ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	ELEMENTARY GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' DECISION MAKING PROCESS DURING THE REFERRAL OF ENGLISH LEARNERS TO SPECIAL EDUCATION: DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LEARNING DISABILITY
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The increasing growth of English Learners (ELs) in US public schools has brought with it several challenges. Included among the greatest challenges facing schools is determining the difference between acquiring a second language and identifying a learning-based learning disability. Klingner and Artiles (2006) have articulated that there is an alarming lack of research on this and related issues. They affirm that more research is necessary on the special education referral and eligibility decision-making process.

While the literature suggests that ELs are overrepresented in special education, it also indicates that there are few studies that look at the rationales of those who are giving the assessments to identify students, or those who are referring the students for testing (Lock & Layton, 2002). Case and Taylor (2005) suggest that the overrepresentation of ELs in special education is evidence of a need for a clearer understanding of the factors

that educators need to consider prior to referring ELs to special education. This research was designed to better understand the decision-making process of the general education teacher as they select ELs for referral to the special education process.

This research study is situated at the intersection of the special education referral process, English language acquisition (ELA) and learning disability (LD). I also draw on the idea of decisional capital (Hargreaves & Fullen, 2012). A two-phased approach was used to understand the decisional process of general education teachers in grades 3 and 4 when referring students who are also ELs to special education. The data sources included surveys, semi-structured interviews, observations, referral and district documents. Findings from this study indicate that teachers largely used oral language and exposure to English to differentiate between ELA challenges and possible LD when considering referral of ELs to special education. The study suggests that teachers need a deeper understanding of best practices for teaching ELs in order to provide appropriate instruction and to prevent inappropriate referrals.

ELEMENTARY GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' DECISION MAKING PROCESS DURING THE REFERRAL OF ENGLISH LEARNERS TO SPECIAL EDUCATION: DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LEARNING DISABILITY

by

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Dedication

This research is dedicated to all classroom teachers, who are making a difference.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge God for being sovereign in my life. The journey to complete this project has been very long and unpredictable. There were times when I was not sure I would make it. It was in those moments when I was reminded to be confident that "He who hath begun a good work in [me] you will perform it until the Day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6, KJ). When I felt alone and discouraged, I was reminded to "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified … for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6 NIV). When I wasn't sure I could do it, I was reminded, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phillipians 4:13, KJV).

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grateful that one day I will be able to share with her my perseverance, commitment and God's favor and faithfulness.

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Background and Rationale

The growth in the number of English Learners (ELs) and the academic struggles facing many of these learners have become challenges for U.S. schools. The increase in the EL population is more rapid among preschool and school-age children (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006) than for any other age group. It was noted in the *Minorities in Special Education Briefing Report* (2009) that ELs are the fastest-growing subgroup of students in U.S. public schools. This has led to profound changes in the composition of the U.S. classroom.

The increase in the number of ELs in U.S. public schools between 1993-1994 and 1999-2000 was about 900,000 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2004), and continues to grow. In 2004-2005, EL represented 9.1% (an estimated 4.3 million) of public school students, in 2013-2014, 9.5% (an estimated 4.5 million), and in 2015-2016, 9.4% (an estimated 4.6 million) (NCES, 2017). In the year 2010, the U.S. Census reported that Hispanics were 16% (50.5 million) of the U.S. population, which increased from 13% (35.5 million) in 2000. The Hispanic population increased by 43% between 2000 and 2010. The growth in the Hispanic population was evident in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Between 2000 and 2010, eight states in the South (Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee) and South Dakota more than doubled in size of Hispanic population. While these increases are significant, the Hispanic population for these states remained less than 9%. Two states showed significant increase and grew the fastest when compared to other

states. South Carolina grew the fastest by 148%, increasing from 95,000 in 2000 to 236,000 in 2010. Alabama was the second fastest with a 145% increase, from 76,000 to 186,000. The number of ELs in the West, as a region, increased by 34%, the Midwest by 49%, the Northeast by 33%, and the South by over 57%. The home language spoken by the largest number of non-English speakers was Spanish, followed by other Indo-European languages (such as German, French, Italian), and Asian and Pacific Island languages.

