABSTRACT

This multiple-case study examines teachers’ self-efficacy, or perceptions of their effectiveness, when differentiating between typical language acquisition difficulties and possible learning disabilities in English Language Learners (ELLs) who are challenged academically. Five mainstream elementary teachers from a mid-sized urban school district in the northeastern United States participated in the study. Data from individual interviews, meeting observations and artifacts were collected from each of the participants. Meeting observations occurred during each participant’s Integrated Learning Team meetings. During interviews, participants described their experiences working with ELLs who struggled more than typical ELLs and presented an artifact representing experiences teaching such students. Across all five cases, key themes emerged, including (1) Character and Personal Experiences, (2) Collaboration with Colleagues/Support from School Administration, (3) Understanding the “Whole Child”, and (4) Professional Development and Training. A cross-case analysis revealed divergence in several sub-themes: Linguistic/Cultural Experiences, Years of Classroom Experience, Reviewing Multiple Types of Data, Comparison between ELL Peers, Using Response to Intervention with ELLs, and Effective Strategies for ELLs. Five findings show that cultural exposure, collaboration among colleagues, reviewing ELL student data, meaningful professional development and teachers’ years of classroom experience contribute to teachers’ self-efficacy when making decisions to investigate possible learning disabilities in ELLs. Implications for
educators include the need for consistent communication with colleagues and school leaders and the importance of sharing best practices for teaching struggling ELLs. Implications for administrators and school leaders involve the importance of regular collaboration for educators to review ELL student data and plan targeted modifications for instruction. Implications for school districts focus on the need for meaningful professional development in second language acquisition theory and culturally responsive pedagogy. Further research is needed to explore the self-efficacy of culturally and linguistically diverse teachers and teachers from schools and districts with small numbers of ELLs.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Immigration to the United States has provided this nation and its cities, communities and schools with a rich linguistic and cultural heritage. While this cultural and linguistic diversity greatly benefits our society as a whole, there is a strong sense of urgency regarding the most appropriate method for fully integrating new immigrants who speak a wide variety of languages into the American educational system (Nieto, 2009). Currently, public school districts are seeing steeper increases in the enrollment of the number of children whose first language is not English, also known as English Language Learners (ELLs), making these learners the fastest-growing group of students in the nation (Serpa, 2011).

Presently, public school teachers at all grade levels are becoming more accustomed to having pupils in their schools and classrooms whose first language is not English. In the past ten years, the number of English Language Learners (ELLs) enrolled in U.S. schools increased by approximately 51% in comparison to the total school population, which increased by only 7.2% (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). This signifies an important point: public school educators today must be prepared pedagogically to serve this growing population of children (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008; Klingner, Hoover & Baca, 2008; Kushner, 2008).

Like ELL education, special education has also experienced transformation over the past forty years, leading to fundamental changes in how students with disabilities are identified and served in American public schools. Nevertheless, only recently has there been a strong push to achieve equity in special education when working with culturally and linguistically diverse
students, such as ELLs, with possible special needs (Liu, Goldstone, Thurlow, Ward, Hatten & Christensen, 2013; Skiba et al., 2008).

While all ELLs are challenged with second language acquisition at varying degrees, some struggle unusually hard and may exhibit signs of a possible learning disability, or LD. In 2008, approximately 7.6% of all special education students in U.S. schools who were served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were also ELLs, about 55% of which were diagnosed with a learning disability (Peña, Bedore, & Gilliam, 2011). Since then, the number of ELLs identified as having a learning disability has increased dramatically: Recent data from 2014-2015 show that the percentage of ELLs with disabilities in U.S. public schools has almost doubled to 13.8% (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). This presents a challenge for the teachers whose task it is to identify and categorize the struggles of ELLs as either language acquisition-related or possible LD. Often, these teachers request further special education evaluation for struggling students because “struggles with English language acquisition, on the surface, can seem to mirror [a learning disability]” (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014, p. 8).

The school district in this case study, Adamstown Public Schools (pseudonym), is a medium-sized urban district in the northeast U.S. with ELLs making up approximately 15% of its total enrollment. Of the total ELL population in the district (approximately 1500 students), 7% are currently identified as needing special education services. As a district leader in the school system, the researcher is fully aware of the confusion and uncertainty among general education elementary teachers regarding what to do when some ELLs in their classrooms struggle more with basic academic tasks than other ELLs at comparable levels of English language fluency. This multiple-case study developed from a need to investigate the cases in
which such teachers might have different perceptions of their relative success when attempting to identify and address the limitations of ELLs. Discovering more about how teachers perceive their abilities to differentiate between ELLs struggling with language acquisition and those dealing with possible learning disabilities along with the factors that might influence the teachers’ perceptions would be very beneficial in understanding the process of early identification of learning disabilities in English Language Learners.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study is to investigate Adamstown Public Schools general education elementary classroom teachers’ self-efficacy, or perceptions of their own effectiveness, when attempting to distinguish between possible learning disabilities (LD) and typical second language acquisition difficulties in English Language Learners (ELLs). The study also identifies and analyzes the key factors that affect these teachers’ self-efficacy.

**Problem Statement**

The process of second language acquisition can be difficult for many ELLs, and students learning a new language often exhibit similar characteristics as students with learning disabilities (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Klingner, Hoover & Baca, 2008). Mainstream elementary classroom teachers in Adamstown are often responsible for deciding whether to initiate the process of special education evaluation, but they do not always have the tools necessary to distinguish second language acquisition-related challenges from those related to a learning disability. This often results in inaccurate conclusions being drawn regarding the pedagogical needs of struggling ELLs, which leads to the overrepresentation of ELLs in special education environments (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Huang, Clarke, Milczarski, & Raby, 2011; Artiles & Barletta, 2006; Klingner et al., 2008; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014). Furthermore, these teachers
may have varied levels of knowledge about the cultural aspect of language learning or how to apply culturally responsive teaching practices with their ELLs, resulting in a less-than-appropriate model of instruction for the students in their classroom who need stronger cultural and/or linguistic connections and a focus on their personal abilities (Gay, 2002; Nieto, 2010). Additionally, teachers’ own personal experiences, linguistic capacity, beliefs, cultural identity, and/or ethnicity may contribute to their varying levels of self-efficacy with respect to the instruction of ELLs in their classrooms.

**Research Questions**

Considering self-efficacy as the guiding principle behind this case study, the central research question is

- What perceptions do mainstream elementary teachers have of their ability to identify the difference between second language acquisition problems and potential learning disabilities correctly in their English Language Learners?

Related research questions that support the central research question are

- What are the reasons why elementary classroom teachers might perceive their own effectiveness to be high or low when trying to understand the nature of an ELL’s academic struggles?
- Do cultural and/or linguistic personal experiences contribute to teachers’ self-efficacy when making decisions about ELLs with potential learning disabilities?
- In what kinds of professional development and training have teachers participated that could raise or lower their self-efficacy when making decisions about ELLs with potential learning disabilities?
Conceptual Framework

There is substantial literature about distinguishing second language learning struggles and LD (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014), the disproportionate representation of ELLs in special education classrooms (deValenzuela, Copelan, & Qi, 2006; Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Fiedler et al., 2008; Sullivan, 2011), culturally responsive pedagogy (Chu & Garcia, 2014; Gay, 2002; Nieto, 2010), and special education teacher self-efficacy (Chu, 2011; Paneque & Barbetta), all of which is essential to investigating the background of this research problem. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding general education teachers at the elementary level and their perceptions of how effective they are when trying to recognize and identify the reasons for ELLs’ struggles in the classroom.

The theoretical lens through which this study is viewed includes three formal theories that pertain to the research at hand. Self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), part of social cognitive theory, can be applied in understanding how a teacher perceives his/her own ability to successfully complete a task or make a decision. In addition, social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) can be used to examine how teachers learn collaboratively based on social interactions and previous experiences. Finally, culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002; Nieto, 2010) is a framework through which educators can improve academic achievement by understanding, embracing and integrating the cultural and linguistic strengths of the students they teach. This theoretical lens provides an important perspective that can assist in answering questions about the distinct factors that contribute to teachers’ self-confidence with respect to their instruction and their abilities to serve the needs of ELLs.
Assumptions, Limitations and Scope

In examining the purpose of this case study, it can be assumed that Adamstown Public Schools general education teachers at the elementary level experience varying degrees of self-efficacy during the decision-making process for early identification of LD in ELLs. It is also assumed that different factors could contribute to these teachers’ perceptions of how successful they are at deciding whether to request further evaluation for struggling ELLs. Although a small number of teachers are participants in this study, there is an assumption that their feelings, perceptions and responses that come across through interviews, classroom observations, and
other relative qualitative data are representative of the larger population of general education elementary teachers in the Adamstown district.

Limitations to this study include certain biases that must be taken into account. Since convenience and snowball sampling were employed as purposeful sampling strategies for this case study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009), it is important to consider the nature of the relationship between the participants and researcher and how it could have affected data collection and results. Furthermore, because the scope of the study is limited to one school district, it is necessary to avoid overgeneralization while analyzing results and to be mindful when providing recommendations that extend beyond the Adamstown Public Schools district.

**Significance and Rationale**

In 2015-16, Adamstown Public Schools experienced a rise in the number of ELL students with disabilities, from 4% in 2014-15 to 7% in 2015-16. Having a clear understanding of how ELLs are identified as learning disabled is important in ensuring that ELL students are not overrepresented in special education classrooms (, 2006; Chu, 2011; Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Fiedler et al., 2008; Honigsfeld & Cohan, 2010; Sullivan, 2011). As mentioned previously, research has shown that distinguishing between difficulties associated with acquiring a second language and those associated with a possible learning disability is quite complicated due to the complexity of language acquisition as well as myriad elements that affect the ability of a student to learn English (Klingner et al., 2006; Klingner et al., 2008; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014). Consequently, English Language Learners are often inaccurately diagnosed with LD when teachers lack fundamental knowledge in second language acquisition or do not have appropriate methods for correctly assessing potential learning disabilities in ELLs (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Rueda & Windmueller, 2006; Sullivan, 2011).
Although the onus is often placed on mainstream elementary teachers to determine whether their ELL students might have learning obstacles that go beyond those associated with typical language acquisition difficulties and report such difficulties for further investigation, it is the responsibility of educational leaders and administrators at the district, state and even national level to inspire transformative change by promoting educational equity and fairness for all students, including culturally diverse learners such as ELLs, in all aspects of their education (Shields, 2010). Culturally responsive teaching and multicultural education models also play critical roles in ensuring that the academic achievement of all students, especially subgroups such as ELLs and students with disabilities, is acknowledged, respected, and also evaluated for ways to attain solid academic growth (Gay, 2002; Nieto, 2010; Fiedler et al., 2008). By looking deeply at how teachers perceive their own success in identifying LD in ELLs, this study can assist Adamstown educators as well as school and district leaders in understanding what works to increase levels of teacher self-efficacy and how to identify training and professional learning needs for all educators who are involved with the academic success of ELLs.

Definition of Terms

The following terms and concepts are defined for the purpose of clarification for this proposed study:

**English Language Learner:** “a child who does not speak English or who is not currently able to perform ordinary classroom work in English” (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016, p. 7).

**Self-efficacy:** “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (Bandura, 1995, p. 2). In other words, self-efficacy can be defined as how someone perceives his or her own ability to complete a task.
**Identification:** in the context of this study, identification refers to the process during which a student goes through informal assessments and observations to determine whether further evaluation for a learning disability or eventual special education services is needed.

**Culturally responsive teaching:** an instructional model that acknowledges, reacts to, and incorporates students’ individual cultural backgrounds; these include characteristics such as communication of high standards, creation of partnerships with parents and families, student-centered learning, learning within the context of culture, and reshaping the curriculum to give full access to all learners (The Educational Alliance, 2016).

**Multicultural education:** a model of school reform which “challenges…discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers represent” (Nieto, 1996, p. 307).

**Response to Intervention (RtI):** a multi-tiered approach focusing on academic and/or behavioral needs that provides intensive, regular assistance to children who are struggling and performing below grade level in a variety of domains (RtI Action Network, n. d.).

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study, understanding teacher self-efficacy and how it pertains to situations involving decision-making about the origin and nature of any academic or linguistic difficulties an ELL is facing, can offer Adamstown Public Schools’ educators and school or district leaders valuable insight into teachers’ professional and pedagogical needs. This chapter has introduced the purpose of the study, research problem, and principal research questions; it has also provided evidence of a strong rationale for the need to conduct this case study. Chapters following this one will present an in-depth review of the most current literature from the field
(Chapter 2), a detailed description of the specific methodology and data collection techniques that were used during the study (Chapter 3), analysis and interpretation of collected data to support or negate early assumptions and limitations (Chapter 4), and finally present future implications, recommendations for further research, and best practices at the individual, school and/or district level.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to investigate in depth how mainstream classroom teachers at the elementary level perceive their own effectiveness in attempting to distinguish whether an ELL is having language acquisition difficulties or whether that student may have an actual learning disability. Often, teachers who are charged with making decisions about an ELL’s needs are not able to differentiate between typical language acquisition-related difficulties and learning disabilities, causing inaccurate placements that are not based on appropriate evidence of a child’s specific issue (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Huang, Clarke, Milczarski, & Raby, 2011; Klingner, Artiles, & Barletta, 2006; Klingner et al., 2008; Klingner & Eppolito, 2008).

Furthermore, teachers may have varied levels of knowledge about the cultural aspect of language learning and the appropriate implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices with ELLs (Gay, 2002; Nieto, 2010).

Research indicates that there may be different internal and external factors at play in an educator’s level of self-efficacy with regard to ELLs with possible learning disabilities (Chu, 2011; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Beasley, Gartin, Lincoln, & Penner-Williams, 2013). Internal factors include variables that occur based on a teacher’s own experiences, beliefs, cultural identity, ethnicity or personality; external factors, such as professional development and training, understanding of educational frameworks for English Language Development (ELD) and Response to Intervention (RtI) models and cultural competency training, are based on teacher training and education. Discovering which factors and to what degree they affect teachers’ perceptions of their abilities to distinguish typical struggles ELLs have in learning English from LD is the principal focus, after which the intention is to provide recommendations for best
practices related to the initial identification process of ELLs with possible LD as well as teacher preparation and development.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

Three theoretical constructs provide the lens through which this study is conducted. Self-efficacy, or how people perceive their own abilities to successfully master tasks (Bandura, 1977), offers insight into teachers’ perceptions of their own strengths and weaknesses when attempting to determine the source of difficulty for ELLs as either language acquisition-related or a learning disability. Social constructivism outlines how teachers are able to build upon their current knowledge of how English Language Learners achieve academically through social interactions with other teachers, first-hand experiences or learning opportunities (Vygotsky, 1978). Culturally responsive teaching, or pedagogy that fully incorporates all cultural aspects of ELL students’ lives in order to create a comfortable, encouraging learning environment (Gay, 2002; Nieto, 2010), can act as the concept that solidly connects all three theoretical concepts together.

**Purpose of the Literature Review**

The purpose of this literature review is to examine recent empirical and theoretical scholarly work from the field that focuses on teacher self-efficacy in the initial identification stage of a potential learning disability in ELL students. Various studies have concluded that there is limited research in this field (Huang et al., 2011; Klingner et al., 2006; Nguyen, 2012; Chu & Garcia, 2014), showing a need for continued investigation and study. The literature included comprises both recent sources and relevant historical works that provide foundational research and theory. This review has revealed six common themes that reinforce findings, results, and implications, all of which will be explored in detail: (1) distinguishing between language acquisition issues and learning disabilities in ELLs; (2) the disproportionality of ELLs
in special education; (3) the need for high quality teacher training; (4) educational frameworks and strategies for working with ELLs with or without possible LD; (5) Response to Intervention as a model for initial identification of ELLs who need special education services; and (6) teacher self-efficacy regarding working with ELLs with a possible LD.

**Distinguishing between Language Acquisition Issues and LD in ELLs**

There are several challenges that educators face when attempting to determine whether a struggling ELL is having typical language acquisition problems or whether that student could potentially have a learning disability; teachers’ limited understanding of how to identify the problem correctly is one of the principal obstacles (McCardle, McCarthy, Cutting, Leos, & D’Emilio, 2005). ELLs tend to underachieve in literacy (reading and/or writing) when compared to their native English-speaking peers, thus causing mainstream teachers to wonder whether or not these students might have a learning disability (Klingner et al., 2008; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014). Mainstream teachers are usually those asked to identify initially whether or not a child might be exhibiting signs of a potential learning disability and might need additional evaluation for eventual special education services (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013). These teachers are often responsible for knowing what to look for, what types of observational data to collect and analyze, and how to interpret the data for decision-making purposes regarding any individualized instructional support that might be given to the child in question (Case & Taylor, 2005).

In order to understand the difference between a language acquisition problem or LD, teachers must have a full understanding of how students acquire language, what the characteristics of LD are, and many other variables, such as the sociocultural context of language and the acculturation process (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Klingner et al., 2006; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Nguyen, 2012; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Seven specific factors can account for
typical academic challenges that ELLs may be facing; they include (1) learning environment, (2) personal and family factors, (3) physical or psychological factors, (4) previous schooling/academic performance, (5) oral language and literacy proficiency in both English and the native language, (6) academic achievement and (7) cross-cultural factors (Hamayan, Marler, Sanchez-López, & Damico, 2013). Educators must consider these factors during the initial phase of investigation about a struggling ELL through careful observation of the student’s behavior along with discussion with experienced colleagues, learning teams, and/or school administrators (Case & Taylor, 2005; Hamayan et al., 2013; WIDA Consortium, 2013).

**Population Characteristics of ELLs with Possible LD**

While English Language Learners are a very diverse group, there are some typical population characteristics that may connect to possible learning disabilities. Earlier studies about characteristics and subtypes focus on common traits of ELLs who might have learning disabilities (Garcia & Tyler, 2010; Klingner et al., 2006) while more recent literature determines different types of ELLs and makes distinctions in their learning (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014). Both perspectives provide important considerations when attempting to distinguish between language acquisition difficulty and LD.

**How ELLs have learned English.** Another defining characteristic of ELL subpopulations and the connection between language learning and possible LD is type of bilingualism, or how ELLs have learned English (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; More, Spies, Morgan, & Baker, 2015). This is important, since each individual ELL has language learning experiences that are unique to him/her and affect the entire language acquisition process. Furthermore, having a stronger understanding of ELLs’ abilities in their native language and in English can provide important information about how to assess students appropriately and
accurately and how to monitor ELLs’ proficiency in their native language and in English (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014).

**Simultaneous and sequential bilinguals.** Simultaneous bilinguals are children who have grown up surrounded by two languages at home (English and their native language), whereas sequential bilinguals start learning their native language at home and English at school. They often “use both linguistic systems to communicate” (p. 26) with people (family and/or community members) who speak both languages. Often, these two types of ELL have not achieved academic proficiency or foundational literacy skills in either English or their native language (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; More et al., 2015).

**Long-term ELLs.** Long-term ELLs are children who have been in English schools for five years or more but are still receiving ELL services (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014). They tend to have excellent oral fluency and often can speak without an accent; however, they have fallen behind in academic achievement, showing scores that are still below grade level in reading and writing and require continuous support in language and literacy instruction (Menken, Kley, & Chae, 2012). Long-term ELLs are often American-born, and many have not established literacy in their native language (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Menken et al., 2012).

**Newcomers.** Newcomers, or students who have been in the U.S. for less than five years, often have solid literacy skills in their first language if they received adequate formal schooling in their native country; they tend to have normal or even advanced English language acquisition rates (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014). Those newcomers who have not had adequate formal education have much more difficulty learning English and often suffer from “feelings of loss of emotional and social networks” (p. 27). It is important for teachers to understand the differences between a newcomer’s host culture and his/her home culture, being especially sensitive to the
child’s needs, respecting cultural identity and applying instructional strategies that are culturally responsive (Gassama, 2012).

**ELLs’ native language proficiency.** Another important characteristic of ELL populations that has a connection to possible learning disabilities is the presence of ELLs’ native language in their lives and education. Students who have a strong background in their own native language, including literacy skills, have proved to be more high achieving than their peers with less native language proficiency (Klingner et al., 2006; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Klingner et al., 2008; Garcia & Tyler, 2010). Therefore, assessing a student’s native language can be a strong determinant in deciding whether the student has LD (Huang et al., 2011; Klingner et al., 2006; Klingner et al., 2008; Peña et al., 2011).

**Students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE).** ELLs who have not had consistent, high quality instruction in their first language, resulting in low levels of literacy and difficulty acquiring a second language are students with limited or interrupted formal education, or SLIFE (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010). SLIFE may come from high context cultures, in which language and communication are very direct and follows rich oral tradition (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010). In such cultures, literacy (reading and writing) and academic processing of information may not be as valued as in Western culture, hence the lack of reading and writing skills that SLIFE often demonstrate (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). A SLIFE’s lack of literacy due to limited or interrupted formal schooling might confuse teachers who are unaware of the child’s background, causing them to believe there could be a possible learning disability rather than a language acquisition challenge (Fenner, 2011).

**ELLs with reading deficiencies.** Klingner, Artiles and Barletta (2006) looked carefully at selected studies with original data reported about ELLs with and without identified LD in
Grades K-12. They noticed that early studies reported ELLs’ common difficulties with reading, auditory processing, and writing. While it was indeterminable as to whether or not these children had LD, the study concluded that it was very possible that “second language acquisition played a key role” (p. 111) in the students’ difficulty with those skills. Garcia and Tyler (2010) support and expand on this common characteristic associated with reading deficiencies, stating that ELLs have additional difficulties with decoding new words and retaining the meanings of new words as well as organization of ideas.

It is critical to keep these types of ELLs in mind when attempting to distinguish between difficulty learning English and LD. This is especially important when teachers and school administrators are considering the use of certain types of special education assessments and interpreting data from those assessments (Huang et al., 2011; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Peña et al., 2011). It will also allow educators to have a stronger understanding of individual ELLs’ needs and cater to them effectively.

Typical Characteristics of ELLs with LD

When learning to distinguish between second language acquisition and LD, it is essential to understand what learning disabilities look like in English Language Learners as typical, identifiable characteristics. One obvious characteristic is that ELLs demonstrate the same or similar learning difficulties in their native language as they do in English (Garcia & Tyler, 2010; Klingner et al., 2008). This is important to consider when assessing ELLs for a possible learning disability; practitioners must be sure that evaluations and testing be provided in the native language and examined as part of multiple variables to determine an LD (Huang et al., 2011; Sullivan, 2011).
**Literacy and alphabetic principle.** ELLs with learning disabilities often manifest the same difficulties as their English-speaking peers with LD (Garcia & Tyler, 2010; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Klingner et al., 2008). For example, ELLs with LD most commonly struggle with literacy (reading and writing); they have difficulties decoding text correctly because they cannot correspond certain letters to certain sounds in English (Garcia & Tyler, 2010). Klingner et al. (2006) describe earlier studies’ results that show ELLs who struggle with comprehension may have difficulties with phonological awareness as well. This is supported by evidence in Klingner et al. (2008) that activities focusing on phonological and print awareness work well with ELLs who show early signs of LD.

Other characteristics of ELLs who struggle with reading and may have a learning disability include alphabetic principle and noticing how different alphabets and orthographies in a student’s native language are from English; fluency, or how accurately ELLs read with the proper inflection and expression; vocabulary, and reading comprehension (Klingner et al., 2008; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014). One decisive observation teachers can make is to compare similar peers from the same language and educational background, grade level and/or developmental level; if the ELL in question stands out from his peers, this is a good indication of the need for further evaluation (Klinger & Eppolito, 2014; Rinaldi & Samson 2008).

**Pronunciation, syntax and semantics.** Case and Taylor (2005) report that ELLs’ difficulties with pronunciation, syntax and semantics as linguistic features overlap with characteristics of students with learning disabilities. For example, certain errors in the way words are pronounced can be considered part of normal oral language development for ELLs; however, some pronunciation patterns can be mistaken for articulation disorders. Furthermore, both ELLs and students with disabilities struggle with syntactical structures such as negation,
word order and grammatical mood of verbs like interrogative, imperative or subjunctive. The authors also describe the complexities of semantics, or the meanings of individual words, phrases or full sentences, as being particularly challenging to both ELLs and to students with disabilities. Understanding and using semantics such as similes, metaphors, idioms and figurative language can be demanding or confusing for both students with learning challenges and student learning English as a second or other language (Case & Taylor, 2005; Klingner et al., 2008).