The number of children between the ages of 5-17 who speak a language other than English in their homes increased from 9% to 21% (from 3.8 million to 10.9 million) of the population in this age range between 1979 and 2008 (NCES, 2010). Some 2 million "school-age children who spoke a language other than English at home and who spoke English with difficulty spoke Spanish; 311,000 (or 12%) of these children spoke Asian/Pacific Islander languages; 279,000 (or 10%) spoke Indo-European languages; 87,000 (or 3%) spoke another language" (NCES, 2010, p. 32). According to the 2011-2012 census report, the Hispanic population is now the second fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the United States but continues to be the second largest racial or ethnic group behind White non-Hispanics (*Education Week*, 2012). The Asian population increased by 2.9% and the Hispanic population by 2.2% within one year, July 2011-July 2012. The increase of the Asian population is largely a result of migration from other countries. According to this report, however, notable is the growth of the nation's youngest population of children 5 years and under. Minorities represent nearly 50% of the population within that age range. If the current growth trends continue, it is estimated that the crossover to majority-minority for that age group will occur within the next 2 to 3

years. The enrollment of White non-Hispanic students has decreased by 13% or 5 million students since 1976, and Hispanic enrollment has increased by 52% (3 million to 4.5 million) between 1976 and 2000 (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006). This growing majority is changing the landscape of our schools.

There is growing evidence that many general education teachers working with ELs are not prepared for the demographic change in their classrooms (Ortiz et al., 2011). Many teachers are concerned about ways to provide high-quality education to students from diverse language backgrounds, cultures, and social classes (Quinn, 2001). The issue of language poses a great challenge to teachers and students alike. Lee's (2006) examination of language use in the classroom revealed that students whose first language is a language other than English are prone to experience misunderstandings and limited active participation in classroom talk, which may lead to limited opportunities to learn.

ELs, like their English-dominant peers, are expected to meet high standards. The advent of the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001* placed high-stakes accountability on all public schools and, more than ever before, schools are accountable for the success of all of their students (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2009). In 2005, the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* replaced the *NCLB Act* (2001); however, the *ESSA* maintains subgroup accountability. In addition to Reading and Mathematics assessments, there is also an English-language-proficiency assessment. Another change that came along with *ESSA* is that all states must have standardized entry and exit criteria for ELs. The Race to the Top (RTTT) program, the *American Recovery and Investment Act of 2009*, provided $5.5 billion incentives in the form of competitive grants to states to encourage education innovation and reform in four areas: (a) enhancing standards and assessments, (b)

improving collection and use of data, (c) increasing teacher effectiveness and achieving equity in teacher distribution, and (d) turning around low-achieving schools. The RTTT program awards states a maximum of 500 points based on how well they meet the above criteria. States that were successful in receiving a grant were expected to use the grant money to implement programs reflecting the four areas outlined above. While both the RTTT and *ESSA* share similar goals, their approaches differ. The RTTT program provides incentives for change whereas *ESSA* mandates changes.

The RTTT program built on the data collected under the *NCLB Act*. The RTTT looked at individual students and followed student growth, whereas ESSA looks at the performance of groups of students. Since the *ESSA* has kept many of the accountability pieces of the *NCLB Act*, there is a continued requirement for each state to have standards and assessments for the other academic domains: mathematics, reading, language arts, English language development, and science. Moreover, students are expected to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) on these assessments. In addition, secondary schools must incorporate graduation rates. In the 2011-2012 school year, 25 states[1] required exit exams to graduate from high school (Center on Education Policy, 2012). The *ESSA* requires that districts disaggregate their test scores to show specific progress for each subgroup, including ELs. According to the national data, 76% of third grade ELs were performing below grade level in English reading and 53% were performing below grade level in mathematics (Zehler et al., 2003). The 2015 National Assessment of Educational

[1] Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington.

Progress (NAEP) Reading Achievement reported that only 21% of Hispanic fourth graders scored at or above the proficient level, compared to 46% of Anglo students.