**Assessing for LD in ELLs**

There are several important considerations to keep in mind when attempting to assess for LD in an ELL. Wilkinson, Ortiz, Robertson and Kushner (2006), as cited in et al. (2009), outline three areas that could be considered “red flags” when reviewing assessments to determine possible learning disabilities in ELLs. These red flags are especially significant since these indicators might cause skewed misdiagnosis: (1) lack of high-quality education and learning opportunities; (2) deficiencies in differentiated instruction (i.e., ELLs may not be receiving appropriate scaffolding to access curriculum content); and (3) a true need for special education services. The benefits of using multiple data points to assess whether or not an ELL may have LD are numerous in that there are various ways in which a child could demonstrate his/her abilities or mastery of certain tasks (Rivera, Moughamian, Lesaux, & Francis, 2009). It is essential that educators who are charged with collecting and reviewing data that points to an LD are looking at a variety of assessments that span different language domains, skills and achievement measures.

**Assessments used for early identification.** While a common method of assessing ELLs at low English proficiency levels is to test oral fluency, research has shown that testing oral language proficiency does not present enough information to tease out problems that ELLs may
have in reading or literacy (Rivera et al. 2009). Other assessments that may be used to evaluate ELLs’ reading fluency, comprehension or vocabulary skills in English do not provide accurate data to use for early identification of an LD (Liu et al., 2013). In sum, the more complex an assessment is with regard to language demand, the larger chance there is that ELLs will struggle (Abedi, 2009).

Research has shown that current assessments used in regular special education evaluations are biased towards native speakers of English (Rinaldi & Samson, 2008; Rivera et al., 2009; Zetlin et al., 2011). This brings into play the validity of the data collected from these assessments when they are given to ELLs, especially those who have had formal academic schooling in their native countries (Huang et al., 2011; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Rinaldi & Samson, 2008; Sullivan, 2011). To complicate matters, different states and school districts use different assessment methods for students referred for special education evaluation, and this can present confusion when making a final decision for an ELL (Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Klingner et al., 2008).

**Alternative methods for assessing ELLs.** Alternative methods for assessing ELLs such as intervention models, native language assessments and multiple tiers of support have been found to work well in the early identification of ELLs with possible LD (Huang et al., 2011; Klingner et al., 2008; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Peña et al., 2011; Rinaldi & Samson, 2008; Rivera et al., 2009). If such interventions are implemented correctly and the ELL in question has not demonstrated progress through progress monitoring, further assessment is needed. An additional method used to assess the “whole child” in a comprehensive way is implementing a detailed data collection tool (Honigsfeld & Cohan, 2010). Acting as a portfolio of collected information from a wide variety of sources, the tool gathers written responses and outcomes from open-ended
questions to educators from mainstream, ESL, guidance, and special education backgrounds in order to examine more completely all aspects of an ELL’s learning struggles.

As has been mentioned previously, distinguishing between an ELL’s difficulty with acquiring English and a possible learning disability can be very challenging. There are multiple factors that contribute to the decision to identify an ELL as having LD, and educators must consider all possible factors that give a larger picture of the situation in order to move forward with appropriate specialized instruction (Sullivan, 2011).

**Disproportionality of ELLs in Special Education Classrooms**

Research has shown that for a number of years, English Language Learners who struggle in school have often been misdiagnosed as having a learning disability and placed in special education classrooms (Chu, 2011; Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Huang et al., 2011; Sullivan, 2011; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Zetlin, Beltran, Salcido, Gonzalez, & Reyes, 2011). Other studies have shown the opposite: Some ELLs with LD have been denied access to special education services due to beliefs that they are struggling primarily with a language acquisition problem as opposed to a true learning disability (Chu, 2011; Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Huang et al., 2011; More et al., 2011; Stein, 2011; Sullivan & Bal, 2011). Often schools and districts are at fault due to lack of clear policy or inaccurate procedures for testing ELLs with possible LD (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). This section presents works of literature that describe overrepresentation and underrepresentation of ELLs in special education as well as the role of educators and school administration in causing disproportionality of ELLs in special education classrooms.

**Overrepresentation of ELLs in Special Education**

Overrepresentation of ELLs in special education classes is a phenomenon that reflects a lack of viable assessments for identification, discrepancy model used to diagnose LD, and
insufficient programmatic services for ELLs in the general education classroom (Rueda & Windmueller, 2006; deValenzuela, Copeland, & Qi, 2006). Often, there is not a clear early identification protocol or information gathering system (Honigsfeld & Cohan, 2010). The question arises whether ELLs are actually receiving equitable access to the general curriculum and whether this is causing some of the struggle. In order to succeed, ELLs must have many opportunities to interact with both native language and target language peers (deValenzuela et al., 2006).

In many schools across the U.S., it often is up to the mainstream general education teacher to take action when an ELL is not progressing appropriately (Chu, 2011; Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Sullivan, 2011). This can be very daunting for teachers who have not had practical experience with ELLs or have not had sufficient training or professional development about second language acquisition theory and practice (Morgan et al., 2015; Nguyen, 2012; Stein, 2011; Sullivan & Bal, 2013).

In one quantitative study, Sullivan (2011) investigated the representation of ELLs in special education in a southwestern state over eight years by analyzing each district’s existing data on ELLs receiving special education services. Results showed that at the state level, ELLs were increasingly overrepresented in special education over the eight-year span; most ELLs were categorized as having specific learning disabilities. On the contrary, at the district level, districts with high numbers of ELLs had a much better balance of representation of ELLs in special education. While several limitations were mentioned, this study implies that multiple reasons exist for why overrepresentation may be occurring in the state. Such reasons include deregulation and lack of language support programs in schools, inexperienced general education teachers making decisions about referral to special education, lack of professional development
focusing on second language acquisition, and districts’ widely varying policies for ELL and special education services.

Fernandez and Inserra (2013) conducted a qualitative study to investigate teachers’ responses to the increasing numbers of ELLs being referred to special education in their district. While this study was different in scale and methodology, the results showed similar themes and patterns as Sullivan’s (2011) study: Teachers are not adequately trained in second language acquisition theory, and schools in the district had inconsistent procedures and best practices for teachers of ELLs with LD.

**Underrepresentation of ELLs in Special Education**

Although underrepresentation of ELLs in special education classrooms is less common than overrepresentation, it still presents a problem in school districts around the country (Chu, 2011; Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Huang et al., 2011; More et al., 2011; Stein, 2011; Sullivan & Bal, 2011). Underrepresentation occurs for a variety of reasons, one being the belief that ELLs must achieve language proficiency in to be accurately assessed for a learning disability and special education services (Zetlin et al., 2011). In addition, underrepresentation occurs when districts cannot provide dual services, forcing students to be placed in either special education classes or English as a Second Language (ESL) classes but not both (More et al., 2015). Furthermore, several studies highlight the chronic shortage of qualified special education teachers trained in second language acquisition to educate ELLs diagnosed with LD, presenting yet another reason why ELLs with LD may be less frequently placed in special education classrooms (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Kushner, 2008; More et al., 2011; Sullivan, 2011; Zetlin et al., 2011). Finally, underrepresentation occurs when teachers are reluctant to refer students in earlier grades, thinking that there will be time for them to “catch up” or otherwise
misunderstanding a learning disability as a language acquisition problem (Klingner et al., 2008; Kushner, 2008; Sullivan, 2011).

**How Educators and Schools Contribute to Disproportionality**

Not all of the blame can be laid on teachers when it comes to disproportionality of ELLs in special education (Rueda & Windmueller, 2006; Zetlin et al., 2010). School and district administrators share responsibility in creating patterns of overrepresentation and underrepresentation of ELLs in special education classrooms. For example, in districts where there are higher numbers of ELLs and a strong capacity to provide support in the native language, students are often not provided the opportunity to receive special education services. This may occur due to a district or school assuming that it already provides adequate support through ESL classes and native language assistance (Zetlin et al., 2011). The varying procedures, protocols and policies implemented inconsistently by different school districts can also cause confusion for educators trying to navigate through the early identification process (Huang et al., 2011; Rueda & Windmueller, 2006; Sullivan, 2011).

Results from one particular study by Sullivan and Bal (2013) contradict findings about school variables causing disproportionality of ELLs in special education. The researchers examined 39 schools in an urban district in the Midwest, whereas other studies, including Sullivan (2011), focused on school districts in the southwest only (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). They found no significance of school variables, such as the percentage of ELLs, students on free/reduced lunch, student suspensions and passing grades, or ethnicities of teachers, with regard to risk of being referred for special education. This could be explained by previous studies not accounting for the wide diversity within the ELL population (Sullivan & Ball, 2013).
Still, school variables must be considered and included in understanding why disproportionality of ELLs in special education occurs.

The underlying commonality across the different types of disproportionality is the misunderstanding of teachers, schools and districts about ELLs’ individual instructional and sociocultural needs. It is important to begin to provide clarity for educators and school leaders about the most effective instructional practices that take into account an ELL’s unique strengths and specific challenges he/she might face when a learning disability comes into play.

**The Need for High-Quality Teacher Training**

The research presented thus far has clearly depicted difficulties in identifying and placing ELLs with or without disabilities into the appropriate areas for best instruction, including special education services. Multiple studies from the field include implications about the dire need for better in-service professional development and pre-service training for all teachers, including general education teachers, special education teachers, or any of those who educate or will educate the English language learning population (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Berg & Huang, 2015; Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Hansen-Thomas, Casey, & Grosso, 2013; Huang et al., 2011; Kushner, 2008; More et al., 2011; Nguyen, 2012; Stein, 2011).

**Training for General Education Teachers of ELLs**

General education teachers are often the first to suspect a struggling ELL may have additional challenges, such as a possible learning disability. Most of the time, they are asked to make decisions about whether a child needs special education testing. This can be difficult if these educators do not have a strong foundation of second language acquisition or understand the sociocultural context of language (Garcia & Tyler, 2010; Hansen-Thomas et al., 2013; Kushner, 2008; More et al., 2015; Nguyen, 2012; WIDA Consortium, 2013). Although the U.S.
educational system has made some progress in improving policy and program development for those who teach ELLs, there is still more that can be done to prepare educators in the mainstream classroom for students whose first language is not English (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Tran, 2015).

Several studies focus on the importance of directing efforts toward preparing teachers of ELLs who are already in the classroom. Berg and Huang (2015) refer to “a gap between the needs of classroom teachers to work with ELLs and the lack of teachers prepared to work with this student population” (p. 1). In their mixed methods study, twenty-three K-12 in-service general education teachers participated in a professional development program focusing on academic language and literacy of ELLs through a functional approach, allowing teachers to gain a stronger understanding of how ELLs learn language in context. Results confirmed that teachers acquired extensive knowledge about how to address the linguistic and academic needs of their ELLs and tools to provide differentiated instruction for such students. Similarly, Hansen-Thomas et al. (2013) presented a study of a “turnaround training model” in which general education teachers were trained to provide targeted professional development for their colleagues around second language acquisition. Findings reported that teachers were very positive about their experiences both as trainers and as participants and reported increased confidence and understanding about teaching ELLs as a result of the training. Overall, professional development when well-planned, targeted, and collaborative, and when it relates to teachers’ everyday work can be very successful for in-service teachers of ELLs (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Berg & Huang, 2015; Hansen-Thomas et al., 2013).

Training for Special Education Teachers of ELLs

Although general education teachers are those that start the early identification process with a request for investigation regarding possible LD in ELLs, special education teachers often
play a role in pre-referral evaluation (Klingner & Harry, 2006). Just as general education teachers must be trained to educate ELLs, special education teachers who actually work with ELLs who have been diagnosed with a learning disability, must also be prepared professionally to provide special education services to these students. Research clearly indicates a need for training specifically for special education teachers that addresses second language acquisition and ELLs’ diverse needs specifically for special education teachers (Kushner, 2008; Paneque & Barbetta, 2006; Peterson & Showalter, 2010; Stein, 2011; Zetlin et al., 2011).

Zetlin et al. (2011) describe California’s efforts to implement new pre-service teacher competencies that include specific attention to special education teachers’ need for targeted preparation for working with ELLs, including “understand[ing]…the assessment process (whether language is contributing to a student’s difficulties) and how to deliver instruction to teach content in strategic ways” (p. 63). This was done through seven comprehensive online instructional modules for all special education teachers enrolled in teacher preparation programs at California State University Los Angeles. When interviewed after completing the seven modules, teachers recognized their knowledge growth about ELLs with disabilities and the specific needs of such students and had increased confidence and positive outlooks (Zetlin et al., 2011).

Another example of the necessity to train special education teachers comes from Peterson and Showalter (2010), who described efforts in Arizona to increase the number of special education teachers available to teach culturally and linguistically diverse children in rural areas. The state developed four specialized online programs for pre-service special educators that addressed cultural and social diversity as well as strategies to provide appropriate accommodations for ELLs with disabilities living in remote areas. While this is a different
approach from the program described by Zetlin et al. (2011), it has been proven effective in providing much-needed pre-service training for special educators working with unique rural populations (Peterson & Showalter, 2010).

As has been stated, it is essential that schools, districts and state policy makers mandate educational programs that address the individual needs of ELLs (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Kushner, 2008); furthermore, research indicates that the inclusion of compulsory training for pre-service and in-service special education teachers in this area would be ideal in preparing teachers to face challenges in educating ELLs with LD (Zetlin et al., 2011; Stein, 2011).

**Educational Frameworks and Strategies for Working with ELLs with or without LD**

In order to be certain that ELLs with or without learning disabilities are being provided high-quality instruction across all classrooms (general education, ESL and special education), school and district leaders need to consider adopting a comprehensive framework that includes culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy (Ballantyne, 2008; Kushner, 2008; Klingner et al., 2006; Nguyen, 2012; Tran, 2014; WIDA Consortium, 2013). Multiple sources from the field provide educational frameworks and strategies that educators and program developers can use to plan and carry out specific, individualized instruction suited to students whose first language is not English.

**Sociocultural Context and Culturally Responsive Teaching Frameworks**

When ELLs enter a classroom, they are bringing with them background knowledge worldviews that are not always parallel with those of the teacher or other students in the class; instead, ELLs may have very different methods of learning and processing information, social interaction with peers and with adults, and grasp of academic language (Garcia & Tyler, 2010). Therefore, numerous studies imply the importance of considering cultural context in the
classroom as a best practice for teaching ELLs (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Fiedler et al., 2008; Garcia & Tyler, 2010; Klingner et al., 2006; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Kushner, 2008; Nguyen, 2012; WIDA Consortium, 2013). Culturally responsive teaching is a framework that incorporates student background, language, values and styles of learning (Chu & Garcia, 2014; Gomez & Diarrassouba, 2014); in order to implement culturally responsive teaching, educators must also have a strong knowledge of second language acquisition and bilingualism (Cummins, 1991, as cited in Chu & Garcia, 2014).

The sociocultural context of learning is extremely important for a teacher of ELLs to understand; in fact, how a teacher teaches “is as much influenced by culture as is student learning, and…principles of good teaching cannot be assumed to be universalistic” (Garcia & Tyler, 2010, p. 116). Ballantyne et al. (2008) mention that teachers’ self-reflection about their own cultural values is an insightful way to keep students’ cultural diversity at the forefront when assessing student learning. Klingner et al. (2006) reviewed several studies that relate to sociocultural context of teaching ELLs, and all seem to identify a lack of cultural understanding from teachers and schools, causing ELLs to perform poorly and exhibit signs of emotional turmoil and stress. Kushner (2008) supports Klingner et al.’s discussion and goes a step further to cite the importance of cultural and linguistic considerations when attempting to plan instruction for ELLs with LD, adding that if teachers are culturally sensitive to students’ experiences and customs, it will lead to more success with specific interventions that help pinpoint learning issues. In the study by Fernandez and Inserra (2013), teachers were unaware of the importance of acculturation for ELLs who are at risk for being referred for special education testing, meaning the time and effort it takes for an ELL to become accustomed to different cultures in his/her school, classroom and new environment. The WIDA Consortium’s (2013)
document continues to support the need for cultural competency by presenting seven factors that could impact the academic achievement of ELLs with possible LD, including a culturally responsive learning environment, personal and family life, and cross-cultural factors.

Several studies address the importance of understanding cultural biases about learning disabilities and special education. Garcia and Tyler (2010), Kushner (2008) and More et al. (2015) all mention that ELLs might come from cultures in which disabilities are stigmatized, thus causing discrimination, lack of family support and occasionally social isolation of those students identified as learning disabled. This underscores the essential nature of being culturally sensitive to ELLs and their needs while also being cognizant of how their individual social groups (families, relatives and/or peers) view learning disabilities (Kushner, 2008). Fiedler et al. (2008) reinforce the importance that schools practice culturally responsive pedagogy; they present a checklist that is intended for school staff to use when examining in depth the early identification, intervention and referral processes of ELLs with possible LD.

**Collaborative Frameworks and Specific Strategies for ELLs with LD**

Collaboration between teachers of ELLs with possible learning disabilities namely the mainstream teacher, ESL teacher and special education teacher is essential to the overall progress, success, and well-being of the students they share. While efforts are being made to address the widespread lack of proper training for mainstream teachers in U.S. schools who may have ELLs in their classroom (Ballantyne et al., 2008), research has shown that providing opportunities for collaboration between educators and putting into place collaborative frameworks for planning and programming services for ELLs with LD is extremely effective in creating a seamless continuum of support (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Garcia & Tyler, 2010;

Garcia and Tyler (2010), Nguyen (2012) and Stein (2001) discussed the need for collaboration between all educators of ELLs with possible disabilities. Garcia and Tyler (2010) and Nguyen (2012) emphasized collaborative instructional planning for meaningful learning experiences for ELLs with LD, while Stein (2011) focused on collaboration during the process of identifying ELLs who need additional support from special education. Other authors (Kushner, 2008; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Rinaldi & Samson, 2008; Stein, 2011) support collaboration during the early stages of investigation into a possible LD in an ELL. They see information gathering about an ELL’s background including current educational status, strengths, areas of concern, and other important factors as a shared process that a team of educators are involved in executing collaboratively. Klingner and Eppolito (2014), Stein (2011), and Rinaldi and Samson (2008) include collaboration as a key part of collecting data on ELLs in question and a critical component in the selection of the most appropriate interventions to try as part of the Response to Intervention (RtI) process. Clearly, these frameworks of collaboration allow for the coming together of educators with different points of view and areas of expertise, precisely what can work well in the decision-making process.

Focusing less on a collaborative framework and more on specific strategies for educators of ELLs with LD are studies by Hart (2009) and More et al. (2015). Both authors present instructional best practices that can work well for ELLs with LD in the classroom or in the process of identification, assessment and placement of these students, such as using curriculum-based assessment, keeping a flexible and comfortable learning environment, allowing first
language use in the classroom, and writing language and content objectives for every lesson. Ultimately, these strategies are useful and effective with all students, not just ELLs with LD.

**Response to Intervention (RtI) as a Model for Early Identification of ELLs with LD**

Response to Intervention, or RtI, is a model of support that examines all aspects of the child in question, provides early intervention that targets the area of concern, assesses students quickly and frequently, and continually monitors progress (WIDA Consortium, 2013). Research on how ELLs react to RtI is emerging and ongoing, with initial findings showing success in implementing the RtI model with ELLs, especially as an alternative way to test for a possible LD (Huang et al., 2011; Klingner et al., 2006; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Klingner et al., 2008).

**Why RtI Works with ELLs**

As mentioned earlier in the review, the distinction between a learning disability and typical language acquisition difficulties in ELLs is difficult for school staff to make (Chu, 2001; Klingner et al., 2006; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Klingner et al., 2008; Kushner, 2008; Rinaldi & Samson, 2008). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) requires schools and districts to implement research-based early interventions as opposed to extensive educational testing to determine whether or not students might have LD (Rinaldi & Samson, 2008). Again, studies have shown that traditional assessments used to identify students as learning disabled are not effective or even valid for ELLs (Chu, 2011; Huang et al., 2011; Rinaldi & Samson, 2008; Sullivan, 2011). The RtI model is ideal in that it provides targeted support over time in the hopes that a student responds positively to the intervention; for ELLs, this is infinitely better at teasing out a learning disability than a standardized test (Chu, 2011; Klingner et al., 2006; Rinaldi & Samson, 2008). The WIDA Consortium (2013) outlines important considerations to keep in mind when administering RtI for ELLs; they provide an
enhanced framework, “Response to Instruction and Intervention,” which includes important factors that might influence ELLs’ academic progress and development.

**Appropriate RtI Interventions for ELLs**

Klingner et al. (2006) call for finding appropriate interventions that can be used in the RtI process. Stein (2011) suggests that teams of educators involved in administering interventions and monitoring student progress work together to review interventions that directly target the ELL’s area of need and are culturally and linguistically appropriate. Research and communication about interventions that work for ELLs is left to schools and the educators who work with struggling ELLs; consequently, there are numerous tools and information-gathering protocols that teacher teams can use to weed out inappropriate interventions and keep those that work well (Rinaldi & Samson, 2008; Stein, 2011). In addition to formal interventions used in the RtI model, educators should be looking at other types of assessments that can contribute to the knowledge base about an ELL’s abilities and areas of need, further providing evidence for or against the possibility of LD (Chu, 2011; Rinaldi & Samson, 2008). As a final thought, there must be continued professional development and training for teachers who implement RtI so that it is done correctly and evidence can be used in the decision-making process for referral of an ELL for eventual special education evaluation (Rinaldi & Samson 2008).

**Culturally responsive RtI.** Harris-Murri, King, and Rostenberg (2006) explain the need for RtI that is culturally responsive, an approach that is much needed in finding and implementing interventions for ELLs with possible disabilities. They argue, “RtI focuses on the broader contextual factors which impact student achievement and behavior. Arguably, the most relevant factors to consider are related to culture: the culture of individuals and institutions and the interactions that take place between them” (p. 780). The authors present four different
dimensions of a culturally responsive RtI model: connections with home, school and community, professional development, curriculum and instruction, and assessment. Focusing on each of these four dimensions allows educators to avoid misperceptions about ELLs based on the teachers’ own cultural backgrounds, values, and beliefs; this model also allows for teachers’ perspectives to change as they build their understanding of cultural differences between themselves and their students as it pertains to the students’ academic and emotional behavior (Harris-Murri et al., 2006).

Overall, RtI that is culturally responsive and moves away from remediation but toward early intervention as a more appropriate way to assess for a disability is essential to making sure there are no misdiagnoses that might contribute to misrepresentation of ELLs in special education classrooms (Harris-Murri et al., 2006; Huang et al., 2011; Rinaldi & Samson, 2008).

**Teacher Self-Efficacy in Working with ELLs With or Without Disabilities**

While teacher self-efficacy, or how teachers perceive their own effectiveness at completing a task (Bandura, 1977), has been researched extensively in other areas of education, there are few studies about teacher self-efficacy in their ability to differentiate between a learning disability and a language acquisition problem in ELLs as well as their ability to educate ELLs with LD (Chu, 2011; Paneque & Barbetta, 2006). All of the previous research cited in this literature review leads to the concept that the ways in which teachers perceive their effectiveness in making decisions about, planning instruction for and assessing ELLs with possible LD might have an effect on outcomes related to placement of ELLs in special education classrooms.

**Teachers’ Perceptions of Their Effectiveness**

Two distinct studies by Chu (2011) and Paneque and Barbetta (2006) address teachers’ self-efficacy with regard to ELLs with LD. The earlier of the two studies describes a
quantitative study surveying elementary special education teachers and their perceptions of effectiveness with ELLs in their schools. Drawing from results of an earlier study that found special education teachers to have high self-efficacy overall but lower self-efficacy when asked a question about ELLs with LD, the researchers sought to investigate this further with more extensive questioning about ELLs. They only found statistical significance in the difference in self-efficacy as related to the teachers’ fluency in their students’ native language, meaning that teachers perceived themselves as more or less effective depending upon their abilities to speak the students’ native language fluently. On the other hand, Chu (2011) presents a review of literature that examines how teachers feel about their abilities to make decisions about referring ELLs with possible LD for special education evaluation. Findings included a discussion on the large number of variables that affect a teacher’s decision about referring a student for further evaluation; therefore, Chu suggests “a multifaceted approach…[that] should not only consider teachers’ confidence in their own abilities to teach such students, but also other factors” (p. 10).

While both Chu (2011) and Paneque and Barbetta (2006) discuss how teachers feel about working with ELLs with LD, only Chu raises issues and provides implications about the referral process for struggling ELLs and whether teachers are more or less likely to refer students for special education assessment and services depending on the teachers’ level of self-perceived effectiveness. Chu makes an important point about not assuming that teachers with high efficacy are correctly placing ELLs in the appropriate classroom (mainstream or special education), bringing to light to the need for more extensive research in the field about what factors contribute to teachers’ levels of efficacy and how teachers’ self-efficacy affects the decision-making process regarding ELLs with possible learning disabilities.
Culturally Responsive Teaching and Teacher Self-Efficacy

According to Chu and Garcia (2014), culturally responsive teaching and teacher self-efficacy share some of the same attributes; they are certainly interrelated as concepts. If a teacher is able to implement culturally responsive teaching successfully for example, he/she might feel confident with having to make decisions about identifying or referring ELLs with possible LD. Furthermore, additional confidence and high self-efficacy might encourage teachers to be more open to adopting new strategies such as RtI or culturally responsive pedagogy practices (Chu & Garcia, 2014).

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is an essential part of the discovery of the lens through which a study will be viewed, conducted and analyzed, particularly with regard to identifying any possible gaps that could become the focus of the research (Weaver-Hightower, 2014). Three important elements make up the conceptual framework: personal interests, topical research and theoretical framework in context (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012).

Personal interests also include the researcher’s beliefs about the topic and any biases that may result. The topic of the current study, how elementary teachers perceive their own effectiveness in deciding whether English Language Learners (ELLs) in their classes may show signs of a learning disability, comes directly from the researcher’s role as the Director of the English Language Learner Program in a mid-sized public school district in Massachusetts. Research has shown that ELLs are often overrepresented in special education (Fernandes & Inserra, 2013; Rueda & Windmueller, 2006; Sullivan & Bal, 2011). Traditionally, mainstream elementary classroom teachers are those who make requests for struggling students to be assessed for LD. The question arises of how confident these teachers feel about their abilities to
distinguish between difficulties in learning a second language and a true learning disability, then, ultimately, to decide to request an evaluation for the ELL student in question. Studies have shown that ELLs are often misdiagnosed as having a learning disability when instead they are challenged by language acquisition, since having difficulty learning a new language can share some of the same characteristics as a learning disability (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013). There is a need to investigate how teachers’ perceptions of their own abilities to distinguish between a language acquisition difficulty and a learning disability come into play and how these perceptions of self-efficacy may affect the early identification of ELLs needing further evaluation. It is also important to investigate what internal and external factors are at play for teachers as they navigate through the complexities of second language acquisition challenges versus possible LD.

Topical research, the literature that surrounds the topic of interest (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012), continues to shape the conceptual framework through the extensive reading of scholarly work for the literature review. There is substantial literature about the distinction between second language acquisition and LD, the disproportionate representation of ELLs in special education, the need for high-quality professional development on second language acquisition and LD, and effective educational frameworks and models for interventions for ELLs prior to evaluation referral, all of which is essential in investigating the background of my research problem. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding mainstream classroom teachers’ self-efficacy and how it relates to their decisions to evaluate an ELL for LD. In other words, what causes elementary mainstream classroom teachers to feel a certain level of confidence (or uncertainty) about identifying a possible learning disability in an ELL? What variables affect their levels of confidence in distinguishing between a language acquisition issue and LD?
The theoretical framework for this study is based on formal theories and frameworks that relate most directly to this topic. Self-efficacy theory is part of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977); it can be defined as how a person perceives his/her own ability to successfully complete a task. In addition, social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) examines how humans learn collaboratively based on social interactions and previous experiences. Finally, culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002; Nieto, 2010) is a framework through which educators can improve academic achievement by understanding, embracing and integrating the cultural and linguistic strengths of the students they teach. Examining the self-efficacy of teachers who initially identify a potential LD in an ELL student through these three theoretical lenses will provide an important perspective that can assist in answering questions about the distinct variables that contribute to teachers’ self-confidence with their instruction and abilities to serve their ELLs’ needs.
Figure 2.1. Conceptual Framework Map.

**Summary**

All of the extensive studies and research articles examined in this literature review provide important insight into the current research problem and help identify what is missing (the gap in the research).

While the emphasis of the present study is on teachers and their perceptions of effectiveness at being able to distinguish between a second language acquisition problem and learning disability in ELLs, students are still front-and-center as the primary focus. ELLs in our schools deserve equitable learning opportunities to access the general curriculum, encouragement to retain their sense of cultural pride and identity, and adequate/accurate
assessments for LD in order to ensure proper placement in the learning environments they need to succeed academically.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This study examined several individual Adamstown Public Schools (pseudonym) mainstream elementary teachers and the perceptions of their own effectiveness as they identify ELLs whose normal academic progress is challenged over time and predict the reasons why these children are struggling. In addition, this study described these teachers’ explanations about why they feel satisfied or unsatisfied about their success in making decisions about these struggling students in their classrooms. Research suggests that there are different variables which may contribute to levels of teacher self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995); thus, it was interesting to discover what factors stemming from these teachers’ own educational, professional, or personal experiences, may have affected their perceived effectiveness.

As described earlier, the central research question to be examined was: How do elementary school classroom teachers perceive their own effectiveness in identifying the difference between second language acquisition problems or potential learning disabilities in their English Language Learners? As part of this multiple-case study investigation, additional supporting questions to be examined included: How do the teachers explain their own capabilities or deficiencies when trying to understand the nature of an ELL’s academic struggles? To what extent can the teachers describe events or phenomena in their personal or professional lives that could raise or lower their self-efficacy when making decisions about ELLs with potential learning disabilities?

In selecting the methodology for this study, it became clear that a case study design would provide an appropriate fit due to the bounded nature of the study (Merriam, 2009) as demonstrated by a focus on individual teachers and their feelings of self-efficacy. Since the
teachers who participated in this study were treated as separate cases to be compared and contrasted, a multiple-case study, with the intention of following a replication design, was the most logical type of qualitative research to apply (Yin, 2014). The cases in question were five individual mainstream elementary teachers in the Adamstown Public Schools, each of whom had experiences trying to understand why certain ELLs in their classroom were struggling unusually hard compared to other ELLs who were successful in making academic progress. Self-efficacy, social constructivism, and culturally responsive teaching – the theories included the conceptual framework for this study – suggest that certain variables related to these teachers’ professional backgrounds, cultural/linguistic experiences, and/or personal characteristics might explain why they hold certain levels of self-efficacy during the decision-making process. It was important to attempt literal or theoretical replications for each case as well as across cases through a variety of data collection methods in order to support or negate the theory (Yin, 2014).

In using a multiple-case design, triangulation of data is essential to finding robust results within each case and across cases with the purpose of drawing meaningful conclusions about the proposed theory of the study (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). Semi-structured interviews, meeting observations, and artifacts were the sources of data collected and analyzed for each case. These three types of data also played a prominent role in the cross-case analysis after each individual case had been analyzed (Merriam, 2009).

Setting

Adamstown Public Schools (pseudonym) serves over 9,300 children in grades K-12, approximately 200 of whom are in elementary schools (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016). Adamstown’s K-12 students are racially diverse, with White (48.2%), Asian (37.1%), African American (6.1%), and Hispanic (5.2%) being the
predominant ethnicities. In addition, 34.8% of Adamstown’s students come from low-income families, 16.9% are Students with Disabilities, and 14.9% are English Language Learners.

Adamstown’s ELL population has been steadily increasing over the last several years. In 2015-16, Adamstown served approximately 1360 non-English speaking students with English Language Development instruction. Approximately 7% of all ELLs are also identified as needing special education services.

In Adamstown Public Schools, ELL educational services at the elementary level are delivered in a “pull-out” method, meaning students are removed from their mainstream classroom and provided explicit English language development instruction. Since these services only occur for a small portion of the school day, the mainstream teacher is the educator that spends the most time with ELLs each day and may observe learning behaviors that indicate a student is struggling more than usual.

The researcher for this study is also the current ELL K-12 Program Director, overseeing approximately 36 ESL teachers system-wide. As the ELL Program Director, the researcher does not supervise or work directly with any of the participants in the study. However, due to the nature of the researcher’s higher-level position within the organization, it was important to address any chance of unintended bias, such as participant answers during the data collection process (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

Participants

There were five participants chosen as individual cases in this multiple-case study, based on their experiences with making decisions about ELLs who may exhibit characteristics of a learning disability. Participants’ availability and willingness to take part in interviews and observations and to share requested artifacts also determined which teachers would become
contributors to the study. The researcher gained access to participants by applying a snowball sampling design strategy by asking elementary school principals, guidance counselors and ESL teachers to suggest names of educators who have been involved with initial identification of ELLs with possible LD. The recommended educators were approached initially in person to explain the study in depth and request their assistance. After they chose to take part, they were informed that they could pull out of the study at any time, and they would have access to interview transcripts for member checks during and at the end of the interview process.

Once five teachers committed to the study, the researcher arranged individual times with them after the workday to conduct short interviews, review relevant artifacts and plan for meeting observations.

**Data**

In order to establish credibility of the findings from this qualitative, multiple-case study, three different types of data were collected and cross-analyzed to allow for methodological triangulation to occur (Merriam, 2009). One data source was semi-structured interviews with each of the five participants. Due to the nature of the overarching research question, which focuses on self-efficacy (a perception or feeling of effectiveness), collecting data through interviews allowed the researcher to gain access to teachers’ feelings or thoughts and perceptions about their ability (or inability) to make meaningful decisions about their struggling ELLs, all of which is unquantifiable data (Merriam, 2009). Since the overarching concept of this study, self-efficacy, is a phenomenon that is best explored and described through using participants’ own experiences and descriptions of their confidence or success, participants were given ample time and opportunity to demonstrate and explain their perceptions about self-efficacy when dealing with ELLs who exhibit signs of LD. The interviews included several structured questions to
identify demographic variables, such as ethnicity, age, languages spoken and years of teaching experience. In addition, there were open-ended questions about teachers’ perceptions, feelings of success or failure and predictions as to why they feel high or low self-efficacy. Interviews were conducted in a comfortable location without distractions at a time of the day that was convenient to both parties involved. Data was collected through sound recordings using a recording device (iPad). The researcher also took notes during the interview in order to record any reactions or facial expressions and to assist in preparing additional probing questions.

A second data point used in this study was field observations of the five participants during Integrated Learning Team meetings which involve discussion regarding struggling ELLs in their classrooms. Observation during these meetings provided valuable information to the researcher to understand the relationship of the teacher to the other meeting attendees, who were any of the following: school administrator, special education teacher, ESL teacher and guidance counselor. Observing interactions and exchange of information with colleagues offered valuable data relative to the participant’s professional experiences related to their self-efficacy.

Specific artifacts such as ELL assessment data, Student Support Team meeting notes, personal items (photos, drawings), or student work (writing samples, tests, quizzes) were able to provide information regarding teachers’ educational background and professional learning; these artifacts constituted the third data point. Participants presented their artifacts during a secondary interview intended as an opportunity for each participant to describe and explain certain details. The authenticity of any documents released to the researcher was validated to be sure the artifacts are genuine.
Analysis

This multiple-case study required several steps in conducting a thorough analysis of all of the data collected. The researcher collected and analyzed data simultaneously for the purpose of narrowing the study and discovering ongoing themes or categories (Merriam, 2009).

As a multiple-case study, there needed to be careful analysis of data collected in order to identify contextual categories, themes and concepts that transpired from all three data sources (interviews, observations and artifacts) for each independent case (Merriam, 2009). Figure 3.1 shows Creswell’s (2013) “Template for Coding a Case Study (Using a Multiple or Collective Case Approach)”, which assisted the researcher in following a protocol for the study (p. 209). As coding of all data sources for each individual case got underway, contextual themes and patterns showing the participants’ perceptions about their own abilities to make decisions about ELLs emerged as factors that could contribute to each individual’s level of self-efficacy. The researcher employed open coding initially, then axial coding, where themes and concepts were grouped into descriptive categories allowing for the greatest amount of explanation in the data analysis.
After all data were coded into contextual themes described in detail, a cross-case comparison and analysis was conducted (Creswell, 2013) to identify any similarities and differences in teacher self-efficacy and contributing factors across cases. Cross-case analysis allowed for a general explanation for any specific phenomena that were common in each case with regard to teacher self-efficacy.

**Participant Rights**

The five individual teachers selected for this study were treated with the utmost respect and care when considering their rights as study participants. Prior to the data collection phase,
the researcher met in person with each individual and explained in detail the purpose of the study and the role of each participant, along with specifics about the three data points (interviews, observations, and artifacts) and the entire data collection process. A consent form was provided with written explanation of the study, a full description informing participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any point, methods to ensure privacy and confidentiality of the participants, and expectations of possible benefits that could result from the individuals’ participation in the study (Creswell, 2013). Participants were expected to read, ask questions or discuss with the researcher, and sign the consent form before the study commenced.

Participants also had the right and opportunity to participate in member checks to help in maintaining the study’s validity (Merriam, 2009). After interviews and observations were conducted, the researcher shared interview transcripts and notes from observations in order to elicit feedback from participants regarding statements or actions. The researcher accounted for any modifications that had to be made after member checks were completed with participants.

**Potential Limitations**

As with any study, there were possible limitations with the current proposed research that had to be considered in order to maintain validity, credibility and reliability (Merriam, 2009). Bias such as the possibility of the participants in the study knowing or being acquainted with the researcher was addressed by selecting specific participants who had little contact or connection to the researcher. Additionally, triangulation of the three types of data collected (interviews, observations, and artifacts) was essential to ascertain that the data valid (Merriam, 2009) and accurately described teachers’ perceptions of their abilities and experiences.

In order to eliminate any preconceptions that the researcher or participants may have had, it was essential for the researcher to be as sensitive and objective as possible when crafting
interview questions about teachers’ self-efficacy since it was assumed that most teachers would not want to come across as giving “incorrect” answers or describing low self-efficacy. The researcher made a point to design questions that let participants to feel safe describing negative feelings and did not insinuate the need for positive answers. When considering meeting observations, the researcher was entirely non-participatory so that meeting attendees could become accustomed and less cognizant of an additional person in the room. This also allowed the meeting observation to occur its most natural state and provide the least amount of disruption possible. With artifacts, the researcher sat with each participant to review artifacts so that any incorrect assumptions or guesses in interpreting artifacts were dismissed. It was the researcher’s full intent to account for all of the limitations mentioned above and conduct a sound, truthful and integral case study to the best of her ability.

Summary

In summary, a multiple-case study provided an optimal research methodology for the current study. Using five elementary mainstream classroom teachers as individual cases offered in-depth data as to how each teacher’s self-efficacy has been formed based on educational, personal, and professional experiences as well as their interaction with the state. All precautions were taken throughout the entire process of conducting the study, such as participant recruitment, data collection and analysis, and reporting of findings, to be sure that participants’ privacy was protected and their rights were not infringed upon. Potential limitations are addressed throughout the study and accounted for in the data analysis and results sections to ensure a research study that informs objectively and honestly throughout.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This multiple-case study investigates self-efficacy of five Adamstown Public Schools general elementary teachers when they attempt to distinguish between possible learning disabilities (LD) and typical second language acquisition difficulties in English Language Learners (ELLs). Chapter 4 begins with a review of the methodology and details the data collection and analysis. It then presents portraits of five individual case studies (one for each teacher as the “case”) as they relate directly to the core research questions and the four major themes that emerged from the data. After each case study is presented, a cross-case analysis will highlight thematic similarities and differences across the five participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

As explained in detail in Chapter 3, five participants were chosen through convenience and snowball sampling. Each fit the criteria of (1) working as a mainstream classroom teacher in the district for over three years, (2) currently teaching Grades 2, 3, 4, or 5 at one of six Adamstown elementary schools with the highest percentage of ELLs, (3) having recently worked with struggling ELLs who might present as having learning disabilities. Collection of data from three different sources (meeting observations, semi-structured interviews, and follow-up interviews describing participants’ choice of artifacts) for each case allowed for triangulation of the data to discover key themes and sub-themes.

Table 4.1 below provides a layout of the demographic information collected during the first interview from each of participants who make up the five cases. This information includes the name of each participant (pseudonym), each participant’s school (pseudonym), the grade she
is currently teaching, age range, number of years in the teaching profession, ethnicity, native language and any other languages spoken by the participant.

**Table 4.1.** Demographic Information of the Five Cases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case #</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name (Pseudonym)</td>
<td>April</td>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>Cassandra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School Name (Pseudonym)</td>
<td>Harvey</td>
<td>Prescott</td>
<td>Franklin</td>
<td>River</td>
<td>Redford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Taught</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>30-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Range</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Teaching</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Language</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Language</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection**

For each of the five cases, the researcher collected and analyzed data from three distinct sources. The first source was a semi-structured interview where the same questions were asked to each participant. These interviews were digitally recorded using Rev.com and sent for transcription to the same company. The second source was in the form of detailed notes from observing Integrated Learning Team meetings held at each site and in which each of the five participants was involved. The researcher took detailed notes and recorded each meeting in order to cross-reference or reinforce notes taken during the meetings, although the recordings were not fully transcribed. The third source was a follow-up interview where each participant presented an artifact, such as documents, photos or notes, to the researcher. These interviews were also recorded and sent for transcription to Rev.com. The researcher then conducted member checks by sharing detailed notes from each meeting observation and transcripts from each interview with each participant for the purpose of member checks to add, change or clarify information as needed. Participants and their schools were given pseudonyms and all identifying information was removed to ensure confidentiality.
Coding

Initially, data were coded by hand using open coding as a first attempt to discover thematic connections within each case as well across cases. In the second and third rounds of coding, the researcher used an online research tool application called Dedoose (www.dedoose.com) that allowed demographic data to be displayed graphically and all text excerpts to be sorted, organized and coded axially.

The three theories of self-efficacy, social constructivism and culturally responsive teaching from this study’s conceptual framework along with re-examination of the study’s key research questions provided the structure for the analysis. Originally, twelve root codes with 29 sub-codes emerged from first round coding. During the second and third round coding, related codes were collapsed into ten root codes with 23 sub-codes. As information became clearer through organization and interpretation of data from each case study, four key themes and fourteen sub-themes emerged, emphasizing factors that relate to teachers’ self-efficacy when trying to identify the difference between difficulties in second language acquisition and possible learning disabilities for struggling ELLs in their classrooms.

Overview of Key Themes

As mentioned above, four distinct key themes presented as important conceptual evidence connected to this study’s purpose and research questions. Theme 1 illustrates how a teacher’s character and personal experiences, such as cultural and/or linguistic background or experience teaching culturally diverse learners, can contribute to perceptions of his/her abilities to make decisions about the needs of struggling ELLs. Theme 2 describes collaboration among colleagues and school administrators, where participants shared their thoughts on the team process, shared responsibility and collaborative analysis of student data for students with
possible LD (ELL and non-ELL). Theme 3 focuses on teachers’ perceptions of the importance of Understanding the “Whole child”, including parental input, peer comparisons, and the student’s social/emotional well-being. Finally, Theme 4 highlights professional development and training, including effective ESL strategies and Response to Intervention, as related to teacher self-efficacy.

Table 4.2. Organization of Key Themes and Sub-Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 1: Character and Personal Experiences</strong></td>
<td>• Linguistic and cultural experiences in personal and professional life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Attitude about teaching culturally diverse learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Perceptions of expertise related to years of teaching experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Intuition: “I just knew”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A teacher’s character and personal experiences contribute to his/her level of self-efficacy in working with struggling ELLs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 2: Collaboration with Colleagues/Support from School Administration</strong></td>
<td>• Sense of shared responsibility when making decisions about struggling ELLs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Trusting the team and the process is crucial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reviewing different types of data to aid in initial identification of LD in ELLs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Understanding/learning about students with learning disabilities (ELL and non-ELL) through communication with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration with colleagues and support from school administration contributes to a teacher’s feeling of success when deciding between language acquisition and LD in their ELLs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 3: Understanding the “Whole Child”</strong></td>
<td>• Communicating with/learning from parents about the student in question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the “Whole child” contributes to a teacher’s feelings of success when deciding to request testing for learning disabilities in ELLs.</td>
<td>• Comparing struggling ELL with ELL peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Understanding and taking into account the social and emotional well-being of child in question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 4: Professional Development and Training</strong></td>
<td>• Educational opportunities through professional development: effective or not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development and training contributes to a teacher’s perceptions of making effective decisions regarding struggling ELLs.</td>
<td>• Understanding and using Response to Intervention (RtI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Effective strategies for instruction of struggling ELLs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Case # 1: April

April (pseudonym), a white female in the 50-to-59-age range, is a teacher at the Harvey Elementary School (name changed). She has been teaching in the Adamstown district for twenty years; her primary language is English, and she does not speak any other languages.

Case Site: Harvey Elementary School

April’s school is a multicultural elementary school in one of the district’s lower economic neighborhoods. The total number of students enrolled is approximately 500, 30% of which are ELLs. Around 45% of the students from Harvey are considered economically disadvantaged. There is a high student-to-teacher ratio at approximately 13 to 1. Three full-time ESL teachers serve ELLs in a pullout capacity, where students are pulled out of their classrooms to receive specialized English Language Development instruction in small groups.

Harvey Elementary School’s Integrated Learning Teams. Harvey Elementary holds three Integrated Learning Team (ILT) meetings per year, where benchmark data are collected and analyzed from standardized assessments as well as from formative and classroom assessments, such as weekly tests and quizzes. At Harvey, ILTs meet by grade level; all teachers and educators involved with each grade, including mainstream classroom teachers, ESL teachers, literacy specialists, and special education teachers, are present at the meeting along with the Principal or Assistant Principal. As observed by the researcher during an ILT meeting at Harvey, the literacy specialists facilitated the meeting and provided each member of the team with printed reports from three standardized benchmark tests: Measure of Academic Progress (MAP), Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), and Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). Prior to discussion, the team celebrated their joint effort in moving several students to a higher Tier, with three students having already hit their End-Of-Year
A list of students’ names and Tier placements from DIBELS was projected for all to see; the team methodically moved through the list, discussing each student’s current progress as well as suggesting any changes to instruction, intervention or social-emotional support. During the observed ILT meeting, the researcher witnessed rich conversation and interaction between April, her teammates and school principal when discussing ELLs in April’s class. There was collaboration and inquiry observed regarding each student’s progress or challenges.

**Theme 1: Character and Personal Experiences**

Throughout the researcher’s interactions with April, it became clear that her character and personal experiences with different cultures and languages through travels, family experiences, and working with diverse learners shaped her feelings about working with ELLs. She provided many examples of personal and professional experiences interacting with people of different cultures as well as her all-encompassing positivity and joy in these interactions, showing a strong connection between her overall perceptions of her abilities to provide instruction and support for struggling ELLs.

**Linguistic and cultural experiences in personal and professional life.** When asked about her personal experiences with people who come from other cultures, April described multiculturalism as part of her own family, having grown up in a multicultural household with an Irish father from Northern Ireland and a maternal grandmother from Canada:

As a child, every summer I've gone to Canada in the summer and my children go as well. We go to Cape Breton Island…Gaelic is the language that they do teach in the schools there, and I know my grandmother spoke it to her sister on the phone. There are some Gaelic words we know. It's nice because it's Scottish culture. We know our ancestors and
the year they came [to Canada]. It's a nice Scottish traditional experience... It's a love of learning and my boys experience that as well. (April, interview)

**Attitude about teaching culturally diverse learners.** When discussing her experiences working with children from diverse cultural backgrounds, April showed great enthusiasm for her encounters with different cultures. She explained that coming to Adamstown from a different district that did not have such a diverse student population was a wonderful change for her, stating:

It's been just so fascinating and awesome to come and work in Adamstown because I was in more suburban settings [before] so it was very typical. My eyes have been just wide open since I got here. I love it. I just love the diversity… I loved seeing Asian cultures like Vietnamese, Chinese…It was so new to me to book a translator for Mandarin, Cantonese, whichever language. (April, interview)

April’s excitement and positivity were evident as she explained specific examples with students. She described several occasions where students from different cultures introduced her to foods and customs from their own cultures of countries such as India, Bulgaria and Egypt. Her willingness to embrace her students’ cultures showed her natural affinity for culturally responsive teaching in her classroom. In her first interview, she described interacting with a new ELL in her class who had no English, where she willingly learned a few words in his language to make him feel comfortable. She states, “He’s so proud that I'm getting his words…They're the experts. They help me with the words that I don't know how to say” (April, interview).