In addition, 31% of students who speak Spanish at home do not complete high school, compared to 10% of students who speak only English (Slavin & Cheung, 2005, p. 248). The academic experience for many of these students seems to be marked by low achievement, high rates of grade retention, school dropouts, and special education placement (Lesaux, 2006). Garcia and Cuellar (2006) and other scholars have contended that many of our schools have not been able to meet the challenge of providing productive learning experiences for EL students.

There are several theories or explanations for the low performance of ELs. One theory put forward by Chang (2008) used sociolinguistic theory to offer an explanation. According to Chang, students may encounter difficulties that they must overcome when learning a new language and a new set of cultural norms. She explained that students need to acquire complex skills to switch language from home to school, and until they are able to achieve a level of bilingualism, code switching between two languages will pose a challenge that can interfere with academic success. To arrive at such language competence, Chang stated, "a sufficient amount of instructional and social input is necessary" (p. 84). Like Chang (2008), Echevarria et al. (2009) put forward that to provide a successful education for ELs, teachers need to understand their students.

Children's language and literacy development are closely tied to their cultural experience (Purcell-Gates, Melzi, Najafi, & Orellana, 2008). Therefore, teachers need to be knowledgeable about the cultural, linguistic, and diverse backgrounds of this growing population of students enrolled in or entering many U.S. public schools (Calderon,

Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011; Echevarria et al., 2009). Becoming knowledgeable about the cultural, linguistic, and diverse backgrounds of this growing population of students will make visible the funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2005) or the intellectual resources students bring to the classroom (Dantas, 2007). Teachers may be able to tap into these resources and incorporate effective techniques and materials into their instructional practice to make connections and promote learning (Echevarria et al., 2009). Calderon et al. (2011) argued that the wide and persistent achievement disparities between ELs and English proficient students indicate a need for increased teacher and staff preparation. In the instances where teachers are unprepared to work with this population of students, the results can be students receiving inadequate educational experiences (Echevarria et al., 2009; Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003; Gersten, 1999; Quinn, 2001; Tellez, 2005). Ballantyne, Sanderman, and Levy (2008) stated that "mainstream" general education teachers who do not have special training in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or bilingual education are not equipped to teach these children. They asserted that "even the most committed teachers cannot provide high quality education without appropriate skills and knowledge" (p. 7).

The demographic shift within U.S. schools has challenged teachers, parents, policymakers, teacher educators, and others to seek answers to these new challenges. Everywhere there are efforts to change all aspects of programs and services provided to EL and/or Latino or Hispanic students, among which is meeting the challenge of appropriately modifying content and assessments to fit the needs of ELs. Included among the greatest challenges facing schools is determining the difference between acquiring a second language and identifying a learning-based learning disability. The latter challenge

has caused some educators to be hesitant to refer ELs to special education because they believe, given more time, students will acquire the language; by contrast, other teachers are very quick to refer ELs to special education. The latter believe the sooner students are referred to special education, the more quickly they will receive the support they need. Research has shown that many school districts resolve their EL problems by classifying more students as special education students (see, for example, Anderson, Minnema, Thurlow, & Hall-Lande, 2005; Huang, Clarke, Milczarski, & Raby, 2011). The number of ELLs has increased by approximately 61% over the last decade from 2.6 million to 4.2 million, while the number of ELs identified as special needs has more than doubled from 120,000 to 240,000 (Reynolds et al., 2009).

As a Special Educator, I am aware of the challenges many teachers, including myself, encounter when working with ELs. When a student is experiencing an array of learning difficulties, the general education teacher can refer the student to the School Instructional Team (SIT). Prior to the referral to SIT, the teacher must implement and document research-based instructional practices and strategies for improvement. The teacher is expected to provide data to support his or her reasons for referral. According to the *Tulloch's County Special Education Process Guide* (2012), data need to be relevant and quantifiable to convey why the referred student is not successfully responding to classroom instruction and strategies (Tier 1). Once referred to SIT, team members can make one of four possible decisions based on the student's response to the classroom's teacher intervention:

1. discontinue intervention and continue Tier 1 instruction;
2. continue the same intervention at the same level of intensity;
3. implement a different intervention at the same level; and
4. move to a more intense intervention or refer to the Supplemental Services Team (SST). (p. 3)

The SIT includes the principal and/or principal designee, referring teachers, and other specialists at the school, such as school counselor, reading specialist, and special education teacher.