**Perceptions of expertise related to years of teaching experience.** With regard to April’s own perceptions of her level of expertise and how that might affect her decision making about ELLs who might have LD, it was evident that her level of self-efficacy increased over
time. She mentioned that there was a “learning curve” in her earlier experiences working with struggling ELLs and that she questioned herself more often than not during that time. When explaining how comfortable she felt now with identifying an ELL who might need additional support, she said:

After my experiences, I feel comfortable that I'm able to notice something, and again, giving the benefit of the doubt and checking for the language. I'm not 100% like, "I know this." I'm not 100% but I'm very comfortable with bringing up my issue. I feel like I have a lot of experience that can really support what I'm thinking. (April, interview)

**Intuition: “I just knew”**. Intuition as a personal experience also played a part in April’s self-efficacy. For the artifact that she was asked to bring and describe, April chose several pieces of a struggling ELL’s work that she had saved from the previous year when she had made the decision to recommend that student for additional testing for a learning disability. She described her perception of the student’s work as “one of those teacher intuition moments” and how it exemplified her understanding of one of her struggling ELL’s true issues. She said she “had a feeling” that there was more to the student’s issues than just language acquisition:

It's that gray area with ELLs because we do provide certain support, like literacy. But then I had a feeling, again by her work, and her ability, verbally, which she could express things, but then when it came to the active writing, she could follow directions... Like her grammar, sometimes it's attributed to the ELL factor, but it's just that some of these phonetic spellings [show that] there's no progress. (April, second interview with artifact)

**Theme 2: Collaboration with Colleagues/Support from School Administrators**

One of the most prominent themes in the data collected from April was collaboration with her colleagues and the support from the principal and assistant principal at Harvey
Elementary School. April’s positive experiences working with her colleagues throughout the decision-making process were invaluable when faced with the difficulty of deciding what to do for a struggling ELL who shows signs of a possible learning disability.

**Sense of shared responsibility when making decisions about struggling ELLs.** April was very clear about the decision being a team decision when reviewing evidence and determining next steps for ELLs with possible learning disabilities:

Typically, in second grade when, in my opinion, more support is needed, we do wait and watch, because it's kind of the third year. But it's definitely the SPED teacher, ESL teacher, literacy specialists and the principal. And informally and then formally at those ILT meetings when the whole team is assembled, it's a group decision…”Wow, this child still isn't there yet, I'm not impressed with her progress, let's keep an eye on her.” (April, interview)

When asked about initial conversations with colleagues regarding ELLs in her class showing signs of struggle, April also described additional experiences collaborating with her ILT colleagues to gather more data on a struggling ELL:

We're constantly in communication with the ESL teachers; it's a quick check in. It’s off the cuff, or with the SPED teacher I've asked under two occasions, "Hey, can you just come take a look at him, because I'm concerned.” So, that's great. You definitely have experts. What I do feel in those two cases, it was beyond just ESL. (April, interview)

**Trusting the team and the process is crucial.** April reinforced her perception of effectiveness with decision-making about struggling ELLs as a result of her strong relationship with her colleagues and school leaders. As witnessed during the ILT meeting observation, April and her team members showed a clear sense of trust in each other’s judgments about ELLs
having difficulties throughout the process by actively listening to each other and showing consent (nodding, agreeing verbally). April participated in discussion of each ELL by offering specific progress markers; for example, she described a student who was recently very focused with comprehension in a small group, which was a change from previous behavior in larger groups. When discussing a struggling ELL in her class, April agreed with her colleagues that despite his low abilities the student had made significant progress in writing so far.

While consensus was more common than not among colleagues, April did reveal that there were times in which she felt differently about a team decision. During her artifact description interview, she mentioned that her feelings about the student in question were contrary to her colleagues, saying, "I think it would have been better if the process started in second, and she started Day 1 in third grade. But I understand everyone's reasoning. It's a team decision” (April, second interview with artifact).

**Reviewing different types of data to aid in initial identification of LD in ELLs.** Data provided by April strongly supported her feelings about the importance of reviewing a variety of student data sources, both formal and informal, when differentiating between language acquisition and LD in ELLs. April described multiple types of data that she uses to monitor her struggling ELLs:

In my experience, I can think two students who have struggled beyond just acquiring language and grammar, which is kind of where you go. I notice it through our benchmark testing, beginning of the year and mid-year [because] we're doing data collection on them. Sometimes these ELLs I'm thinking of, they're not always taking our weekly tests or my weekly assessments. But I'm monitoring them, [asking yourself], “How is their writing? How is their learning? How is their reading?” So, there's my personal
monitoring, but then there are dipstick times through the year when you have a feeling or you're noticing that you’re not seeing progress. But then I can nail it with the data and it supports me. (April, interview)

April’s chosen artifact provided an in-depth look at formative classroom data as one piece of the puzzle for determining her ELLs’ needs. She shared two examples of her student’s writing at two different times in the year, showing that there was minimal progress between the two. In explaining her choice, she said:

I chose her writing. I could have brought my DIBELS scores but I thought that wasn't showing the person as much, or what we talked about. So I brought this because it shows how [the student] could follow directions and procedure. But then for me it was some of these phonetic spellings that just glare, this is towards the end of the year, that are still standing out, like some sight words that she can't see, that she can't spell. (April, second interview with artifact)

Understanding/learning about students with disabilities (ELL and non-ELLs) through communication with others. When asked about her experience working with students with learning disabilities (both ELL and non-ELL), April described the strategies and protocols she follows to be sure the students’ needs are being met to the terms of the student’s Individual Education Plan (IEP). However, it was interesting to hear her state that with a current ELL in her class on an IEP, she is more attentive and aware of the ELL’s disability than with non-ELLs on IEPs. In one interview she said, “with a non-ELL, it’s…sometimes a quicker conversation or it’s a quicker alignment or adjustment…where with [this ELL] I’m definitely making sure he understands” (April, interview). With non-ELLs on IEPs in her classroom, April explained that
she felt very comfortable since there are no questions about what those students need as the appropriate modifications are outlined in detail in the IEP.

**Theme 3: Understanding the “Whole Child”**

Theme 3 addresses the importance of understanding all of the elements of the “whole child” that affect how a child progresses in school. April’s perceptions of her abilities to differentiate appropriately between her ELLs’ language acquisition and something other than language as a cause for struggle were well-defined, since she made a point to investigate many elements that could contribute to a child’s achievement or lack of achievement to her own decision-making process.

**Communicating with/learning from parents about the struggling student.** Throughout the data, there were many instances of April’s communication efforts with parents of her ELLs. During the ILT meeting, April was consistent in bringing up any significant communication that she had had with the parents of her ELLs. She mentioned that she had good news to share: the mother of one of her struggling ELLs contacted her during the December break to tell her that the family had hired a tutor to assist the student in question. For another student, she acknowledged that the child was more motivated and making progress now that her parents started to become involved with reinforcing her learning at home. Often during her interview, April explained her feelings about the necessity of communicating with parents, even with non-academic topics as the center of conversation, in order to build trust and understanding. She described her daily interaction with one mother:

> Every day there's a new food, and I'm trying to write them down so I'll know, and then [the mother] always says, "For your boys, you take extra for your boys." I'm always taking a baggie home for them. I love that she's so proud of that and I love that it's this
confident way for us to communicate. This way she's the expert, and I'm asking her what's in [the food]. (April, interview)

**Comparing struggling ELLs with their ELL peers.** When asked about using this approach when trying to assess whether an ELL is adequately making progress or not, April explained that this was a strategy she often used to help her gather more information:

Looking at the other ELLs, that's really a big piece. I guess I haven't even mentioned them yet in all my teamwork talk and all the colleagues that I work with. But that piece of it is so informational as well… so that even with these other students, like a [beginner] that moved in this summer as well, I'm seeing it. Really it's my…point of reference. (April, interview)

For her artifact, April brought student work samples that she had kept from ELLs that concerned her in order to compare their work with any new ELLs in her class that might also have been struggling in the same way: “I usually save an [ELL’s work]…I do it to use it as a check for teaching. It’s a great reference” (April, second interview with artifact). By comparing and contrasting two ELLs in terms of academic work or social-emotional learning, April showed that she was able to make educated guesses about where the cause might lie for a struggling ELL.

**Understanding/considering the social and emotional well-being of the child in question.** Having a clear understanding of a child’s social and emotional well-being is an important piece for any elementary teacher, especially when a child might be dealing with additional challenges, such as culture shock, difficult family dynamics, or having to make new friends. During her interviews and the ILT meeting observation, April gave examples of how she considers all that a child might be going through as possible factors affecting his/her ability
to succeed academically. One instance of this was evident while April was describing the child whose work she brought as an artifact:

I know at the end of the year, [the student] thought they would be moving to North Carolina. She would miss her dad. But then they stayed. I know they live with multiple, different families. A lot of them live communally. So there's that kind of support at home. Her mom doesn't have much English, but [she] would bring a friend to the conferences. They're both supportive of her. They're very loving. She's an only child…And she's well cared for and everything. (April, second interview with artifact)

**Theme 4: Professional Development and Training**

Theme 4, which focuses on a teacher’s professional development and training in second language acquisition or special education, is another area of focus with regard to April’s self-efficacy, although it was not as prominent as the other themes described previously. Overall, April had positive feedback about the different kinds of courses, workshops and professional development opportunities regarding the education of ELLs provided over time either by the district or by the state.

**Educational opportunities through professional development: Effective or not?**

When asked about her experiences receiving professional development or training about how to work with ELLs, April said:

To be honest, my only [professional development] experiences have been in Adamstown…When I first came as a long-term sub, I had asked [the assistant superintendent] when I was hired, "What can I do? It's so different in Adamstown." I loved every one of those classes, and there are still strategies that I use…I was still so grateful that over time I had all of those trainings…I feel like I was still so pleased to
have gotten all of those [strategies] and to have been able to practice along the way.

(April, interview)

It is evident that April found that opportunities she was afforded through district-offered professional development were very useful to her when working with ELLs. Her attitude about the trainings showed a very high sense of appreciation for the value of the courses she took.

**Understanding and using Response to Intervention (RtI).** When asked about her experience understanding and using RtI, April seemed uncertain as to what RtI was. After receiving a general definition of RtI for the purpose of answering the interview question, she was able to describe her own RtI experiences as using general strategies and progress monitoring skills for her ELLs. She also mentioned literacy as the primary intervention used for struggling ELLs, but she could not name a specific intervention specific to ELLs:

Not in my experience, no. It's the same type of [intervention]. I know some of [the interventions] are literacy services. Ironically, this year with the way our schedule is, we used to have students that we wanted to give another intervention but their ESL [instruction] times used to be separate from our available 30-minute literacy support. So, the student would have their ESL [instruction] and then if they needed an intervention, they could also access literacy. But they should have scheduled differently to allow that.

(April interview)

When asked about support from school administrators around the RtI process, April stated that she and the Integrated Learning Team members were given support when planning interventions for or discussing progress monitoring for struggling ELLs.

**Effective strategies for instruction of struggling ELLs.** According to April, many of the effective strategies for instruction of ELLs who struggle connected with her experience with
professional development and second language acquisition. Each of April’s data sources contained a wealth of examples with particular ways in which she used strategies on a daily basis. She describes one in detail:

So, if I'm doing sentence frames or accessing prior knowledge with photos or something on YouTube, it benefits everyone. It's a bit seamless, I find, and it's so positive and it makes me a little more mindful: "Okay, I need to let literacy know this." But everyone's learning. (April, interview)

Case Study Summary: April

Analysis and interpretation of all data collected for April (interviews, meeting observations, site study data) has brought into focus the following positive factors affecting April’s self-efficacy:

• Cultural competency through positive cultural/linguistic personal and family experiences as well as professional experiences working with culturally diverse learners and their families contributes positively to April’s high self-efficacy;
• Solid relationships forged among Harvey Elementary School colleagues and school administrators as well as a strong sense of trust in the team process contribute to April’s elevated confidence in her abilities to make decisions about her struggling ELLs;
• Consideration of all factors that contribute to her ELLs’ academic progress, including their social/emotional well-being, is extremely helpful to April as she attempts to differentiate between language acquisition issues and possible LD;
• April’s learning experiences from district-offered professional training have contributed to her positive sense of self-efficacy, but not as significantly as other factors described above.
Case Study # 2: Heather

Heather (pseudonym) is a white female teacher who falls in the 50 to 59 year old age range. She is currently at teacher at Prescott Elementary School (pseudonym) and has been teaching for over 25 years. Her primary language is English, and she does not speak any other languages.

Case Site: Prescott Elementary School

Heather’s school is located in a low- to middle-income neighborhood with over 300 students enrolled. Approximately 60% of students have a first language other than English, and around 35% are categorized as English Language Learners. Although Prescott has close to 35% of its student population that considered economically disadvantaged and are eligible for free/reduced lunch, the school has an excellent student-to-teacher ratio at 14 to 1. There are two full-time ESL teachers one part-time ESL teacher, all of who provide daily English Language Development. Similar to all other schools in the district, Prescott follows a pullout instructional model where ELLs are pulled out of their classrooms in small groups to receive targeted English language instruction.

Prescott Elementary School’s Integrated Learning Team. Prescott holds Integrated Learning Team (ILT) meetings three times per year to examine student progress and achievement on both formal standardized assessments as well as informal classroom-based assessments in reading and math. ILT meetings are held with individual classroom teachers who rotate through 30-minute meetings scheduled with the school’s ESL teachers, literacy specialists, special education staff and school principal. For observational data collection purposes, the researcher was able to attend Heather’s ILT meeting in January. The meeting was facilitated by the literacy specialists and began with an overview of Heather’s individual students’ scores on
the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP), Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), and Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) assessments. Heather’s specific student profiles and score reports on these assessments were printed out and compiled in a folder for each team member to review during the ILT meeting. Heather and her colleagues went through student by student, spending more time on students that had not made significant progress on the standardized assessments. There was equal participation and a sense of collaboration among all involved, although the principal played a more passive role with minimal direct participation during the meeting.

**Theme 1: Character and Personal Experiences**

Data collection and analysis of Heather’s interviews revealed that her character and personal experiences with family, traveling abroad and working with culturally diverse learners and their families have contributed significantly to her own sense of self-efficacy when working with ELLs who struggle more than others. She described different examples of her interactions with other cultures and people from diverse backgrounds in her work setting as well as in a more familial setting.

**Linguistic and cultural experiences in personal and professional life.** Heather’s experiences in her personal life show her comfort and enjoyment interacting with people from various cultural backgrounds. During one of her interviews, Heather described her experience with family members from different nationalities and her feelings towards this experience:

I’ve traveled to Italy and spent a fair amount of time there, probably about six weeks…And had follow-up visits and then we traveled around Europe, that sort of thing. [Additionally,] one of my brothers is married to a Mandarin woman. They go to China
every year, three summers now with the baby… I'm dying to go and spend time over there. (Heather, interview)

**Attitude about teaching culturally diverse learners.** Heather also describes various examples of her professional experience working with culturally diverse students and their families. She describes her first few days at Prescott Elementary as one of her first experiences having ELLs in her classroom and feeling a sense of “full immersion” with such a diverse class:

I remember that first year I think I had 19 kids and I had all my ten boys, I think they were all Mandarin except one, one was Cantonese. And I had mostly Chinese girls that year and maybe two or three girls that were not Chinese… I wasn't going to say it was culture shock…but then it was really dealing more with the language, like making sure that they are learning. (Heather, interview)

**Perceptions of expertise related to years of teaching experience.** Although Heather has over twenty years in the district, her years of teaching experience did not play a significant role in either of her interviews as a helpful advantage in understanding the difference between a possible learning disability and difficulty acquiring English in her ELLs. However, she did mention that her years of experience teaching afforded her confidence in the assessments used to measure progress and attainment in reading and literacy, stating, “I’m confident in the measurements because I’ve been using them for so long” (Heather, second interview with artifact).

**Intuition: “I just knew”**. Intuition played an important role in Heather’s perception of her own efficacy in making decisions about struggling ELLs. When describing an experience with a struggling ELL in her earlier years as a teacher, Heather explained:
I knew all year, and of course there were issues at home as well with language and that sort of thing. So [his parents] couldn't support him. But he was just not making the gains. And I clearly knew, I just knew it. He was special needs. It just was in your face, that sort of thing. And he clearly was an ELL. (Heather, interview)

Heather also explained that her intuition was not always based on what evidence she was able to see regarding characteristics typical of learning disabilities or language acquisition issues, but instead on what was not evident, stating, “it's not even so much what I see, it's what I don't see” (Heather, interview).

**Theme 2: Collaboration with Colleagues/Support from School Administration**

Theme 2 held a strong presence throughout the data collected from Heather’s interviews and ILT meeting observation. It was very clear to the researcher that Heather relied heavily on her colleagues’ support and expertise to help her make decisions about her struggling ELLs. She provided numerous examples of conversations and interactions with her colleagues throughout her years of teaching in the district. In addition, she often commented about how supported she felt by Prescott’s principal, evident particularly in his active participation in conversations and eventual decisions about testing or services for struggling students.

**Sense of shared responsibility when making decisions about struggling ELLs.** A strong sense of shared responsibility among colleagues in the decision-making process about ELLs with possible learning disabilities was significant throughout the researcher’s interactions with Heather. She felt that having initial conversations with her colleagues regarding students that they shared was essential in helping her make informed decisions regarding a child’s specific needs:
We are constantly having conversations, whether they are while passing in the hallway, here and there, at lunch, before school, after school, or at the door when they come in:

"Hey, I meant to tell you this.” (Heather, interview)

Heather also explained the importance of having full support from her school principal and saying, “He rightfully said, ‘I want to know,’ unlike some of the other administrators I’ve worked for that were kind of more hands off” (Heather, interview).

Interestingly, in one of her interviews, Heather also admitted that sharing responsibility could occasionally be overlooked by team members. At one point, she described a situation with a student who had not being receiving ESL services in an earlier grade:

Balls get dropped all the time by all of us, and then I come to find out his first grade teacher was hoping that he would be an ELL. We didn't know that. Mom had requested ESL services, so he is back [receiving services]. (Heather, second interview with artifact)

**Trusting the team and the process is crucial.** This sub-theme was particularly evident in Heather’s ILT meeting with colleagues, as was observed by the researcher in January. The importance of group discussion about each ELL in her class came through as each individual team member spoke about his/her own experience with each student in question in Heather’s class. The researcher was able to observe specific dialogue about one struggling ELL that indicated a mutual respect for each team member’s opinion and a profound understanding about the necessity of a group decision about ELLs that may present learning disabilities.

**Reviewing different types of data to aid in initial identification of LD in ELLs.** Heather’s data demonstrated her strong commitment reviewing data from a variety of assessments for ELL children who may show signs of a learning disability. Due to her strong skill set in teaching literacy, it was clear that she is very comfortable particularly when using
formal assessments such as DIBELS or DRA to assist in making decisions about struggling ELLs:

I am still a massive fan of the DRA. I DRA almost every kid in this room by November or December, if need be. He has been DRA-ed through me, and then I will DRA probably this corner of the room by the end of the year. It used to be mandatory, every kid, K-4 I think. That's just me. (Heather, second interview with artifact)

Heather’s choice of artifact, DIBELS beginning and middle of the year benchmark scores for her class, also reinforces her feeling that formal data analysis is one of the most beneficial tools for her in determining the nature of an ELL’s difficulties with reading and writing. She explains, “This is where it starts, for me, anyway, and then it kind of leads out to DRA, the formatives, the weeklies, which I'm religious about” (Heather, second interview with artifact). Although she reviews other types of data when determining whether her struggling ELLs might have additional learning challenges beyond second language acquisition, Heather’s comfort level with formal data is clearly the highest, thus contributing to her feelings of strong self-efficacy as well.

Understanding/learning about students with learning disabilities (ELL and non-ELL) through communication with others. Heather also brought up an interesting point during one of her interviews: She and her colleagues often look at a family’s history with children on IEPs to understand if there are any links between siblings and how this data might inform their decisions about a child’s needs. She explained:

Here came his sister. And she already was on an ed plan and we knew that. And there were other issues with her. She's in third grade now; I had her last year…We were just talking about this, probably about a month ago. It'll be interesting to see if the littlest one…will come with some issues. (Heather, interview)
In concluding her discussion about her experience with students with LD in general (ELL or non-ELL), Heather explained how things could be different when she is working with an ELL on an IEP:

I just could be maybe a little more vigilant with the ELLs just to make sure I'm not missing anything. And also to make sure I keep that line of communication with whoever is servicing him or who will potentially service, and making sure the [struggling child’s] name is on the list… And make sure with home that there are no surprises for [the parents]. (Heather, interview)

**Theme 3: Understanding the “Whole Child”**

As was evident in data collected through interviews and meeting observations, Heather demonstrated a strong connection to Theme 3 as she described her experiences with specific ELL children about whom she felt more concern than usual and the value of considering all elements that influence an ELL’s academic progress. She explained multiple times that understanding as much as possible about each child can assist in making the best possible decision for that child’s educational well-being.

**Communicating with/learning from parents about the struggling student.** Heather realized how necessary it was to have a strong bond with the parents of her ELLs in order to coerce them into becoming more actively involved with their children’s education. In one interview, she described her efforts in communicating with parents of ELLs in a weekly newsletter:

I try to get out a weekly newsletter. At the beginning of the year, it's like all this stuff’s going on that I [want to] announce to everyone. I'm like, "Should it be translated?"... and the principal asked, "Do you think they're reading it?" I said, "You know I do. I really
do.” I think that those [parents] that have a decent understanding [of English] under their belts are passing [the information] along. Because all of a sudden you see, like when we're on a project, it comes back. Oh, somebody must have mentioned this, or reminded [other parents]. (Heather, interview)

When dealing with struggling ELLs, Heather makes an effort to comprehend parents’ feelings about their child and to communicate effectively but also with care when asking questions or explaining difficult situations. She realizes that some parents put pressure on their children to succeed, and it is difficult when she has to give them news that their child is not achieving as rapidly as they would like. When describing a struggling ELL in her class and the need to communicate with the parents, she stated:

He's very silly, and I'm really trying to work with him to break that habit. Even [the principal] and I talked, and I don’t know if I’m going to bring it up to mom and dad. I don't want that because it's their only child [and they often] put all their eggs in the basket. (Heather, second interview with artifact)

**Comparing struggling student with ELL peers.** In her interviews, Heather often mentioned using ELLs who are making adequate academic gains as “barometer kids”, meaning they are considered a point of comparison for her as she attempts to understand the reason why some of her ELLs are not making progress. When explaining this, she states: “I always have a barometer with one of the kids; it doesn't matter, boy or girl. This is kind of how I gauge it, one of the ways, based on their peers that year” (Heather, interview).

**Understanding and taking into account the social and emotional well-being of child in question.** Heather also has a clear grasp on how useful it could be to understand more about her students’ social and emotional well-being in their lives outside of school and the impact it
could have on them in school. She views different components, such as readiness and maturity, as elements that can help her rule out disability as a reason for lack of progress. In one of her interviews, Heather mentioned the significance of students’ positive outlook on school:

One thing that I say to parents, and I even say it to the kids, is,...are the kids really happy? Once they want to come to school and they are skipping to the door, as I say, everything else...will fall into place. Then it makes it almost easier for me, where there are a few social/emotional issues, and to say, I don't think in my gut it's a learning disability, but something that's happening at home. (Heather, second interview with artifact)

Theme 3 was well exemplified throughout Heather’s data, since she reiterated several times how she makes a point to learn as much as possible about each child. Doing so allows her and her colleagues to make informed decisions about next steps for ELLs who may show signs of a learning disability.

**Theme 4: Professional Development and Training**

Heather’s experience with professional development and training regarding Second Language Acquisition and working with culturally diverse learners was well represented in the data that Heather provided. She described both the professional learning opportunities offered by the district as well as those offered by the state, offering her thoughts on the value and usefulness for her as an educator of ELLs.

**Educational opportunities through professional development: effective or not?**

While this sub-theme was not as prevalent as others in Heather’s interviews and observation data, she did explain that some voluntary and mandatory training sessions provided by the district and state were beneficial to her instructional practice and worthy of her time, especially
those related to literacy-based strategies for working with ELLs. In contrast to the positivity she relayed towards certain specific training workshops, she also described other sessions required by the state that were redundant and not all that helpful and seemed poorly planned or “rushed through”.

**Understanding and using Response to Intervention (RtI).** Due to her prior knowledge in literacy intervention, Heather felt very comfortable using RtI with her struggling ELLs. She described her expertise in the use of RtI, mostly with a focus on reading and literacy, to determine her opinion of the best programmatic services for each individual child. When asked if she provided specific interventions for ELLs in her classroom, she responded, “All the time…I do a lot of one on one. I do almost more one on one than a small group because I am going to customize it for that kid” (Heather, interview). However, she was not specific or clear about any intervention strategies specific to ELLs that she might have employed when using RtI with her struggling diverse learners. Such strategies take into account second language acquisition and its effect on an ELL’s literacy skills.

**Effective strategies for instruction of struggling ELLs.** Heather mentioned several approaches that fall into her comfort zone of literacy-based strategies and her use of these strategies regularly to work with ELLs that are having challenges. She explained, “I love small groups and guided reading, and of course now we’re immersed in the guided math…I still use my Project Read stuff all the time, whether it’s just the hand signals or the short vowels” (Heather, interview). While these strategies are not necessarily tailored to ELLs’ needs, Heather felt that they are beneficial regardless of whom they are used with, as they are just a few tools out of many that can be used. She said, “All of those are just strategies for ‘stretching your bubble gum’” (Heather, interview).
**Case Study Summary: Heather**

Heather’s sense of self-efficacy became evident in different ways through analysis of data collected from interviews, her description of an artifact and the researcher’s observation of an ILT meeting at her school. It is clear that the following factors have strongly contributed to Heather’s perception of her own ability to identify reasons why some of her ELLs struggle more than others:

- Heather’s numerous personal and professional experiences with students, parents, relatives, and friends from different cultural backgrounds have afforded her a broad understanding, respect and appreciation for diversity, clearly contributing to sense of self-efficacy;
- Heather’s perception of self-efficacy is supported through her belief in the benefit of having a strong collaborative team of colleagues and support from the school administration in sharing the responsibility for all ELL children in her care;
- Assessing ELLs and collecting different types of data, particularly from formal assessments (DIBELS, DRA) and literacy-driven benchmark tools, gives Heather confidence in her decisions about ELLs with possible learning disabilities;
- Professional development specific to ELLs, in addition to training about appropriate interventions focusing on foundational literacy skills have been most valuable to Heather and have contributed to her sense of self-efficacy in attempting to identify the reason behind her ELLs’ struggles.
Case Study # 3: Penny

Penny (pseudonym) is a white female between 30 and 39 years of age. She currently teaches at Franklin Elementary School (pseudonym) and has been a public school educator for over 13 years. Her primary language is English, and she does not speak any other languages.

Case Site: Franklin Elementary School

Penny’s school is a medium-sized school located in a low- to middle-income neighborhood with over 300 students enrolled. Half of the students attending Franklin are considered economically disadvantaged, meaning they are eligible for the free/reduced lunch program. Close to 75% of the students speak a language other than English at home, and half of the whole student body is receiving ELL services. ELL instruction occurs using primarily a pullout model, where children leave their general education classroom to receive specialized instruction in English language development. The student-to-teacher ratio is approximately 12 to 1, allowing for stronger instructional support with small class sizes. Notwithstanding the high number of ELLs and high poverty rate, Franklin has made substantial progress in its state assessment accountability over the last several years.

Franklin Elementary School’s Integrated Learning Team. ILT meetings at Franklin are held three times per year, commensurate with the other elementary schools in the district. ILT meetings are held with all teachers in a grade level rather than with individual teachers; formative, summative and any additional data are reviewed for each student in the grade level. The researcher was able to observe an ILT meeting for Penny’s grade level team in February. The meeting was held in a large space to accommodate a large group of educators which included the school’s team of ESL teachers and literacy specialists along with special education teachers, guidance counselors, and the principal. Literacy specialists were the facilitators of the
meeting; they projected a spreadsheet with student data on a large screen with so that each student’s scores could be viewed and analyzed by the group. In addition, each individual teacher had a folder with all grade level data from DIBELS, MAP and ACCESS assessments. Teachers first focused on students struggling the most, then moved towards others demonstrating higher achievement and progress. The meeting itself lasted for over two hours, with adequate time being given based on each individual student’s need. All team members were active participants, providing insight into each student’s specific situation. The principal was also an active participant, acting more as a peer in the decision-making process rather than an administrator holding a certain amount of authority.

**Theme 1: Character and Personal Experiences**

Through two separate interviews and an ILT meeting observation, the researcher was able to collect data related to Penny’s overall character and attitude as well as experiences in her life where she interacted with people who were from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds. It became clear that her feelings about working with children and families from various cultures directly stem from her experiences teaching and working in a district and school that has a diverse student body.

**Linguistic and cultural experiences in personal and professional life.** With regard to her personal experiences with persons of different ethnic backgrounds, Penny has had limited exposure; she has not traveled abroad, although she did have a childhood friend whose family was from a different country. In one of her interviews, Penny explained that most of her interactions with people from diverse cultures and ethnicities have been with her school colleagues as well as the students in her classes and their families:

I kind of learned a lot through [colleagues at] school. I learned what is acceptable what
isn't acceptable and why parents sound like they're screaming at their kids when they're not really screaming at their kids and things like that. I've learned a lot about that, but it's all been through different teachers talking to us or asking, "Why is this happening?" and they would explain it to us. (Penny, interview)

She went on to highlight a specific example:

One of our teachers actually went to China for two weeks and learned and went to school there. She said, "It's culturally rude not to speak loudly". I was like, "Huh". It kind of makes a lot of sense because it always sounds like they're screaming at each other. So, it makes me feel a little more comfortable [to know that] because it's not the way I was raised. If my parents raised their voices, I was in deep trouble. (Penny, interview)

**Attitude about teaching culturally diverse learners.** When describing her feelings and thoughts about working directly with ELLs in her classroom, Penny demonstrated sincere enthusiasm and care for her students. She mentioned in both interviews how much she enjoys working with ELLs, stating that they make her job exciting and enjoyable with great moments of hilarity and laughter as well. She expressed a feeling of reward when seeing the progress her ELLs make in her class:

They are fascinating. The fact that they come in not speaking a word of English and leave reading chapter books is amazing to me. I don't know how they do it, but I get really frustrated when they're like, "On the test they didn't do that well." I'm like, "Who cares?" When you see it, you see them come in not speaking English and they leave reading chapter books. How is that not progress? (Penny, interview)

**Perceptions of expertise related to years of teaching experience.** Penny strongly perceives her expertise in working with ELLs is a result of her years of teaching at her school
and in the district. During one interview, she described how lucky she felt to have had many years of teaching experience working with ELLs, stating, “I've learned a lot of good skills that I may not have learned if I had a whole class of ‘white’ children… we're constantly differentiating for all [English fluency] levels” (Penny, interview).

Penny also considers her years of expertise to be an advantage to working with struggling ELLs; she realizes that things may be different for a brand new teacher dealing with a student presenting signs of LD, saying, “I think it's different when you're a first-year teacher compared to a teacher that has been there for a number of years. You notice things a little more, I think, than the first-year teacher that's overwhelmed” (Penny, interview). She remembered her own experiences as a less experienced teacher and how her self-efficacy in determining the needs of her struggling ELLs has increased over time:

I think I maybe put them in a little sooner now than I did when I was younger because I have more faith in myself. [Sometimes] you know something's not right there. I think I've proven [by now] that when I bring a kid up there's a problem. I think maybe in the beginning I wasn't so confident with that. (Penny, interview)

When describing her artifact pertaining to her experience with an ELL manifesting possible LD, Penny explained that her experience with those students at beginning fluency levels helped her to distinguish characteristics that resembled learning disabilities as opposed to difficulties with language acquisition:

I think it represents me knowing and having a good sense of what is expected of ELLs. I know that [this student] is not acting like a normal beginner because I've dealt with beginners. I've had beginners. I kind of know what's normal and can tell that's not ... I think it also just shows what beginners need. Like I kind of have an idea where they're
coming from and what topics I really want to hit on. (Penny, second interview with artifact)

**Intuition: “I just knew”**. During the ILT meeting observation at Franklin Elementary School, Penny mentioned intuition particularly in working with one student about whom she is concerned this year. When the student in question came up, Penny explained that she had a strong feeling that this child’s issues, particularly the social/emotional issues, went beyond language acquisition and were contributing to his lack of academic growth, so much that she was concerned about him being bullied by the other children in her class. In her second interview presenting her artifact, Penny reinforced the idea of intuition driving her push to have the student evaluated further, stating, “Something in your heart just says this isn't normal. This isn't ... It's not that he's not normal, but it's not how beginners typically look” (Penny, second interview with artifact).

**Theme 2: Collaboration with Colleagues/Support from School Administration**

Penny’s data provided many examples of her collaboration with colleagues and how that collaboration related to her feelings of self-efficacy when attempting to identify the needs of her ELLs. Interestingly, Penny explained in several instances that collaboration was not always easy, and there were occasionally differences of opinion about what action to take when deciding whether to test a struggling ELL for learning disabilities.

**Sense of shared responsibility when making decisions about struggling ELLs.** This sub-theme was particularly evident during the researcher’s experience observing Penny and her colleagues during Franklin’s ILT meeting. During that time, the team worked meticulously through each individual student’s benchmark data and listened to each other carefully as team members contributed their part to the conversation. When asked about this shared decision-
making aspect during one of her interviews, Penny responded in the following way:

I think we as a group work really well together. We work really well with the SPED teacher. You know, there’s days where their kids maybe achieve progress and you're just so proud of them...We communicate well together and we work on similar things.

(Penny, interview)

** Trusting the team and the process is crucial. ** Penny explained the importance of trusting the team even when her own opinion differed from her teammates. In her second interview, Penny praised her teammates and the process that has allowed many ELLs with academic difficulties opportunities to make progress over time:

I think that at most schools, it's really the collaboration; people really listen, and teachers are saying, “I have concern.” People will take time to listen. We're really lucky we have great literacy teachers, great ESL teachers and they respect…people who have been in the system for a long time. (Penny second interview with artifact)

Although she suspected that particular issues about ELLs who were not making progress would resurface in the future, Penny also felt that it was important to accept the team’s decision:

I think it's dependent on what the team decides. There are days where I feel like, "Yes. We've made the right decision." There are other days where I'm like, "I'm not so sure I agree with that decision." But, this is the decision the team made so I just have to accept it and move on. I think I get frustrated with that sometimes, but that doesn't mean I stop helping [students]. (Penny, interview)

** Reviewing different types of data to aid in initial identification of LD in ELLs. ** Penny stressed the importance of reviewing different types of data throughout the decision-making process, which was clear to the researcher when observing her participation in Franklin’s
ILT meeting. During the meeting, Penny focused primarily on formative data collected on her struggling ELLs, such as weekly assessments, classroom behavior and interaction with other children. She provided important information regarding her communication with her ELLs’ families and other social/emotional data.

When asked about her use of formal assessments such as DIBELS and MAP in attempting to differentiate between LD and language acquisition issues, Penny offered her opinion about DIBELS:

DIBELS doesn't really show me anything. I mean, DIBELS shows me how fast a kid can read, but we all…have children who can decode like clockwork…That doesn't show me how well they understand. Yeah, you can be fast, but if you have no clue what you read, does it matter? (Penny, second interview with artifact)

Understanding/learning about students with learning disabilities (ELL and non-ELL) through communication with others. Due to the large population of ELLs at her school, Penny feels that she has extensive knowledge about working with ELLs with LD. In both of her interviews, Penny came across as confident and satisfied with what she has been able to do to assist her ELLs on IEPs. She explained the importance of communication with her teammates when making putting together modifications for a student’s IEP, saying, “I think we work well together as a team as far as when we’re doing a new IEP. Well, this is what's working in my room, so maybe this is the new modification we need” (Penny, interview).

When describing how she provides instruction and support for ELLs with LD versus non-ELLs with LD in her class, Penny explained:

I don't think it's different. I think you do what you do based on what the kid needs, whether that's breaking apart words, whether that's just encouraging them a little more. I
think [with] ELLs, maybe, you have to work more on endings; you have to work more on multiple meaning words; but I guess I just kind of do what the kids need. (Penny, interview)

**Theme 3: Understanding the “Whole Child”**

Data collected during Penny’s ILT meeting observation and two interviews strongly exemplifies the theme of Understanding the “whole child” as an important factor in building Penny’s self-efficacy. She provided numerous examples that focused on her ELLs’ behavior in class with peers, their experiences at home interacting with family members, and her own observations and opinions of their general well-being with regard to their abilities to make adequate academic progress.

**Communicating with/learning from parents about the struggling student.** This sub-theme was particularly prevalent throughout all of the data collected during Penny’s meeting observation and interviews. Penny felt that it was very important to communicate regularly and often expressed her opinion about parents’ involvement as a contributing factor to the success of the student, stating how helpful it was to be able to hear from parents about their child. She also felt that it was useful to know parents’ educational background or mindset about education, since she would often hear parents say that the struggling ELL in question was “just lazy”.

Penny also understood that communicating with parents who come from a culture where disabilities and mental illness were not discussed would be challenging, stating, “I think the most challenging has been when we have to raise concerns with [an] IEP or some mental health issues. I think that becomes a real struggle with a lot of parents” (Penny, interview). During her second interview, Penny recounted an exchange with the parent of the child whose work she brought as an artifact, explaining that the parent was very concerned about the child’s lack of progress.
However, knowing from previous conversations with the parent where the child was accused of being lazy, Penny predicted that their next conversation, focusing on the need for additional special education testing, would be a difficult one.

**Comparing struggling student with ELL peers.** While no specific examples from Penny’s data showed a direct comparison between struggling ELLs and other more successful ELLs, Penny did describe instances where one of her struggling ELLs would show self-awareness and deep frustration because of his academic difficulties. In her second interview, Penny explained how this particular student reacted when he would see other peers excelling in certain class activities, describing the student “acting out if children are ahead of him; he's aware of it, but it's screaming, throwing things, refusing to do things. There are huge concerns…if a kid is a level ahead of him, he will get upset” (Penny, second interview with artifact).

Considering the child’s behavior, Penny considered this show of frustration to be another important factor in considering additional testing for a learning disability for this specific ELL.

**Understanding and taking into account the social and emotional well-being of child in question.** Because several of her current students are struggling ELLs, Penny’s data showed a strong connection to this sub-theme, relating to her overall self-efficacy. The ILT meeting observation provided many examples of Penny and her ILT teammates focusing on struggling children’s needs that go beyond academic concerns. During the meeting as well as during both interviews, there was a clear indication that the social/emotional health of one of Penny’s ELLs is in jeopardy; she described how this child was being picked on and bullied by others in the class, and his frustrations in not being able to handle academic challenges were becoming more regular. Penny’s attention to her student’s struggles and the root of these struggles is acute, showing this sub-theme as one of the largest factors attributing to her confidence and self-
efficacy when making decisions about this particular ELL.

**Theme 4: Professional Development and Training**

Theme 4, professional development and training, was well represented in Penny’s data. She recounted specific situations and offered instances of how the professional development that she received through the district was advantageous to her teaching in a high-incidence ELL school like Franklin Elementary. In addition, she offered her opinion about what could have been different with regard to offering strategies to teachers, especially those who do not have extensive experience working with ELLs.

**Educational opportunities through professional development: effective or not?**

Penny’s opinions regarding the effectiveness of the training she received through district and state initiative were varied. She explained in one of her interviews that her initial training experiences were useful, and experience with ELLs over time helped to put that training into perspective:

I think it helps a little knowing a little bit about how the English [language acquisition] process works and how they learn it and the silent period and how it takes time. Just understanding the grammar errors, and I think a lot of it is just experience too. You can say, “They are leaving off all of their endings. Well, that's an ELL.” We kind of know that by now. (Penny, interview)

On the contrary, Penny did not feel that the professional development recently mandated by the state was useful to her. In her first interview, she explained that the state-required training focused primarily on working with ELLs who were at an intermediate level or above, rather than with ELLs at lower fluency levels, making it less effective than professional development geared toward working with beginner ELLs. Her criticism reflected the need for some additional
training; she says, “If we could do one thing, it would be a class for how to work with beginners, what are the steps, you know? Even a scope-and-sequence, like work on short 'A', then work on short 'E', short 'I'” (Penny, interview).

**Understanding and using Response to Intervention (RtI).** Penny provided plenty of evidence of her understanding of the RtI process and how it pertains to working with struggling ELLs:

My understanding is there are three layers. The base [layer] at the bottom would be the kids that are pretty much where you want them to be. Then [students in] the second layer need some support, and the top layer needs the most. I think we do RtI well. We look at our RtI [model] and say, "This one is in kindergarten. This one's had literacy. What are we doing next? What are our next steps? What are our next levels?" (Penny, interview)

Penny also explained that the way in which educators use RtI model at her school feels rather seamless, where children are receiving interventions all the time based on their needs. She stated in one interview:

I think we do interventions based on where they are and who they are. I mean, modifications come out because we know what they need. I have one who needs to sit with me and talk out his whole writing…It wasn't like, "Okay, this is my ‘Response to Intervention’ with him". It was just what I feel he needs, because he does better with it. (Penny, interview)

**Effective strategies for instruction of struggling ELLs.** Penny’s ability to use effective strategies for her struggling ELLs as part of her daily instruction clearly contributes to her sense of confidence and self-efficacy when making decisions about ELLs who are not making progress. For instance, part of Penny’s artifact included samples of two-column notes that she
had modified specifically for her ELLs, where she had added fill-in-the-blanks for ELLs who may be confused about finding key ideas and details in non-fiction reading. When asked how the samples represented her feelings of self-efficacy, she responded, “I think it represents me knowing and having a good sense of what ELLs are expected [to do]. . . . I kind of have an idea where they're coming from and what topics I really want to hit on” (Penny, second interview with artifact).

**Case Study Summary: Penny**

Penny’s sense of self-efficacy manifests itself in a variety of ways through each of the four themes. Like the other participants, her explanation of her individual experiences teaching at her school provides evidence as to the factors that are involved in why she perceives herself to be effective in her decision-making when it comes to challenging ELLs in her class. Several factors that contribute most noticeably to Penny’s perception of success with regard to differentiating between LD and language acquisition issues are as follows:

- Penny attributes much of her self-efficacy to her intuition and years of teaching experience at a high-incidence school for ELLs in the district; her interactions with people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds have occurred primarily through her professional experiences and less so through personal experiences;
- Constant collaboration with colleagues and support from school administration is one of the strongest contributing factors to Penny’s feelings of her own success in making decisions about her struggling ELLs;
- Understanding the “Whole child” with particular attention to parental communication and the child’s social and emotional well-being is essential to Penny’s sense of success and confidence when dealing with ELLs who are challenged at school;
• Although not fundamental to her perceived effectiveness in making decisions about ELLs, Penny’s educational experiences related to second language acquisition through professional development and training, such as learning to apply useful educational frameworks and instructional strategies for ELLs, have been helpful in understanding what may be the true cause of a student’s academic struggles.

Case Study # 4: Elaine

Elaine (pseudonym), a white female between 30 and 39 years of age, is a teacher at Adamstown’s River Elementary School (pseudonym). She has been teaching in the public schools for approximately 13 years. Elaine’s native language is English; although she studied another language in college, she does not consider herself fluent or even conversational in that language.

Case Site: River Elementary School

River Elementary is a large school with close to 450 students. It is located in a middle-income neighborhood where almost 60% of its students’ families do not speak English at home, and almost half of all students at the school are receiving services as English Language Learners (ELLs). A little more than one third of the school population falls into the category of economically disadvantaged, but the district has made low class size a priority at this school with a student to teacher ratio of approximately 14:1. Three full-time ESL teachers and one part-time ESL teacher offer English Language Development instruction at this school through the pullout model.

River Elementary School’s Integrated Learning Team. As is a practice in the district, River conducts its ILT meetings three times per year. The team consists of the school’s literacy specialists, who facilitate the meetings, the ESL team, one special education teacher, and the
principal; the guidance counselor was not present. Similar to other schools in the district, River’s ILT meetings are with the entire grade level team rather than with individual teachers. The researcher was able to observe an ILT meeting in January. At the beginning of the meeting, the literacy team provided a folder with DIBELS and MAP assessment scores for all students in the grade being discussed. In addition, there was a list of students from this grade level’s three classrooms, prioritized from most to least concern displayed on an easel at the front of the room. Rather than go through each student profile, the team targeted the neediest students first, discussing current services provided and what could be changed in order to offer additional support. All team members participated in the discussion about students, although it was observed that there was more focus on literacy instruction and less on English language development, and there was little mention of progress (or lack thereof) on the yearly English language development assessment for struggling ELLs who were being discussed.

Theme 1: Character and Personal Experiences

Theme 1 indicates that a teacher’s character and his/her personal experiences with individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are factors related to his/her self-efficacy when making decisions about struggling ELLs. In reviewing and analyzing Elaine’s data, it became clear that her overall experience and interactions with persons of diverse cultures has occurred primarily through her time as a teacher in Adamstown and less so through personal experiences such as travel, language study, or other encounters.

Linguistic and cultural experiences in personal and professional life. When asked about her experience outside of school with other cultures and languages, Elaine explained that her only real experience was with French; she had minored in French during college and had traveled once for a short period to France. Although her stay abroad was short, she described it
as “a really good experience…You’d think eleven days doesn't seem like a lot, but I was able to really kind of immerse myself” (Elaine, interview).

As for her experiences in her professional life, Elaine felt that the majority of her exposure to different cultural backgrounds happened in her school with colleagues from different ethnicities as well as the children in her classroom and their parents. She described learning from her colleagues:

We do have some staff members here and it's really helpful to talk to them about the culture, and they have filled us in on things that we need to know… even at the beginning of my career, I used to get so confused because [the students] would call their cousins brothers and sisters, and… one of our teachers here kind of walked me through it so I could figure out how they were related. (Elaine, interview)

**Attitude about teaching culturally diverse learners.** Elaine enjoys teaching and working with students from different countries and cultures, especially when she is able to learn from her students. She explained:

It's like kind of cool for me…to learn from these little people all about something different. And they laugh. Like even on [an international holiday] I said [Happy New Year in their language]. They were thrilled that … I was interested in them, and that I asked them about certain things. And it's great for the other kids in the room, too, to be able to experience that. (Elaine, interview)

Elaine also recognized the challenges involved with working with this diverse population, stating that her teaching goes beyond academics such as reading and writing to include “helping them make friends, [since] they might not be used to kind of that socialization” and encouraging them to “immerse themselves in after school [activities]” (Elaine, interview).
Perceptions of expertise related to years of teaching experience. When asked about whether her years of experience and how they relate to her self-efficacy, Elaine explained that she continues to gain experience working with diverse learners and their families. In one of her interviews, she stated, “There are things that I do now without thinking about for my ELLs that at the beginning of my career, I had to sit down and think like what are the modifications I'm making for each group of students that need the modification” (Elaine, interview). She definitely feels that years of teaching experience play a large part in her self-efficacy:

You're just able to draw on those experiences that you've used in the past, and you’re not necessarily comparing students, but [you’re] seeing things that you've seen before that were clues for you, that you may not have even known at the time. Then you realize after that [it] was something that really led me to that decision, and it was the right one.

(Elaine, interview)

Intuition: “I just knew”. Although this sub-theme was less predominant than others in the study, Elaine did mention a sense of intuition when working with an ELL who had exceptional difficulties. She remembers feeling that there was something more than just language acquisition at play with this ELL in her class:

Any time that I've really felt strongly, like this past student who was just picked up two weeks ago, I knew, and it was kind of the hemming and hawing thing, and then they tested him and he was going to be six times thirty [minutes of special education instruction]. I knew that that was what he needed. (Elaine, interview)

Theme 2: Collaboration with Colleagues/Support from School Administration

Theme 2, which addresses the teamwork and collaborative experiences that Elaine has felt with her colleagues and principal at her school, was quite strong throughout Elaine’s
interviews and during the ILT meeting observation. There is a strong support system within River Elementary School, where educators and administrators work together to find the best possible instructional models for their students with academic challenges.

**Sense of shared responsibility when making decisions about struggling ELLs.** The sub-theme of shared responsibility emerged notably during the researcher’s observation from Elaine’s ILT meeting. A strong team approach, where all members consult and respect each other during the student investigation, data collection phase and final decision process, was evident throughout the meeting. The conversation among colleagues often turned to specific strategies and current or future needs of each individual student. Everyone had a voice, and agreement of the team was considered a necessity to move forward after each student’s profile had been discussed.

**Trusting the team and the process is crucial.** In one of her interviews, Elaine reinforced this sub-theme, describing how she might begin the process of requesting further evaluation for a struggling ELL in her class:

I’d probably ask [the guidance counselor], because she will have heard about it… [since] she's the chairperson of our team. She probably would have heard about it if another teacher was concerned. I usually talk to her first, and then I definitely talk to my [grade level] teammates…we check in about our kids anyway. But then I would probably go to their EL teacher, literacy teacher, to see how they're doing, then to former teachers.