As a member of a SIT that meets weekly to discuss students' progress, intervention, and eligibility for special education supports, I can affirm that the challenges of making decisions to meet the needs of ELs can become complex. Differentiating between normal second language acquisition and learning disability is one such challenge (Klingner & Harry, 2006). Moreover, educators often misinterpret ELs' limited proficiency in the English language as low intelligence or as a language or learning disability (Klingner & Harry, 2006). Making informed decisions about the needs of all students is a great challenge; making decisions about EL students is particularly challenging for the general or regular classroom teacher.

A few years ago, the SIT at my school met to discuss the reading progress of a female student. The team felt that all the necessary interventions had been given, and the next step was to request assessments in order to determine whether she needed special education services. The assessments included cognitive, to be given by the school psychologist, as well as academic. I was responsible for the academic testing. After all the assessments, it was determined that she was eligible to receive special education

services as a student with a learning disability. About a year or so later, her brother was also brought to the SIT with reading concerns and the team again went forward to request permission for assessments. The parent gave permission and I was to assess the student. While administering the assessment, I noticed many similar behaviors and responses to test items that reminded me of his sister. Given my limited knowledge and experience with linguistically diverse students I asked the team, which included the ESOL teacher, to look into whether the students spoke another language at home and it turned out that another language was indeed spoken in the home. The sibling was never identified as needing special education services but rather ESOL services, and I continue to wonder if we misidentified his sister. Artiles and Klingner (2006) pointed out that the disproportionate representation of ELLs in special education is not only a challenge for general education teachers but also for special educators. Guiberson (2009) stated that while it is a challenge for school officials to distinguish between differences and disability in Hispanic students, it is also a challenge for special education professionals as they assess Hispanic students. According to Guiberson, who referenced several researchers (Anderson, 2004, Artiles et al., 2005; Cheng, 1991; Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003), "linguistic and cultural differences may mask, mimic, or be mistaken for symptoms or characteristics of a specific disorder" (p. 170). Echevarria et al. (2009) posited that the characteristics associated with ELs' normal second-language acquisition process may be misinterpreted as either a language and or learning disability (see Figure 1).