(Elaine, interview)

Elaine reiterated the importance of trusting the team of educators who work with the struggling child in order to have a balance of different educator opinions, saying, “The team decides so I can bring my concerns, but it's a team decision” (Elaine, interview).
Reviewing different types of data to aid in initial identification of LD in ELLs.

During both interviews and meeting observation, Elaine provided several instances of using and analyzing different types of data in order to make informed decisions about whether or not to request further evaluation for LD. An excellent example is the artifact she provided, which was a variety of formal and informal assessments as well as descriptions about one particular student in her class that is struggling. When asked which part of her artifact felt most valuable in helping her make decisions about her ELL with difficulties, she explained:

I can look at these assessments, but it's really what I see day to day. Like everything, honestly, working with him, talking to him and watching his work and watching him interact with other kids during group work and knowing the services that he gets. (Elaine, second interview with artifact)

Understanding/learning about students with learning disabilities (ELL and non-ELL) through communication with others. When asked about what differences she noticed between ELL and non-ELLs on IEPs, Elaine felt that there was not a great difference between the two types of students other than the need for including modifications that were specific for ELLs when needed. She explained:

Honestly, it's not as different as you would think. I think you have the modifications that they need, you have the accommodations they need, and a lot of [these accommodations] are the same as they are for students who have been here their whole lives. It's a lot of the same stuff: shortened lists, repeated directions, work that's modified for their level, and obviously, every child is different. It's not going to be exactly the same. The modifications that work will just be changed for what they need. (Elaine, interview)
Elaine also mentioned looking carefully at a struggling ELL’s family history to see if other older siblings might have similar difficulties in order to understand more about the whole child. In her interview describing her artifact, Elaine brought up a sibling of one of her struggling ELLs as a comparison, stating, “I had his brother in my [class]room…His brother started pretty much where he is now and progressed through the year. I mean he wasn't speaking in paragraphs by the end, but made a lot of progress” (Elaine, second interview with artifact). She explained that remembering how the student’s sibling had progressed through the year and the types of supports or instructional assistance she provided to the sibling helped her to establish a point of reference when deciding about whether or not to evaluate the current student for LD.

**Theme 3: Understanding the “Whole Child”**

Theme 3 focuses on understanding all of the aspects in a child’s life that might affect how successful he or she is in school. Elaine presented substantial evidence that supports this theme through her interviews and during the observed ILT meeting. After a more careful analysis of Elaine’s data, it became clear that she felt quite strongly that knowing her students completely and wholly was necessary in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of their needs.

**Communicating with/learning from parents about the struggling student.** For Elaine, communication with the parents of her struggling ELLs is one of the most important elements in understanding more about her student’s behavior and interactions with others at home and how this relates to what she sees in school. She described the benefits of talking with the parents with translators in this way:

You want to make sure that you do that so that they feel like they're involved and they're included…It's awesome that they trust us and they're happy that we're doing what's best for their child, but…you want to show them that [they] can be involved here, and we
want [their] opinion and help because they know their child the best. It's really helpful to get [important information] from the parents, like, “Oh yeah, you know what, I've noticed in our native language that they have trouble with recall or…anything that might be going on.” (Elaine, interview)

Elaine also recounted her conversation with the mother of a current ELL who is having difficulties, where she offered suggestions for the child to have more exposure to English outside of school and asked for information about the child’s literacy in the native language, saying, “We asked her if she thought that he did well reading Chinese, and she said not all the time” (Elaine, second interview with artifact).

**Comparing struggling student with ELL peers.** At the beginning of her interview presenting her artifact, Elaine offered an interesting piece of data that connected wholly to this sub-theme: she asked two ELLs from her class who had arrived in the U.S. in the school district during the same month to introduce themselves to the researcher. She asked them each a few general questions to have them show their oral fluency of English separately. Then, as an additional part of her artifact, she showed multiple assessments (formal and informal) in order to demonstrate how she often compared data between ELLs. When asked about what the comparison of data meant for her, she explained, “I hope that it shows that I know my students and that what I am seeing and [what] the taskforce [is seeing] are matched up. And it shows that I care about them and I want them to do well” (Elaine, second interview with artifact).

**Understanding and taking into account the social and emotional well-being of child in question.** In both the ILT meeting observation and the artifact interview, Elaine offered evidence of this theme as one of the factors contributing to her perception of self-efficacy when making decisions about her struggling ELLs and their needs. While describing her artifact,
which included information about the social and emotional well-being of one of her struggling ELLs and how it pertained to her decision to request additional testing for LD, Elaine described the struggling child’s behavior in the classroom as well as in school in general:

He is not alone; he doesn't keep to himself but he doesn't interact with kids the same way. He doesn't play with them or suggest anything to them. He is more of a follower…He does what he’s supposed to be doing all the time, but not wanting to be, say, a self-starter…I'm sure that it is also a self-confidence issue. (Elaine, second interview with artifact)

**Theme 4: Professional Development and Training**

Theme 4 pertains to the type, frequency and effectiveness of professional development or training participants may have received that might have contributed to their sense of self-efficacy when identifying LD in an ELL. Like other participants in the study, Elaine found some professional development opportunities to be beneficial while others were less useful to her when preparing and planning instruction for ELLs who are challenged academically.

**Educational opportunities through professional development: effective or not?**

When describing her educational experiences relating to English Language Learners, second language acquisition and/or special education, Elaine readily gave her opinion of the workshops, courses and trainings she had attended, both in-district and statewide. In one of her interviews, she discussed the benefits of one of the workshops she took several years ago:

It was actually really hard. They didn't fool around. We learned a lot, but we were probably kind of snobby…we were in there with some teachers from [other districts] who had one [ELL], and they would keep talking about their one ELL, something that…wasn't quite as hard as what we were dealing with, with our Asian students…So it was an
interesting experience just to see how they approached it…because a lot of us started our career here, so we jumped into [working with ELLs]. (Elaine, interview)

Like other participants, Elaine was not very pleased by the state-mandated training in which she participated most recently. In one of her interviews, she admitted that it felt redundant, since much of the focus was on specific strategies that she had already been using for her ELLs for several years.

**Understanding and using Response to Intervention (RtI).** Elaine explained how River Elementary implemented the RtI model informally in order to attempt to support academically challenged ELLs in the school. She stated, “I'm not sure we do it in a formal way, but I would definitely come back and let everybody know…what interventions have worked and what we've done in the classroom” (Elaine, interview). Data analysis from Elaine’s interviews and ILT meeting observation made it seem that using specific and targeted formal interventions was not a common practice at River Elementary School; rather, teachers were comfortable using informal interventions and sharing their experiences with their team when necessary.

**Effective strategies for instruction of struggling ELLs.** When asked about what types of strategies are used with ELLs who are academically challenged in the school, Elaine focused on the additional services, such as ESL and literacy pullout instruction, that she sees as a great advantage to her struggling learners:

It’s in a small group, it's in a quieter place; it's a little bit easier giving them more of a foundation than they might get in a classroom of 23. So we try to do that as much as possible as well, so they get the ELL time and the literacy. I mean, it doesn't always work out. It doesn't always happen, but when we can, and I kind of try to push for that as well, just because I know that some of the ELs have a lot of success in that. (Elaine, interview)
Case Study Summary: Elaine

After a full review and analysis of data collected from Elaine’s interviews, the artifact she provided, and her ILT meeting observation, several significant factors that contributed to Elaine’s perception of self-efficacy when deciding how to move forward with ELLs who are struggling in her classroom have emerged:

- Years of teaching experience coupled with interactions with culturally diverse school colleagues, students and families in her professional setting have given Elaine a sense of confidence as well as specific decision-making skills to assist her in choosing the next steps for her ELLs with academic difficulties;
- Collaboration with and support from colleagues and school leaders on a routine basis, particularly when reviewing and discussing a variety of formal and informal assessments, contributes to Elaine’s higher sense self-efficacy through validation and a shared approach to seeking solutions for struggling children;
- Having a strong understanding of all factors contributing to a child’s academic success, particularly with regard to social and emotional well-being, is an important factor in Elaine’s feelings of success when identifying the problems causing an ELL’s lack of academic progress;
- Professional development and training with specific attention to instructional strategies for ELLs in the classroom and knowledge of available support outside the classroom, such as literacy and English language development, has been a useful tool in elevating Elaine’s perceived success in her ability to make informed decisions about ELLs who are challenged in school.
Case Study # 5: Cassandra

Cassandra (pseudonym) is a classroom teacher at Redford Elementary School (pseudonym); she is a white female between 30 and 39 years of age. English is her native language; although she studied Italian in college, she does not consider herself fluent in a second language. Cassandra is a newer teacher and has been in the teaching profession for approximately five years.

Case Site: Redford Elementary School

Redford Elementary has close to 600 students, making it one of the largest elementary schools in the district. It has a distinctly diverse population, with over 50% of its students speaking a language other than English at home and close to 20% of the total student population eligible for English language development instruction. The model implemented for instruction of ELLs at Redford is that adopted in the district, pullout ESL instruction during the school day based on need. The school is situated in a lower middle class neighborhood; close to half of the families of children attending this school are considered economically disadvantaged. Fortunately, the district is able to support the school by providing a small student-to-teacher ratio of approximately 14 to 1.

Redford Elementary School’s Integrated Learning Team. As is common to all elementary schools in the district, Redford holds ILT meetings three times per year where individual student progress is discussed and initial, formative, and summative data are collected and analyzed from standardized and classroom assessments. Like in other schools in the district, ILT meetings occur by grade level with classroom teachers, ESL teachers, literacy specialists, and special education teachers and the assistant principal as members of the ILT team. During the ILT meeting observed by the researcher, literacy specialists acted as meeting facilitators,
providing each team member with printed reports from the MAP, DIBELS and DRA assessments. Representing the school administration was the assistant principal, who remained an active participant throughout the meeting. There was considerable discussion of each child, with equal attention paid to individual students’ academic growth (or lack thereof) and their social and emotional well-being both in and outside of school. There was a strong feeling of teamwork and genuine respect between colleagues at all times, with evidence of a sound collaborative process. It was clear to the researcher that this school staff places great importance on ILT meetings and values the role of each individual educator and what he/she brings to the table.

**Theme 1: Character and Personal Experiences**

Theme 1, which addresses a teacher’s character and personal experiences as factors in his/her self-efficacy, was well represented throughout Cassandra’s data. As she recounted her story during her interviews, it became evident that she was profoundly affected by her personal interactions with people of different cultural background both through her own personal experiences and through her professional life teaching at a school with many culturally diverse students and families.

**Linguistic and cultural experiences in personal and professional life.**

In her first interview, Cassandra described her first linguistic and cultural encounters while studying abroad in college, and how overwhelming the experience initially was but also how she could relate her experience to those that her ELLs may also be having:

You would hear the language around you and not really being able to fully interact…It was like, "Oh, laughter sounds the same everywhere." Once you would hear someone laughing, you're like, "Oh, those are just people joking with their friends. I know how to
relate to that. I know what that is”… It turns out [that I am] able to translate that a little bit with [students] who come here from new countries. (Cassandra, interview)

**Attitude about teaching culturally diverse learners.** Throughout interactions between Cassandra and the interviewer, there was no doubt that Cassandra thoroughly enjoys working with culturally diverse learners and their families. Part of the artifact she presented was a photo of her class of sixteen students; it revealed her pure joy and love for teaching children from many different backgrounds. She explained, “There's one, two, three, four, there's like five languages...you get to the heart of [the fact that] these are human children, no matter where they're from. I think that makes the challenges of the job a lot easier, I just love it” (Cassandra, second interview with artifact).

When asked about challenges that may come up with so many diverse learners in the classroom, Cassandra mentioned working with their parents:

Obviously [there are] language barriers, having conferences with parents whose primary language isn't English…Sometimes it's a lot of smiling and thumbs up. Trying to see if you can pick up on the inflection and the tone in their voice and some of the keywords they're using. I feel like I'm always trying to make sure they're not feeling uncomfortable. (Cassandra, interview)

**Perceptions of expertise related to years of teaching experience.** Since Cassandra has only five years of experience as a teacher, this sub-theme was represented differently than other participants with many more years in the classroom. Still, she believed that she gained considerable experience between her first year and her current year teaching, acknowledging that her teacher preparation classes assisted in preparing her:

Obviously, this is only my fifth year in the district, so still younger in general in terms of
teaching. Coming into it, I knew what I was getting involved in. You know you'd have a varied population. You hear it in school and you hear this and that and just how to address the needs of your EL population, but you need to be in it. (Cassandra, interview)

**Intuition: “I just knew”**. As with the previous sub-theme, the sub-theme of intuition and its relation to a teacher’s sense of confidence when identifying why an ELL may be struggling did not come up often, possibly due to her small number of years in the teaching profession. At one point, Cassandra did mention feeling a sense of success in being able to identify certain ELLs who were struggling more than usual in her class, stating, “I would by no means say, ‘Oh yeah, I've got this down pat,’ but I would say that even just having a few years under my belt, you really can tell those students who are just well behind or well below” (Cassandra, interview).

**Theme 2: Collaboration with Colleagues/Support from School Administration**

Cassandra often showed evidence of Theme 2, which focuses on a teacher’s collaboration with colleagues and support received from his/her administrators as a contributor to a teacher’s perception of success with identifying reasons why an ELL may struggle. Apparent throughout her interviews and particularly at the ILT meeting, the importance she placed on working with colleagues who might be more expert than she in identifying learning disabilities in ELLs was distinct.

**Sense of shared responsibility when making decisions about struggling ELLs.** The researcher witnessed this sub-theme fully when observing Cassandra’s ILT meeting at Redford Elementary School. While she described each student’s case to the ILT team, Cassandra also asked other team members to shed any light on the students she was bringing up, and collaborative conversations ensued that showed each person’s role in deciding the next course of
There was strong participation from each area of expertise (ESL teachers, special education, literacy specialists, school administration) for each child; each educator readily contributed his/her own evidence regarding the students’ academic progress, demonstrating a cohesiveness in the decision-making process that helped to elevate self-efficacy within the group.

**Trust the team and the process is crucial.** Cassandra also demonstrated this sub-theme while describing how she gathered information about ELLs who might be showing signs of LD. She felt that it was important to find out more about what her colleagues had seen in order to have a bigger picture and assist in making a well-informed decision for the child:

> Obviously, ELL teachers, their previous grade teachers… I do check in with guidance and see what they know. Sometimes they have more background than I do…A lot of the teachers who have been here longer than myself, [I] check in with them and say, "Hey, listen, I've got so and so from this country, and this is what I'm seeing. Have you seen it before? If so, what have you done, or, what have you not done?" Collaborating in that way. (Cassandra, interview)

**Reviewing different types of data to aid in initial identification of LD in ELLs.** Cassandra demonstrated a holistic approach to the different data that were available to her when identifying the root cause of an ELL’s academic struggles. Like other study participants, she felt that was necessary to review a variety of assessments (formal and informal) but also to consider other data, such as a child’s background, social skills and classroom or playground behavior. In her interview presenting her artifact, Cassandra stressed the importance of having a complete picture about a child before making any specific decisions:

> I think that's the starting point, and then it's sort of me building my background
knowledge about them. You know how long have they been here? Where are they from? What are they speaking at home? What's home life like? Are there other issues that would contribute to academic performance that have nothing to do with ability? In that, you know, in talking to [ESL teachers] and all those. I think its informal observations, sort of what I'm seeing in here first is what would lead me down that path. (Cassandra, interview)

**Understanding/learning about students with learning disabilities (ELL and non-ELL) through communication with others.** In one of her interviews, Cassandra reported that she has had both ELLs and non-ELLs on IEPs in her classroom, but she does not feel that there is a difference in her ability to serve either group. She felt that as long as she was addressing the needs of the child as outlined on the IEP and as observed in her classroom, there were no distinct challenges. She added that keeping the lines of communication open with her colleagues and with the child’s parents was essential in feeling confident that she was providing the best possible educational experience in her classroom for the child, regardless of their language or cultural background.

**Theme 3: Understanding the “Whole Child”**

Theme 3, which focuses on the importance of understanding the “whole child”, was the most prevalent theme in Cassandra’s data. She gave numerous examples of how her high level of confidence and perceived success with struggling ELLs was due to having a broader picture of her students, from understanding their academic strengths and weaknesses through communication with colleagues and administrators to in-depth knowledge of a child’s social/emotional background and collaborative communication with parents and families of the child.
Communicating with/learning from parents about the struggling student. In all of her responses, Cassandra stressed the importance and benefits of having partnerships with parents of struggling ELLs. The opportunity to learn more about what parents see and hear what parents are concerned with was something Cassandra valued immensely; she considered this information to be very beneficial, since it was often the “missing piece” to the puzzle. During the interview where she presented her artifact about one of her current struggling ELLs, she described an important interaction that she had had with the parent of the child and how their conversation had affected how both she and the parent proceeded in assisting the child:

Mom mentioned to me how he's feeling, so I made that effort to make sure I was addressing it. I mentioned to mom he's struggling, but keep doing what you're doing at home. It was really a group effort to get him to where he is now, [but we] know he definitely needs more support [outside of the classroom.] (Cassandra, second interview with artifact)

Comparing struggling student with ELL peers. Cassandra explained the benefits of using this strategy of comparing students who are struggling to peers who are on target with language acquisition and academic growth. She felt that comparing two students who had been in the country for the same amount of time was helpful, but also, “every kid is a different learner, every kid has a different backstory…[for example, for] this friend, his home life is a little bit more fragmented than this [other] friend” (Cassandra, second interview with artifact). She went further to say that this comparative strategy might not give her detailed information about specific student needs, but it did assist in identifying any disparities that needed to be addressed.

Understanding and taking into account the social and emotional well-being of child in question. This sub-theme presented itself most prominently throughout all of the data
collected from Cassandra’s interviews and meeting observations. It was clear that knowing as much as possible about a child’s well-being both at home and in school contributed greatly to her sense of self-efficacy in making decisions about how best to provide instruction and support. In one interview, she demonstrated this point by describing an interaction with a parent during a conference:

I had a conference at the beginning of the year with a Syrian family who came over this year from just terrible situations, and dad was really concerned with academics, but I just was like, "Is he happy?" You know? Dad, through their translator, was like, "He's very happy." I'm like, "Oh, thank goodness." (Cassandra, second interview with artifact)

Theme 4: Professional Development and Training

Theme 4 relates to professional development and training and its relation to Cassandra’s sense of self-efficacy when identifying a possible learning disability in a struggling ELL. She recounted her various educational experiences and how these pertained to her feelings of confidence in working with ELLs who are academically challenged. It was interesting to consider that most of Cassandra’s professional development and training pertaining to working with culturally diverse learners happened during her graduate school experience as opposed to other district-based experiences.

Educational opportunities through professional development: effective or not? In one interview, Cassandra described a course she took about culturally responsive teaching, which she found to be very valuable. She explained how it assisted her in her current teaching position due to the diverse backgrounds of her students:

I do remember at grad school taking a class…The takeaway was just to accept and acknowledge all cultures and backgrounds. Give students the opportunity to share if they
want to... I remember that takeaway and also just knowing who you're dealing with. If it's possible to do any background work, you should. If not, tread lightly before you assume things and before you jump in and take that whole, "Everybody is like me." (Cassandra, interview)

She also mentioned her participation in the state-mandated training expected of all mainstream classroom teachers working with ELLs, explaining that while it was a valuable training overall, it seemed tailored to teachers or districts with small numbers of ELLs in their classes. She stated, “You know if you have four English Language Learners, it will work a lot better than if you've got twenty at various stages” (Cassandra, interview). She also noticed that there was a lack of focus on ELLs who were newcomers in the state-mandated training, which is the one group that continues to challenge teachers. She said, “Sometimes you just get a student and they've literally come from a different country [the day before] and there's no manual on how to get things going” (Cassandra, interview).

**Understanding and using Response to Intervention (RtI).** When asked about her familiarity with the RtI process, Cassandra admitted that she was familiar but by no means an expert with RtI; she did understand the premise and importance of the model and trying different interventions to see what supports work best to move a child forward. In one of her interviews, she explained that she implements informal interventions and strategies when requested by other colleagues like literacy specialists, but she felt that the whole RtI process was more investigative than formal when it comes to aiding in the identification of students with LD.

**Effective strategies for instruction of struggling ELLs.** Across all three data points, Cassandra demonstrated her knowledge and use of instructional strategies when working with ELLs who were having difficulty more than usual. During Redford Elementary’s ILT meeting in
February, Cassandra shared different strategies that seemed to be effective with several of her struggling ELLs, like reading questions aloud, giving redirection, or asking another student with the same first language to help translate. Additionally, in one interview she described culturally responsive teaching as a less conventional but equally important instructional strategy:

The kids here are just so amazing, and they've been exposed to so much. For them to look around the room and see different colors and know different things, it's so fantastic. They don't think anything of it, which is the best. I do try to always keep that present in the classroom as I'm teaching lessons that come up that could [be challenging]... We were recently talking about Abraham Lincoln for President's Day and slavery comes up…The kids can't even believe it, "Why would someone do that? Are you kidding me?" They are just mad…Then sometimes stories will come up, "In my country, this happened and this happened." I allow them to share those thoughts and validate part of their country's history or what they're feeling. (Cassandra, interview)

**Case Study Summary: Cassandra**

Analysis of the rich data from Cassandra’s interviews, meeting observation, and artifact revealed that her personal, educational and professional experiences were factors that contributed in different ways to her perception of success and level of comfort when faced with making decisions about her ELLs with possible LD. The following points provide a summary of Cassandra’s case study:

- Personal experiences such as living abroad, learning a new language and professional experiences related to working with culturally diverse learners and their families every day allows for Cassandra to gain a greater understanding, appreciation, and respect for students’ and families’ background and stories, thus increasing her self-efficacy level;
• Having a strong professional and collaborative relationship with key players at her school is a valuable asset to Cassandra; this has helped to build her confidence and perception of success as she navigates through the decision-making process for her struggling ELLs.

• The single most important factor that relates to Cassandra’s sense of self-efficacy is having a more complete picture of the “whole child” by knowing as much as possible about each of her student’s lives both in and outside of school;

• Professional development and training that focuses on culturally responsive pedagogy and effective instructional strategies for working with ELLs is important for teachers like Cassandra who are at the beginning of their teaching careers so that they can feel successful and confident when making decisions about ELLs with possible LD.

**Cross-Case Analysis of the Five Case Studies**

Each of the case studies that comprise this qualitative multiple-case study provided a wealth of data on teacher self-efficacy from five mainstream elementary classroom teachers each from a different school in the Adamstown district. These participants shared similar and diverse experiences from their personal and professional lives through interviews, meeting observations and artifact presentation. Data from these case studies shed light on teachers’ perceptions of their own effectiveness when deciding on the best possible course of action for an ELLs who are learning-challenged. This cross-case analysis of the major themes and relevant sub-themes seen in each of the case studies will examine similarities and concurrences in each participant’s data as well as distinct differences in each individual’s experiences. The analysis considers whether these differences contribute to the participants’ perceptions of their effectiveness in dealing with ELLs who show signs of a possible learning disability. Table 4.3 provides a general overview of similarities and differences across all five cases in the four key themes and their sub-themes.
Table 4.3. Overview of Similarities and Differences across the Five Cases.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
<th>Similar</th>
<th>Different</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 1: Character and Personal Experiences</strong></td>
<td>A teacher’s character and personal experiences contribute to his/her level of self-efficacy in working with struggling ELLs.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Linguistic and cultural experiences in personal and professional life</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attitude about teaching culturally diverse learners</td>
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<td>Perceptions of expertise related to years of teaching experience</td>
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<td>Intuition: “I just knew”</td>
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<td><strong>Theme 2: Collaboration with Colleagues/Support from School Administration</strong></td>
<td>Collaboration with colleagues and support from school administration contributes to a teacher’s feeling of success when deciding between language acquisition and LD in their ELLs.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sense of shared responsibility when making decisions about struggling ELLs</td>
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<td>Trusting the team and the process is crucial</td>
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<td>Reviewing different types of data to aid in initial identification of LD in ELLs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Understanding/learning about students with learning disabilities (ELL and non-ELL) through communication with others</td>
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<td><strong>Theme 3: Understanding the “Whole Child”</strong></td>
<td>Understanding the “Whole child” contributes to a teacher’s feelings of success when deciding to request testing for learning disabilities in ELLs.</td>
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<td>Communicating with/learning from parents about the student in question</td>
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<td>Comparing struggling ELL with ELL peers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Understanding and taking into account the social and emotional well-being of child in question</td>
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<td><strong>Theme 4: Professional Development and Training</strong></td>
<td>Professional development and training contributes to a teacher’s perceptions of making effective decisions regarding struggling ELLs.</td>
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<td>Educational opportunities through professional development: effective or not?</td>
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<td>Understanding and using Response To Intervention (RTI)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Effective strategies for instruction of struggling ELLs</td>
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Similarities across Cases for Theme 1

Theme 1, which pertains how a teacher’s character and personal experiences contribute to his/her level of self-efficacy when working with struggling ELLs, was broadly evident in all five cases through four significant sub-themes. The participants’ personalities coupled with their descriptions of personal interactions with people from culturally diverse backgrounds played an important part in shaping how they perceived themselves as effective educators and decision-makers for ELLs in their classrooms.

**Attitude about teaching culturally diverse learners.** While there were slight variations in consistency across some of the sub-themes, the data describing this particular sub-theme was the most uniform for all five participants. Each teacher expressed her profound enjoyment working with children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds but also acknowledged challenges that presented themselves along the way, such as initial interactions with new ELLs in her classroom and difficulty communicating with parents and students who do not yet have a solid command of English and who follow different cultural norms.

**Intuition: “I just knew”**. The sub-theme of intuition, or “I just knew”, was also consistent across the five cases. Each teacher described similar experiences of having “that feeling” or “an inkling” about something that was “not right” with an ELL at least once during one or both of her interviews. It also became clear that their sense of intuition drove much of these teachers’ self-efficacy; the more often it happened, the stronger their connection between intuition and self-efficacy was. Since they all had opportunities to discuss their feelings and suspicions with their school colleagues and administrators to investigate more in-depth an ELL’s challenges to learning, their sense of confidence in making the right decisions for their struggling students was reinforced.
Differences across Cases for Theme 1

Although strong representation of Theme 1 and its subthemes was notable throughout the data in each of the five cases, there were distinct differences as well. Each participant brought her own unique interpretation of interview questions and artifacts. It was also interesting to note differences in each teacher’s participation in her school’s ILT meeting within the context of how the meeting was facilitated at each site.

Linguistic and cultural experiences in personal and professional life. This sub-theme presented the largest differences across cases with regard to types of experiences each participant depicted. For example, April, Heather and Cassandra each recounted personal experiences traveling abroad and immersing themselves in other cultures as having a profound effect on them and how they now interact with their ELLs, referring to the ability to transfer some of those experience to the classroom when they are working with children and families from diverse cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, Penny and Elaine described their exposure to cultural diversity from working in multicultural schools with many different languages and cultures represented. They each placed specific importance on having colleagues who have different backgrounds to offer different perspectives on teaching students and families from other countries and felt that their interactions with these teachers and staff members were impactful and assistive.

Perceptions of expertise related to years of teaching experience. Since each participant had varying years of expertise in the field of education, the data representing this sub-theme were also slightly different. Heather and Penny, both whom are educators with extensive teaching experience in the district, placed heavier emphasis on their many years in the elementary classroom as factors contributing to their confidence in making decisions about their
struggling ELLs. April and Elaine also felt that their expertise played some role in their self-efficacy, although this sub-theme was not featured as prominently as it was with Heather and Penny. Cassandra, having had only a few years in her position as an elementary school teacher in the district, felt that what little knowledge she gained about working with ELLs with possible LD was useful in making her feel more confident in her ability to identify reasons why her ELL may be more challenged that usual. However, she acknowledged the fact that she still has a long way to go to feel highly effective when making decisions about her students.

**Similarities across Cases for Theme 2**

Data from each participant pertaining to Theme 2, which focuses on collaboration with colleagues and support from school administration, were the most consistent across cases of the four key themes that emerged during data analysis. This was particularly apparent during the observation of each participant’s ILT meeting, where educators from different areas of expertise meet three times a year to discuss individual student achievement and growth and plan for individualized support as needed. Other data in all five cases showed evidence of communication and collaboration with colleagues as an essential part of the decision-making protocol for struggling ELLs.

**Sense of shared responsibility when making decisions about struggling ELLs.** There was no question that all of the five participants had similarly strong feelings about this sub-theme and the role it has played in their self-efficacy. Aside from their participation in ILT meetings, each of the teachers described comparable examples of professional collaboration among colleagues where everyone had a voice in the decision and was an integral part of the process, such as checking in with ESL teachers, literacy specialists and guidance counselors on a regular basis to compare experiences about struggling students.
**Trusting the team and the process is crucial.** There was also uniformity of data across each case study with this particular sub-theme, especially during ILT meetings. Several instances arose where there were slight variances of opinion between team members about the best course of action for a struggling ELL, but the overall outcome was accepted and supported as the best decision for the child. During participant interviews, evidence showed that each of the five teachers similarly felt that it was their responsibility to respect their team’s decision even if they themselves might have questioned the final determination of instructional support for the ELL in question.

**Differences across Cases for Theme 2**

Although the data collected was the most similar across all five cases in Theme 2 than in the other key themes, there were small discrepancies in the way the five participants provided examples for two specific sub-themes. One sub-theme addressed the different types of data that teachers might review to assist them in making a decision about ELLs who are having difficulties; the other focused on how teachers learn and understand from others how to work with all students with disabilities, ELL and non-ELL alike.

**Reviewing different types of data to aid in initial identification of LD in ELLs.** This sub-theme represented the most significant differences across participant data in all five cases for Theme 2, particularly with regard to the type of artifact that each participant chose to present. For example, Heather, whose comfort lies in formal assessments like DIBELS and DRA, presented her students’ DIBELS scores and explained how she uses these data to identify which students may show signs of a learning disability. She felt quite confident that these data would aid her in making a decision whether or not to request initial testing of any of her struggling ELLs.
April’s artifact, on the other hand, consisted of formative classroom assessments for a struggling ELL she had had in her classroom the previous year. She explained that she based her decisions less on what she would see in the formal assessments, which are given less frequently and are timed, and more on what she saw every day in her classroom.

Elaine, Penny and Cassandra each provided a combination of formal assessments, such as MAP and DIBELS, as well as classroom assessments (tests, quizzes, or writing assignments) as their artifacts. They similarly stated that the combination of data and the ability to pull different assessments as evidence helped each of them feel that their decisions about struggling ELLs are effective and appropriate. While Cassandra also presented a variety of information including formal and informal assessments, she also included specific notes that addressed the social and emotional well-being of one of the more challenged ELLs in her class, such as notes regarding parent conversations and observations of student behavior.

Understanding/learning about students with learning disabilities (ELL and non-ELL) through communication with others. In two of the cases, there was consensus between the two participants that their behavior changed when working with ELLs who have disabilities as opposed to non-ELLs with disabilities. Amy and Heather both felt that they were more attentive to the student to make sure that because the student was also learning English, he/she was getting extra support with language, as well. In contrast, Penny, Elaine and Cassandra each felt that there were no distinct differences between ELLs with disabilities and non-ELLs with disabilities especially because individualized instructional supports had already been put into place within each student’s IEP.
**Similarities across Cases for Theme 3**

Theme 3 which focuses on the importance of knowing about different aspects of an ELL’s life both inside and outside of school can boost teachers’ confidence when making decisions about how to support their struggling ELLs was a prevalent theme in each of the five case studies. All of the participants presented similar data to support the necessity of having a strong understanding of the “whole child” as it pertains to their own self-efficacy when identifying ELLs that may need additional testing for possible LD.

**Communicating with/learning from parents about the struggling student.** Across the five cases, this sub-theme was present in each case study. Obviously, the situations where the participants spoke to parents were different, but each participant made clear the necessity of communicating and collaborating regularly with parents as an important investigative step in discovering more about ELLs who demonstrate more difficulty than usual. Data from ILT meeting observations represented this sub-theme as well, since the ILT teams usually brought up the family situation of each student being discussed in order to include any poignant data in the ILT process.

**Understanding and taking into account the social and emotional well-being of child in question.** Of the three sub-themes that emerged from Theme 3, this sub-theme was the most consistent. The participants gave multiple examples and detailed accounts of their consistent efforts to bear in mind whether the child was fitting in socially and emotionally. Each teacher brought up at least one student to use as an example of how she had reflected on whether an ELL’s social and emotional situation was helping or hindering his/her academic progress.
Differences across Cases for Theme 3

Data connected to Theme 3 remained the least varied of all four key themes across the five cases. Participant responses and observation data from each ILT meeting both showed that understanding the “whole child” was a critical factor in building teacher’s self-efficacy. Only one of the three sub-themes showed slight differences across cases since each teacher explained her connection to it differently.

Comparing a struggling ELL with ELL peers. Four of the five participants (April, Heather, Elaine and Cassandra) provided similar data when comparing a struggling ELL to an ELL who was not having the same academic difficulty as his/her peer. Heather referred to her students as “barometer kids” while Elaine called them “anchor students”. Cassandra mentioned comparing two “friends” from her class in order to observe behaviors and monitor academic progress. Penny, on the other hand, did not mention comparing her ELLs who were having difficulty to other ELLs in her classroom that were making adequate progress. Rather, she discussed how students themselves gauged their abilities based on what their peers were able to do; she recounted that one of her challenged ELL learners was acting out his frustration at not being at the same academic level as his classmates.

Similarities across Cases for Theme 4

Theme 4, professional development and training as a possible factor affecting teacher self-efficacy, was an interesting theme that emerged from the data across all five cases. Each of the participants spoke positively about some aspects of her professional development experiences focusing on ELLs with particular attention on useful instructional tools and strategies that have assisted in the decision-making process for ELLs in question.
Effective strategies for instruction of struggling ELLs. During interviews and ILT meeting observations, it was evident that each participant felt a strong connection with certain strategies that she had acquired during either locally offered or state mandated professional development and training. All five participants described a variety of skills and tools that they were able to use effectively and attributed them to their perceived sense of ability and success in distinguishing between a language acquisition problem and a learning disability for a struggling ELL.

Differences across Cases for Theme 4

While in each case there were many instances of positive feedback and connection of Theme 4 to the participants’ self-efficacy, the data collected regarding this theme were the least uniform of all four themes with only one of three sub-themes showing consistency across cases. Since participants had had different experiences throughout their careers with professional development and training about working with ELLs with or without disabilities, their opinions varied about effectiveness of professional development as well as in their understanding and use of the Response to Intervention (RtI) process.

Educational opportunities through professional development: Effective or not?

Participants had a broad range of responses regarding the professional development and training they had received over the course of their teaching experiences. For example, April was extremely positive about her educational journey in learning about ELLs with/without disabilities although she did not seem to connect it to her own self-efficacy when trying to distinguish between language acquisition or possible learning disabilities in her ELLs. Penny was less positive than April was about what she had learned through district and state professional development offerings particularly with regard to the state-offered training. As
opposed to April, Penny clearly stated that she did not feel that professional development was as prominent a factor as others were for her, such as intuition and years of expertise working with ELLs, in her level of confidence and success.

**Understanding and using Response to Intervention (RtI).** This sub-theme which addresses participants’ understanding and use of the RtI process as an important step in determining how to best serve the needs of struggling ELL also showed disparity across case studies. It was interesting to hear such a variety of explanations from each of the participants regarding her knowledge of RtI. One participant (April) admitted that she wasn’t entirely sure what RtI encompassed, while Elaine and Cassandra both felt that RtI was practiced at their school in an informal way and not necessarily in the mainstream classroom. Of all of the participants, Penny and Heather had the strongest understanding of RtI. Heather discussed her use of interventions in the classroom from a literacy perspective without mentioning second language acquisition, while Penny gave a description of her school’s use of the RtI process and how teachers and administrators take into account second language acquisition processes due to the large ELL population at her school.

**Cross Case Analysis: Summary**

Conducting a cross case analysis in this multiple-case study allowed the researcher to examine trends within the four major themes and related sub-themes of teacher self-efficacy when identifying ELLs with possible learning disabilities. Analysis of data across all five cases revealed that Theme 2, Collaboration with Colleagues/School Administrators, was the most consistent theme when considering its connection to teacher self-efficacy. On the whole, all five participants felt strongly about how the collaboration with their school colleagues and administrators created an invaluable support network in which team decision-making and review
of student progress were essential when making decisions about their struggling students.

Theme 4, Professional Development and Training, was the theme with the most variation across cases specifically with the sub-theme of Understanding and Using Response to Intervention (RtI). Participants had varying levels of knowledge and expertise regarding the RtI process, meaning their experience with RtI as an assistive tool to use in determining the instructional needs of an ELL who might have a learning disabilities was not consistent across cases. While some teachers were more comfortable with the concept of RtI, there were no specific connections made between a participant’s experience with Response to Intervention and that her self-efficacy.

**Summary**

The results from this multiple-case study connected directly to the purpose of the study, which investigated elementary classroom teachers’ self-efficacy pertaining to their ability to distinguish between ELLs struggling with language acquisition and ELLs that might have a learning disability. Data analysis from each of the five cases, each case being a general education classroom teacher of either Grade 2 or 3 at an elementary school in the Adamstown district, provided four overarching themes: Character and Personal Experiences, Collaboration with Colleagues/Support from School Administration, Understanding the “Whole Child” and Professional Development and Training. Each of these themes contributed positively to all five of the participants’ sense of self-efficacy in similar and different ways, as was highlighted in the cross-case analysis. Thus, the results directly answered the study’s central research question and three supporting research questions pertaining to teachers’ perceptions of their ability to distinguish the difference between second language acquisition issues and a learning disability in their struggling ELLs.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Understanding and identifying the root cause of the struggles of an English Language Learner is a complicated undertaking; typical difficulties acquiring English may be mistaken for a possible learning disability (LD) due to the similarity between the two (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Klingner, Hoover, & Baca, 2008). Often, general education classroom teachers at the elementary levels are involved with initial discussions and opinions regarding struggling ELLs in their classrooms. This multiple-case study investigated five Adamstown mainstream elementary teachers’ perceptions of their own effectiveness in trying to distinguish between difficulties an ELL may have with learning English and evidence of potential LD. The study sought to identify key factors that could contribute positively or negatively to a teacher’s sense of self-efficacy.

The central research question that guided the research, data collection and analysis was

• What perceptions do mainstream elementary teachers have of their ability to identify the difference between second language acquisition problems and potential learning disabilities correctly in their English Language Learners?

Additional supporting questions were

• What are the reasons why elementary classroom teachers might perceive their own effectiveness to be high (or low) when trying to understand the nature of an ELL’s academic struggles?

• In what kinds of professional development and training have teachers participated that could raise or lower their self-efficacy when making decisions about ELLs with potential learning disabilities?

• Do cultural and/or linguistic personal experiences contribute to teachers’ self-efficacy
when making decisions about ELLs with possible LD?

The conceptual framework included three well-known theories that guided this multi-case study. Self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977) focuses on how teachers perceive their own effectiveness in performing specific tasks. Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) portrays how teachers learn through collaboration and social interaction. Finally, culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002; Nieto, 2010) helps educators to use culture and language as a lens through which to educate students from diverse cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

An extensive review of the literature uncovered six principal areas of research supporting to this study. They included (1) distinguishing between language acquisition issues and learning disabilities in ELLs, (2) disproportionality of ELLs in special education, (3) the need for high quality teacher training, (4) educational frameworks and strategies for working with ELLs with or without LD, (5) Response to Intervention (RtI) as a model for initial identification of ELLs who need special education services, and (6) teacher self-efficacy when working with ELLs with a possible LD.

Five mainstream elementary classroom teachers from five different schools in a public school district in the northeastern part of the U.S. acted as separate “cases”. Participants were selected through convenience or snowball sampling methods. Data originating from three different sources (meeting observations, participant interviews, and artifact descriptions) were collected from each of the five participants. Data from a thorough examination of each case site (i.e. each participant’s school) were also included. This comprehensive collection process allowed necessary triangulation of the data and provided a wealth of information for evaluation of its direct alignment to the central research question and supporting questions.

Data analysis commenced initially with open coding, followed by axial coding in the
second and third rounds. Four key themes and fourteen sub-themes emerged from careful review and analysis of the data from each case. Five individual case reports described key thematic findings for each case, and a cross-case analysis described a thorough investigation of the similarities and differences across all five cases.

The following sections in this chapter address specific findings related directly to the study’s central and supporting research questions, implications for all stakeholders, recommendations for action, and recommendations for further study of this research area.

**Interpretation of Findings**

As mentioned earlier, four key themes developed from data analysis of each of the five case studies. These themes align effectively with the central and supporting research questions, the body of reviewed literature in the field, and theoretical underpinnings associated with the broader conceptual framework guiding this study, allowing several major findings to transpire.

**Central Research Question and Supporting Questions**

The central research question of this study focused on elementary teachers’ self-efficacy when identifying the difference between second language acquisition problems and potential learning disabilities in their English Language Learners. Based on the data analysis from each case study, responses indicate that participants exhibited a sense of high self-efficacy, meaning they generally perceive themselves to be effective in distinguishing between typical struggles an ELL could have when learning English as opposed to a possible learning disability. In order to answer the central research question in a more comprehensive way, the researcher employed the supporting questions as a framework for participant interviews, observations and data collection.

Analysis and careful examination of the data collected with the central research question and supporting questions in mind resulted in five majoring findings, four of which are directly
aligned with the four themes that had emerged from data analysis of the five case studies. One additional finding which stemmed directly from two specific sub-themes emerged as well; its prominence in the data collection and analysis has deemed it worthy of noting as a major finding.

Figure 5.1 provides a graphic depiction of these findings and their direct relation to areas of focus from the literature review and the three key theories included in the conceptual framework.
Figure 5.1. Graphic Portrayal of the Interpretation of the Study's Findings
Finding 1 - Cultural Exposure: Personal and professional experiences interacting with people from different backgrounds/ethnicities build teacher cultural competency and strengthen teacher self-efficacy.

Aligning closely with theoretical and thematic concepts of this study, this significant finding suggests teachers with greater exposure to diverse cultures and languages have higher levels of self-efficacy. Analysis of the data from each case study and comparison across all five cases showed that teachers who interact/have interacted with individuals from diverse cultures develop greater cultural competency, which they associate with a sense of self-efficacy when working with their culturally diverse learners. Four of the participants recounted their experiences traveling abroad and their personal interactions during their travels, recognizing that what they were feeling as a newcomer in a new culture or environment is something that their ELLs feel. Those who had traveled to countries where languages other than English were spoken stated that they felt a sense of empathy for ELLs with low language fluency attempting to communicate with new classmates and teachers.

In addition, participants felt that it was a great advantage to have access to colleagues from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In several instances, they explained the importance of having someone in their schools that could provide insight into student and family behavior that could be connected to cultural practices. It was clear that all five teachers’ experiences working directly with diverse learners in their classrooms and students’ families contributed to their cultural awareness and responsiveness to teaching, ultimately giving them a sense of high self-efficacy.

Culturally responsive pedagogy and teacher self-efficacy share several attributes and can be considered interconnected in an educational setting with culturally diverse learners (Chu &
Garcia, 2014). Educators who are capable of integrating culturally responsive topics, activities and instructional strategies may feel more successful when faced with difficult decisions regarding ELLs in their classrooms who need additional evaluation that is possibly due to a learning disability.

**Finding 2 – Collaboration: Teachers feel more confident about their effectiveness when making decisions about their struggling ELLs when they collaborate regularly with other educators.**

One of the most prominent findings present in this study is how collaboration promotes teachers’ self-efficacy. All five participants reiterated the importance of having the opportunity to collaborate, learn and share with their colleagues, especially when they were dealing with an ELL in their class who is academically challenged. An important vehicle for this collaboration is Adamstown’s model of Integrated Learning Teams (ILTs), where educators can discuss at length any child that may need additional support or possibly an individualized instructional plan. The opportunity for classroom, ESL, literacy, and special education teachers along with school administrators to share in the decision-making process is a strong contributor to teachers’ self-efficacy.

Additionally, evidence of more informal interactions between participants and their colleagues or supervisors emerged from their explanations during interviews. It became clear that teachers feel more comfortable knowing they can bounce an idea or a concern about a struggling ELL off of a colleague; they depend on those interactions to build their sense of confidence when determining whether that ELL may have learning challenges beyond language acquisition.

It is important to note that the case study sites also contributed to participants’ self-
efficacy. Considering each school’s significant number of ELLs in the student body, it is evident that school leaders have seen the necessity for putting into place cooperative structures where the participants and their colleagues could build a collaborative continuum of support for each other. This creates a true community of practice (Wenger, 1998) at each school with a common understanding of the norms and shared repertoire related to collaborative investigation regarding struggling ELLs, including trusting team decisions and actions. Working with this population on a regular basis and making informed decisions regarding appropriate, modified instruction for these students is a fully integrated practice at these schools due to their large number of non-English speakers. There is no doubt that these built-in collaborative measures contribute positively to teachers’ self-efficacy when identifying reasons for ELLs’ slowed academic progress and planning for individualized support for those students.

Literature from the field shows that providing collaborative opportunities for teachers of ELLs with regard to planning, implementing and evaluating appropriate instruction is essential in creating a continuum of support for those ELLs who struggle more than their peers (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Garcia & Tyler, 2010; Hansen-Thomas, 2013; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Kushner, 2008; Nguyen, 2012; Stein, 2011; WIDA Consortium, 2013). All five cases in this study provide evidence that teachers not only learn from one another through formal and informal conversations but also depend on their colleagues’ points of view from individual areas of expertise to construct their own perceptions of what a struggling ELL needs. Social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) clearly comes into play as teachers build their own personal knowledge by observing, listening to and interacting with others. This in turn helps to build confidence and strengthen teachers’ self-efficacy when identifying possible learning disabilities in English Language Learners who are not making adequate progress in the classroom. In
addition, social learning systems and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2000) are strongly represented in each of the five case studies when teachers engage with each other and align and ultimately share their purpose of making the best possible decision for English Language Learners in their classrooms.

**Finding 3 – ELL Student Data: Teachers are confident decision makers when they use a variety of student data (academic, behavioral, social/emotional) to distinguish between second language acquisition issues and LD.**

Another important finding in this multiple-case study is that of using diverse sources of data to make decisions to identify a possible learning disability in an ELL. During the data collection and analysis phase of the study, it was evident that teachers rely on having multiple assessments and a wealth of information regarding an ELL’s academic, social and behavioral progress to make good decisions about their students. Based on their backgrounds in professional experience and education, participants in these five cases described variations in the types of data that they are most comfortable using for the decision-making process but stressed the importance of considering all available data when planning what course of action would be most beneficial to the ELL in question.

The review of formal and informal academic assessments was a common thread throughout participant interviews and observations in this study. It can be deduced that while some teachers clearly rely more on formal, standardized assessments such as DIBELS or DRA, others feel more inclined to base their decisions on formative assessments and progress monitoring of day-to-day classroom work. Supported by research in the field, there are advantages in utilizing multiple data points to assess whether or not an ELL may have LD since ELLs are all individual in their skill sets and levels of mastery (Rivera et al., 2009).
As was emphasized during observations and interviews, teachers believe in the importance of considering the “whole child” in their evaluation of an ELL’s needs. They find ways to gather as much information as possible by communicating with parents regularly and consistently, communicating with current and former educators regarding the child’s behavior and academic progress, and observing children outside of the classroom in social settings, for example. This learning and building of knowledge through interactions with others comes back into play as teachers acquire more information through their communication and collaboration with key players (Vygotsky, 1978), allowing them to make better decisions about their ELLs.

Current literature from the field reinforces this finding. Variables related to the social and emotional well-being of a child such as a child’s contextual and pragmatic use of new language as well as adjustment to a new culture are useful data points for teachers to consider when trying to identify the cause for an ELL’s lack of academic progress (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Klingner et al., 2006; Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Having a strong understanding of what to look for during exploratory observation as part of the initial investigation process (Case & Taylor, 2005; Hamayan et al., 2013) is also essential when gathering and examining different data for struggling ELLs. Cultural competency and culturally responsive teaching strategies (Gay, 2002; Nieto, 2010) are critical as teachers attempt to distinguish second language acquisition issues from possible LD in ELLs by including social and emotional behaviors as key data points in assessing the “whole child”.

**Finding 4 – Professional Development: Professional development and training has a slight effect on how successful teachers feel when working with struggling ELLs, but not as much as other factors.**

This finding, which focuses on professional development and training regarding
instruction and assessment ELLs as a contributor to teacher self-efficacy, was not as prominent as other findings. While professional development and training were considered important and useful by each of the participants in the study, there were divergent levels of self-efficacy based on the quality and extent of professional learning each participant had experienced.