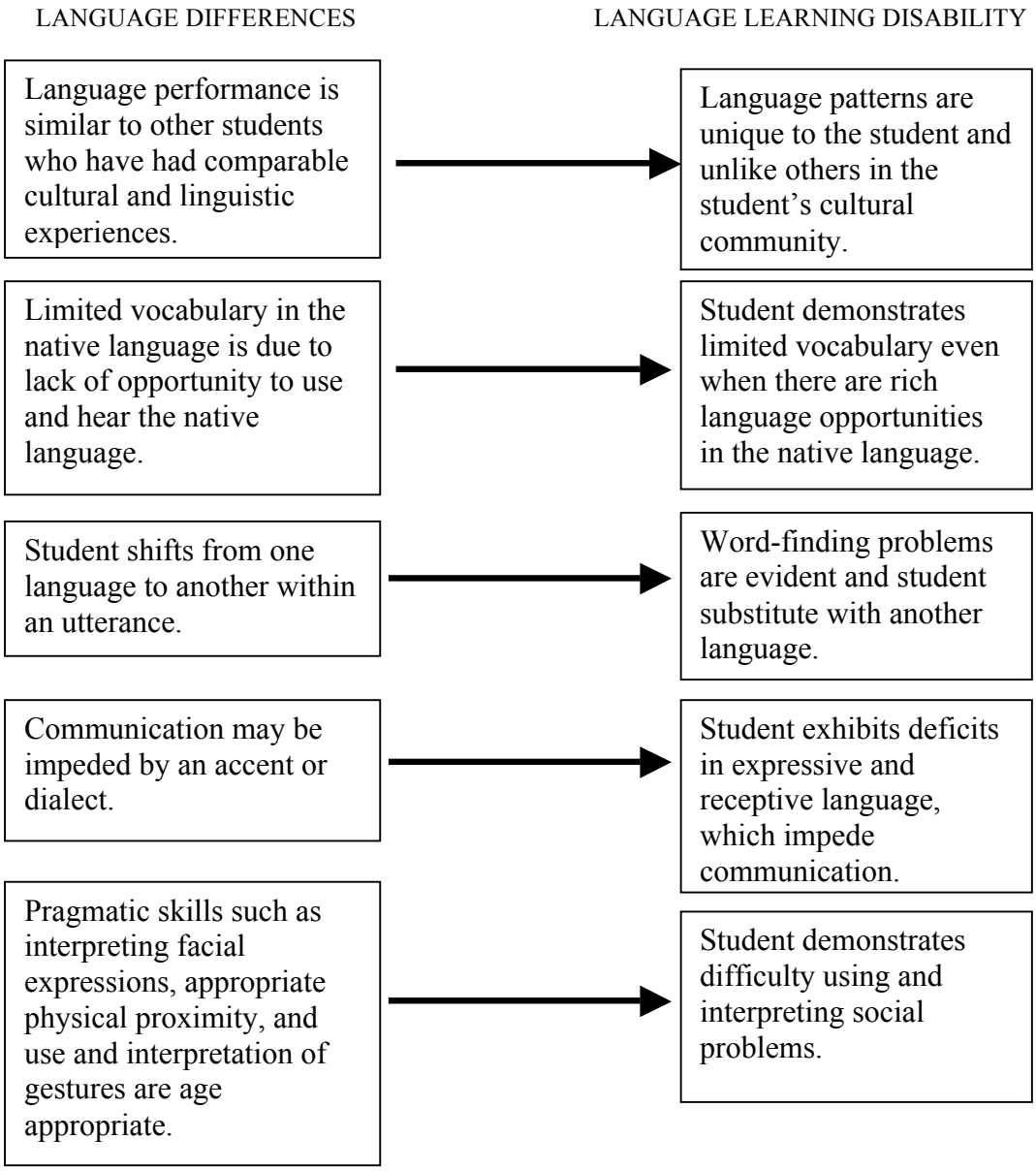

Figure 1. Causes of confusion in assessing students with language differences and/or language learning disabilities (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008, p. 195)

Limited knowledge, training, or experience of classroom teachers in teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners increases the challenge of referral to special education and the likelihood of inappropriate referrals to special education (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003). Garcia and Ortiz (1988) suggested that the inability to distinguish between learning differences and a learning disability results in the inappropriate referrals of language minority students to special education, which contributes to the disproportionate representation of these students in special education.

Statement of Problem

There is an increasing concern regarding inappropriate referrals of ELs to special education. The challenge lies primarily with the inability to distinguish between the characteristics of second language acquisition and learning disability. Klingner and Artiles (2006) have articulated that there is an alarming lack of research on this and related issues. They affirmed that more research is necessary on the referral and eligibility decision-making process. Another related area in need of more research is deciding on the accommodations or adaptations that are most helpful to second language learners prior to the referral to special education (Haager, 2007). While the literature has suggested that ELs are overrepresented in special education, it has also indicated that few studies have looked at the rationales of those who are giving the assessments to identify students, or those who are referring the students for testing (Lock & Layton, 2002). Case and Taylor (2005) suggested that the overrepresentation of ELs in special education is evidence of a need for a clearer understanding of the factors that educators should consider prior to referring ELs to special education. These are critical issues that need to be examined if we are to address the under-referral and over-referral of ELs in special

education and to identify those ELLs who are in need of specialized instruction (McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, & Leos, 2005).