One notable difference as part of this finding was the amount of value and appreciation participants placed on different workshops or sessions either offered to them through the district or mandated by the state. It became obvious that PD offered by the district as voluntary training was much better received than the mandatory training required of all general education classroom teachers. Participants characterized the redundancy of content and lack of organization in presentation and delivery (most teachers completed district-offered PD concentrating on ELL instruction before the state mandated PD was in place). With district-based training opportunities, the feedback from participants was varied, as each had her own individual experience with the content and interpreted her involvement differently.

Other factors held more weight than professional development and training with teachers involved in this study. For example, participants’ years of teaching experience as well as their ability to collaborate regularly with other educators and school administrators contributed more to a heightened sense of self-efficacy than workshops PD sessions or courses they took in a formal professional learning environment.

It is particularly interesting to note the varied amount of understanding about Response to Intervention (RtI) across case studies. While none of the participants identified a need for more PD or training, knowledge of RtI implementation is lacking among teachers and administrators in the district. Additional professional development in the RtI process for ELLs may be a contributing factor to teachers’ perceptions of effectiveness when identifying LD in their ELLs,
but it was not clear in this study. Teachers’ understanding and use of RtI would be an interesting topic for further study.

Overall, while teachers consider training and professional development useful in understanding their struggling ELLs’ needs, they do not deem it a strong contributor to their perceived effectiveness in identifying LD in an ELL. It is clear from the literature that targeted, relevant professional development focused on English Language Learner education for in-service teachers of ELLs shows evidence of success, (Ballantyne et al, 2008; Berg & Huang, 2015; Hansen-Thomas et al. 2013). Therefore, it is essential that future professional development offerings surrounding ELL instruction and assessment be well-designed and meaningful for it to be a stronger contributor to teacher self-efficacy.

**Finding 5 – Years of Experience: The years of classroom experience and the resulting sense of intuition a teacher feels about a struggling ELL contributes to teacher self-efficacy.**

One additional finding related to teachers’ years of experience in the classroom and resulting sense of intuition about their ELLs’ difficulties emerged from analysis of data across all five cases. Throughout their interviews and observations, participants often remarked that their years of experience teaching in the district has given them a sense of intuition about why an ELL in their classroom may be struggling more than his/her peers. Teachers clearly create strong bonds with their students, and the opportunity to really “know” a student is an obvious possibility based on the amount of time teachers and students spend together on a daily basis. This sense of intuition, which often comes from previous experiences with different struggling ELLs through the years, was a strong influence on how teachers made decisions based on their prior interactions with students with similar situations.

Although this finding is not prominent in the literature, it is necessary to note that
teachers feel strongly that their years in the classroom contribute to their sense of self-efficacy. The more experience teachers have working with academically challenged ELLs and participating in the investigative and solution-seeking processes, the more they are able to identify reasons why these learners struggle and to plan for specific instructional support with the help of their colleagues and school administrators. The importance of having opportunities to interact with, learn from and share knowledge with others (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998) carries over in this finding as well. However, it would be interesting to investigate further how consistent practice of self-reflection might affect teachers’ sense of intuition by attributing their feelings of heightened self-efficacy to their substantial knowledge and practical application over time (Schön, 1992). Ultimately, experience and interaction with ELLs on a daily basis allows teachers to develop, implement and share best practices on how to work with children who are having difficulty making academic progress.

Implications

Distinguishing between language acquisition issues and a possible learning disability in ELLs is a challenging task for mainstream elementary teachers. The findings from this multiple-case study shed light on certain practices that may be beneficial to the process of identifying ELLs with LD or that should be avoided so as not to misrepresent an ELL’s challenges for something that is completely different.

Implications for Educators

Results from this study suggest that teachers are most effective when they are collaborating and sharing multiple sources of data to make informed decisions about their struggling ELLs. Finding ways for teachers from different areas of expertise to come together, share information and ultimately decide on the best course of action for their students in need of
additional support or modified instruction. Teachers who are comfortable with ELLs and feel successful in their abilities to implement culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms can build communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) at their schools and within their areas of expertise. These exemplary educators may consider becoming teacher leaders in their schools or districts with the goal of sharing their successful strategies and classroom practices with colleagues informally or through a “teachers training teachers” model.

**Implications for Administrators/School Leaders**

Public school administrators and school leaders may want reflect on any collaborative measures in place in their school or district that allow for mainstream teachers to work together with educators who specialize in ESL, special education, literacy instruction and guidance or student support. Setting aside time for in-depth investigation of any or all student progress promotes a sense of shared responsibility and ownership of the decisions being put forth regarding recommendations for a struggling ELL. School leadership should also promote regular and open communication between the school and parents and families of ELLs in order to cultivate partnerships based on trust and care that can provide the best possible support for children.

**Implications for School Districts**

The findings from this study suggest that school district leaders should provide meaningful and targeted professional development and training for staff to build teacher capacity to work with culturally diverse learners. Teachers need PD that helps them follow procedures and protocols for any comprehensive investigation into ELLs who are not making academic progress. Encouraging teachers to learn more about cultural competency and the ability to embrace the wide variety of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds of their students will create a
strong sense of ownership as well as joy and excitement of teaching children from diverse cultures, which in turn can build their self-efficacy. In addition, district-created opportunities for social learning (Wenger, 2000) through system-wide professional learning communities or online networks focused on ELLs with possible LD fosters a sense of a shared mission and purpose for educators.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Further Study**

It is important to consider the limitations presented in this study and how they have affected the outcomes presented above. Since each case dealt with one of five elementary schools with the most sizeable ELL populations in the district, the participant in each case already had multiple experiences working with ELLs and families. Educators and administrators from these schools are always looking for ways to strengthen relationships with their culturally diverse students and families. Additionally, all of the teachers involved in the study were demographically homogeneous and provided data based on their own cultural and ethnic backgrounds and experiences, which was congruent in many ways.

In considering recommendations for further study, it would be beneficial to replicate this study with teachers from schools and districts with smaller numbers of ELLs in order to investigate whether the support provided by the school and district are adequate in preparing teachers for working with ELLs who may also have learning disabilities. Further research that focuses on mainstream teachers from culturally diverse backgrounds might also deliver very different results from the findings in this current study. Another area warranting further investigation is the self-efficacy of other educators that work with ELLs showing signs of learning disabilities, such as literacy specialists, special education teachers, or guidance counselors. Finally, more research needs to be addressed with regard to districts and schools’
use of the Response to Intervention model in order to identify whether or not educators are using RtI protocols properly and successfully with ELLs displaying signs of LD.

**Recommendations for Action**

Based on the findings described in this multiple-case study, the following recommendations for action for teachers as well as school and district leaders are suggested:

- Teachers should make a point to learn and understand as much as possible about their ELLs and their families in order to be as informed as possible when investigating probable causes for an ELL’s academic difficulties. Keeping track of information is essential through regular record keeping and progress monitoring of a variety of assessments, including social and emotional behavior.

- School administrators must provide adequate time during the school day for collaboration between colleagues who teach children in common. This will promote shared decision-making through analysis of different educators’ experiences with children who may need specialized or modified instruction.

- Districts should offer system-wide professional development that focuses on second language acquisition theory as well as instructional frameworks and strategies that target working with struggling ELLs.

- Districts should also provide professional learning opportunities focused on teaching culturally diverse learners for school and program leaders; this will assist leaders as they themselves attempt to provide professional support for teachers working with struggling ELLs as well as system-wide programmatic support for English Language Learners.

- Hiring teachers who have been trained in culturally responsive pedagogy or have had a broad range of cultural experiences is essential to building a more culturally competent
school district staff. Such training will also help educators forge and maintain partnerships with culturally diverse families that are based on mutual trust and respect.

**Conclusion**

English Language Learners in U.S. schools face challenges every day as they are expected to make adequate gains in acquiring English while attempting to further their academic knowledge in other subject areas as well. ELLs who have the added challenge of showing signs of a possible learning disability may have even more difficulty if teachers are unable to identify the cause(s) of their struggles. Mainstream classroom teachers at the elementary level are the educators who are most often given the responsibility of moving ELLs forward academically; they are charged with finding solutions for those children who do not make adequate progress.

This study emphasizes the concept of teacher self-efficacy, or teachers’ perceptions of their own abilities to be successful with their struggling ELLs. It sought to discover how teachers felt about their own abilities to make decisions about why ELLs in their classroom may not be having the same amount of success learning English or progressing academically as their ELL peers and what factors contributed to those feelings of high or low self-efficacy. The study is significant, as no previous research in the area of ELL education was identified that has focused specifically on mainstream general education teachers’ self-efficacy regarding their initial identification of possible learning disabilities in their ELLs. Five substantial findings related to teacher self-efficacy confirmed that certain factors contribute significantly to the perceptions teachers have of their effectiveness with decision-making about struggling ELLs. They include teachers’ cultural exposure, collaborative opportunities among colleagues, reviewing multiple sources of data to make informed decisions, professional development and training as a necessity for improving and promoting cultural competency/knowledge of language.
acquisition, and years of experience in the classroom and resulting sense of intuition. Each of
these findings sheds light on essential areas of focus not only in the instruction and support of
English Language Learners themselves but also in the building transformative leadership skills
among teacher leaders and school administrators in the quest for equity and fairness of
educational opportunity for all students.

It is the hope that the insight gleaned from this unique yet important study can be of use
to future researchers investigating the complexities of second language acquisition and learning
disabilities in English Language Learners. Although there is no certainty that can be applied to
this conundrum, research in this field must move forward to provide better guidance for those
who are charged with making decisions about appropriate pedagogy and support for all culturally
diverse learners. It is the duty of public school educators, administrators and school districts
themselves to be advocates for English Language Learners with or without learning disabilities
and ensure that these students are encouraged, challenged and supported throughout all aspects
of their academic journey in the U.S. educational system.
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APPENDIX A

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Project Title: Teachers’ Self-Efficacy When Differentiating Between Language Acquisition Difficulties or Possible Learning Disabilities in English Language Learners

Principal Investigator(s): Elizabeth Hallett

Introduction:
• Please read this form, you may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study and, if you choose to participate, document your decision.
• You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study now, during, or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is completely voluntary.

Why is this study being done?
• The purpose of this study is to investigate how mainstream elementary classroom teachers feel about their abilities to make decisions about why English Language Learners (ELLs) in their classes may be struggling more than their peers. Problems acquiring a new language can often mirror characteristics of a learning disability, and it is often difficult for mainstream classroom teachers to distinguish between the two. Findings will provide insight into key factors that contribute to teachers’ perceptions of their own success as well as how districts can support teachers who work with struggling ELLs in their classrooms every day.

Who will be in this study?
• You have been identified as potential candidate to take part in this study because you fit the following criteria:
  o Mainstream elementary classroom teacher of Grades 2 – 5
  o Teaches at one of the district’s five elementary schools with high ELL enrollment
  o Currently has or has had an ELL that has struggled academically more than usual

What will I be asked to do?
The study will occur between January and the end of June, 2017.
• First, you will be asked to participate in a short, individual interview (maximum 1 hour) to answer a series of questions pertaining to the research topic. Some of these questions are highly structured (i.e. questions about demographic information) while others are more open-ended. Any and all information from this interview will be recorded using a recording app for iPad called “Rev” and sent to their company for written transcription.
Data collected through this interview will allow the principal investigator to identify common themes, patterns, and trends. You will be provided with a copy of the interview transcription for your review and approval.

- Second, the principal investigator will observe a meeting (as a non-participant) that you take part in which focuses on progress and achievement of a struggling ELL. This meeting could be a Student Support Services Team (SST) meeting or an Integrated Learning Team (ILT) meeting. There will be no interaction between the principal investigator observing the meeting and the meeting attendees or you. Data collected from meeting observations will assist the principal investigator in understanding the processes and underlying frameworks that are used to work with struggling ELLs in your school/district.

- Finally, you will be asked to participate in a second short interview (maximum 1 hour) where you will bring an artifact, or item that represents your personal, educational, or professional experiences pertaining to the study topic, and describe/explain in detail. Any and all information from will be recorded using a recording app for iPad called “Rev” and sent to their company for written transcription. Data collected through this interview will allow the principal investigator to identify common themes, patterns, and trends. You will be provided with a copy of the interview transcription for your review and approval.

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?
- There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?
- There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. There may be a benefit to the district or state, as analysis of data may provide guidance for improved practices in supporting teachers working with struggling ELLs.

What will it cost me?
- There is no cost to you, other than any inconvenience of your time to participate in a short interview and discussion regarding the artifact you provided as part of the study.

How will my privacy be protected?
- Throughout the entire study and thereafter, your privacy will be protected. During data collection, any interviews or meetings will take place in a private location behind closed doors. With regard to meeting observations, no information will be divulged to any additional meeting attendees, other school employees or administrators regarding your participation in this study.

- In addition, you will be given a pseudonym, as will your school and district, in order to maintain confidentiality during data collection, analysis and reporting. Any other information that might identify you will be omitted or changed to protect your privacy. Only I, the principal investigator, will have access to your information.

- Your privacy will remain protected after results of the of the study and the dissertation will be published in June 2017 through the University of New England.

How will my data be kept confidential?
• All data, including interview recordings, transcripts, and observation notes, will be kept confidential in a locked private office. Electronic data will be held on a password-protected personal computer owned by me, the principal investigator, and backed up on a personal, external hard-drive. Handwritten notes and artifacts will be placed in a sealed container and locked in the principal investigator’s office desk drawer. Only I, the principal investigator, will have access to your data.
• A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by me, the principal investigator, for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location that only members of the research team will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.
• For audio recordings of your interviews, only I, the principal investigator, will have access to them. As mentioned earlier, transcription services will be provided by “Rev”; they will be transmitted using 128-bit SSL encryption, the highest level of security available, and will be kept strictly confidential. You will be provided with a copy of the interview transcription for your review and approval.
• Research findings and a copy of the dissertation will be provided to you at your request at the end of the study.

What are my rights as a research participant?
• Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of New England or your public school district. Your decision to participate in this study will in no way impact your relationship with your supervisor(s) or employer.
• You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
• If you choose not to participate in this study, there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
• You may also choose not to participate at all.

Whom may I contact with questions?
• If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and your participation, you may contact me, the researcher, via e-mail at ehallet1@une.edu or via my personal cell phone at 617-653-0054. You also may contact Dr. Michelle Collay at the University of New England at mcollay@une.edu or by phone at 207-602-2010.
• If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu.

Will I receive a copy of this consent form?
• Yes, you will be given a copy of this consent form.
Participant’s Statement
I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

Participant’s signature or
Legally authorized representative

Date

Printed name

Principal investigator’s Statement
The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

Principal investigator’s signature

Date

Printed name
APPENDIX B

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH
(*for Meeting Attendees during Meeting Observation)

Project Title: Teachers’ Self-Efficacy When Differentiating Between Language Acquisition Difficulties or Possible Learning Disabilities in English Language Learners

Principal Investigator(s): Elizabeth Hallett

Introduction:
- Please read this form, you may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study and, if you choose to participate, document your decision.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study now, during, or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is completely voluntary.

Why is this study being done?
- The purpose of this study is to investigate how mainstream elementary classroom teachers feel about their abilities to make decisions about why English Language Learners (ELLs) in their classes may be struggling more than their peers. Problems acquiring a new language can often mirror characteristics of a learning disability, and it is often difficult for mainstream classroom teachers to distinguish between the two. Findings will provide insight into key factors that contribute to teachers’ perceptions of their own success as well as how districts can support teachers who work with struggling ELLs in their classrooms every day.
- The study will occur between January 2017 and the end of June, 2017.

What will I be asked to do?
- As the principal investigator, I would like to observe as a non-participant a meeting which you are an attendee focusing on progress and achievement of a struggling ELL. This meeting could be a Student Support Services Team (SST) meeting or an Integrated Learning Team (ILT) meeting. There will be no interaction between the principal investigator observing the meeting (myself) and other meeting attendees or you.
- Data collected from meeting observations will assist the principal investigator in understanding the processes and underlying frameworks that are used to work with struggling ELLs in your school/district. All meeting attendees will receive a copy of the notes taken during the meeting for review and approval.

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?
- There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.
What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?
- There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. There may be a benefit to the district or state, as analysis of data may provide guidance for improved practices in supporting teachers working with struggling ELLs.

What will it cost me?
- There is no cost to you, other than any inconvenience of having an additional person in the room during the meeting.

How will my privacy be protected?
- Throughout the entire study and thereafter, your privacy will be protected. During data collection, any interviews or meetings will take place in a private location behind closed doors. With regard to meeting observations, no information will be divulged to any other school employees or administrators regarding your participation in this study.
- In addition, you will be given a pseudonym, as will your school and district, in order to maintain confidentiality during data collection, analysis and reporting. Any other information that might identify you will be omitted or changed to protect your privacy. Only I, the principal investigator, will have access to your information.
- Your privacy will remain protected after results of the of the study and the dissertation will be published in June 2017 through the University of New England.

How will my data be kept confidential?
- All data, including meeting observation notes, will be kept confidential in a locked private office. Electronic data will be held on a password-protected personal computer owned by me, the principal investigator, and backed up on a personal, external hard-drive. Handwritten notes will be placed in a sealed container and locked in the principal investigator’s office desk drawer. Only I, the principal investigator, will have access to your data.
- A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by me, the principal investigator, for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location that only I will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.
- Research findings and a copy of the dissertation will be provided to you at your request at the end of the study.

What are my rights as a research participant?
- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of New England or your public school district. Your decision to participate in this study will in no way impact your relationship with your supervisor(s) or employer.
- If you choose not to participate in this study, there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the
research, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.

- You may also choose not to participate at all.

**Whom may I contact with questions?**

- If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and your participation, you may contact me, the researcher, via e-mail at ehalttt1@une.edu or via my personal cell phone at 617-653-0054. You also may contact Dr. Michelle Collay at the University of New England at mcollay@une.edu or by phone at 207-602-2010.
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu.

**Will I receive a copy of this consent form?**

- Yes, you will be given a copy of this consent form.

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**Participant’s Statement**

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

Participant’s signature or
Legally authorized representative

Date

Printed name

**Principal investigator’s Statement**

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

Principal investigator’s signature

Date

Printed name
APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

DATE:
TIME:
INTERVIEWEE # _______

Introduction: As you know, I am a doctoral student at the University of New England, and I am currently working on research for my dissertation. My topic involves mainstream elementary classroom teachers in the district who currently have or have had struggling English Language Learners (ELLs) in their classrooms; specifically, I want to learn about teachers’ perceptions of their own abilities to differentiate between a possible learning disability in their struggling English Language Learners and difficulty acquiring English. Your input will be valuable for understanding how we can support mainstream elementary teachers in the district and state when working with ELLs who are academically challenged.

You have previously signed a consent form to take part in this study. If you feel at any time that you would like to withdraw from this interview or the study altogether, you may do so at any time.

I would like to focus on your answers rather than trying to write them all down. For that reason, I would like to record our conversation with your permission, of course. I will be using a professional transcription service that will transcribe our interview. Later when I am reflecting
on potential themes from different participants, I will be able to play back your comments. The transcription service will receive the audio without your name or any identifying information about you. This is done intentionally to maintain confidentiality. Once the audio recording is transcribed, I will mail you a copy for your review. I will also forward you a copy of my overall findings to request your comments or corrections. Does that sound ok? Any questions?

I will ask you a series of questions and then allow time for more comments and questions from you at the end.

**Demographic Information:** Note: all demographic information or other identifiers will be kept confidential; pseudonyms will replace names of people, places, or other identifying information.

What is your name? (pseudonym) _____________________________

What is your gender? ___ Female ___ Male

Which age range are you in? ___ 20-29 years old ___ 30-39 years old ___ 40-49 years old ___ 50-59 years old ___ 60+ years old

What is your race/ethnicity? ___ Caucasian/White ___ African American/Black ___ Hispanic ___ Biracial ___ Other _________________

What is your native language/first language? _______________________________

What other languages do you speak? _______________________________

What grade do you teach? _______________________________

Years of teaching experience (in the district/outside the district)? ____________

**Semi-Structured Questions:**
1. Can you tell me about any **personal** experiences you have had with other cultures and/or other languages (example: international travel, living/studying abroad, friends/family from cultures different from your own, etc.)?

2. Can you tell me about any **professional** experiences you have had with other cultures and/or other languages (example: colleagues from different cultural/linguistic backgrounds, work abroad, teaching culturally diverse students/ELLs; interacting with parents of culturally diverse students/ELLs)?

3. Can you describe any educational experiences where you were the learner (example: professional development workshops, graduate/undergraduate teacher preparation courses) that have focused on working with culturally diverse students?

4. Tell me about your experience educating/working with English Language Learners (ELLs) throughout your years of experience as an elementary classroom teacher.

5. Describe the educational framework or model that your school follows for educating English Language Learners.

6. How often have you noticed ELL students in your classroom that struggle more than usual with making academic progress when compared to other ELLs in the class?

7. How do you determine that they are struggling?

8. Have you discussed the struggles your ELLs are having with colleagues (guidance, ELL teacher(s), literacy specialist school psychologist, principal) to request further investigation for possible learning disabilities?

9. How recently has this occurred?
10. How you determine when you should speak to colleagues about your struggling ELL student?

11. Can you tell me about your understanding of and experience with the Response to Intervention (RTI) process in your school and classroom?

12. Does your school (administration and colleagues) support and use RTI in determining students who may have potential learning disabilities? Please explain.

13. Have you used RTI with ELLs in your classroom?
   - If yes, please describe what types of interventions and how successful (or unsuccessful) they were.
   - If no, please explain if you have used any other method/tool to assist struggling students (ELL and non-ELL).

14. Have you had experience working with ELL students already diagnosed with learning disabilities in your classroom? Please tell me about your experience.

15. Have you had experience working with non-ELL students with learning disabilities in your classroom? Please tell me about your experience.

16. How do you feel about your ability to tell the difference between an ELL that is struggling with language acquisition (a.k.a. learning English) and one that may present signs of a learning disability?

17. Why do you feel that way?

18. How confident do you feel about your effectiveness in making decisions about your struggling English Language Learners with regard to their needs? Why or why not?

19. Describe how successful (or unsuccessful) you have felt in being able to differentiate between a language acquisition issue and a potential learning disability with your ELLs.
20. What questions do you have for me?

Thank you for your time and for sharing with me about your experiences. This information contributes to the understanding of current practices and how we can improve them for the future. Feel free to contact me at any time with any questions or comments. You are welcome to review the dissertation before and after its completed submission.
APPENDIX D
Artifact Discussion Protocol

*Introduction:* As you know, I am a doctoral student at the University of New England, and I am currently working on research for my dissertation. My topic involves mainstream elementary classroom teachers in the district who currently have or have had struggling English Language Learners (ELLs) in their classrooms; specifically, I want to learn about teachers’ perceptions of their own abilities to differentiate between a possible learning disability in their struggling English Language Learners and difficulty acquiring English. Your input will be valuable for understanding how we can support mainstream elementary teachers in the district and state when working with ELLs who are academically challenged.

You have brought with you today an artifact, or an item that represents educational, professional and/or personal experiences you have had pertaining to your work with ELLs. I’d like to ask you to describe the artifact you have brought in detail and what it represents about your experiences. I may ask clarifying questions during our discussion as well as more in-depth questions. I will then allow time for more comments and questions from you at the end.

You have previously signed a consent form to take part in this study. If you feel at any time that you would like to withdraw from this interview or the study altogether, you may do so at any time.
I would like to focus on your answers rather than trying to write them all down. For that reason, I would like to record our conversation with your permission, of course. I will be using a professional transcription service that will transcribe our interview. Later when I am reflecting on potential themes from different participants, I will be able to play back your comments. The transcription service will receive the audio without your name or any identifying information about you. This is done intentionally to maintain confidentiality. Once the audio recording is transcribed, I will mail you a copy for your review. I will also forward you a copy of my overall findings to request your comments or corrections. Does that sound ok? Any questions?

Questions about Artifact # ______________

1. What artifact did you bring today? Please describe it in detail. (The researcher may ask clarifying questions when reviewing the artifact together with the participant).

2. What does the artifact represent about you as a teacher?

3. What does the artifact represent about you as a person?

4. In your own opinion, how does this artifact relate to your experiences with struggling ELLs?

5. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you for your time and for sharing your artifact with me. This information contributes to the understanding of current practices and how we can improve them for the future. Feel free to contact me at any time with any questions or comments. You are welcome to review the dissertation before and after its completed submission.