Relevance of the Study

This research is important because it is predicted that the number of ELs nationwide will double by 2050 and it is "likely that every teacher will have ELs in [his or] her classroom at some time" (Meskill, 2005, p. 740). Currently, only three states require all teachers in preservice programs to have an understanding of how to teach ELLs effectively: California, Arizona, and Florida (Echevarria et al., 2009). In the *1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey in the U.S.*, 41.2% of teachers indicated they have taught or are teaching ELs, but only 12.5% have received eight or more credit hours of training in the past 3 years in how to work with or teach ELs (Berg, Petron, & Greybeck, 2012; Echevarria et al., 2009; Flynn & Hill, 2005). According to Berg et al. (2012), Darling-Hammond (2008) pointed out that a large number of teachers from exemplary teacher education programs who were surveyed rated themselves as "less well prepared" to work with ELs. There has been an overrepresentation and an underrepresentation of ELs in special education, and general education teachers need to have more knowledge about ELs in order to work effectively with these students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the identification and classification practices by third and fourth grade general education classroom teachers in the referral process to special education. I wanted to understand how classroom teachers distinguish between the developmental processes involved in ELA and evidence of a learning disability for referral of ELs to special education. For this study, I focused on Tier 1 and

Tier 2 of the Response to Intervention (RtI) model[2] in reading. What occurs in these tiers and what factors influence the general education teacher to recommend students to Tier 2 and from Tier 2 to Tier 3? This is an area of significant challenge for many teachers, which directly impacts their instructional practice, often leads to inappropriate referrals, and results in both an overrepresentation and under-representation of ELLs in special education. I examined how teachers distinguish between English language acquisition and a learning disability when providing interventions in Tier 1 and Tier 2 of the RtI process and when referring ELs to special education.

My purpose in focusing on the general education teachers' challenge to distinguish between English language acquisition (ELA) and learning disability (LD) when referring ELs to special education is to contribute to the scholarship on the general education teachers' decision-making process when referring ELs to special education.

Research Questions

The guiding questions for this research were:

1. How do general education teachers differentiate between English language acquisition challenges and learning disability needs when considering referral to special education?
2. What is the identification process used by third and fourth grade general education teachers to recommend English learners (ELs) for referral during the special education process?

[2] Response to Intervention (RtI) consists of three tiers. Tier 1—Research-based core instruction for all in the general education classroom, Tier 2—Intensive supplemental instruction for students who do not make adequate progress in Tier 1 and Tier 3—Individualized intensive instruction.

Overview of Conceptual Framework

This research is situated at the intersection of the special education referral process, ELA and LD. Giving attention to these three areas will help to shape the scholarship about factors that influence general education teachers' decisions during the referral process of ELs to special education. According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), making decisions or the ability to judge and judge well is critical to the teaching profession. The researchers described this as decisional capital. This is the capital that enables teachers "to make wise judgments in circumstances where there is no fixed rule or piece of incontrovertible evidence to guide them" (p. 94). They also pointed out that social capital, which is working with other colleagues and drawing on their insights and experiences, enhances decisional capital and is an integral component of decisional capital. I discuss the literature that framed the context in which general education teachers make decisions in the referral process of ELs.

Preceding the referral to special education, teachers must show that they have provided appropriate instruction for students. According to the *Individuals with Disability Education Act* (*IDEA*), when a student is suspected of having a learning disability, the disability cannot be the result of a lack of appropriate instruction in reading or math, environmental or economic disadvantage, or being of limited English proficiency. The Department of Education policy also affirms that a child should not be determined eligible for special education on the basis of limited English proficiency.

Disabilities within special education may be classified into two groups, commonly described as "objective and "subjective" (Gelb & Mitzokawa 1986) as well as

"social model" and "medical model" (Vallas, 2009). Blindness and deafness would be among the objective category or medical model, while specific learning disability (SLD), mental retardation (MR) (now classified as intellectual disability [ID]), and emotional disturbance (ED) are the common examples of the subjective category or social model (Gelb & Mizokawa, 1986; *Minorities in Special Education Briefing Report,* 2009; Vallas, 2009). Subjective disability or social diagnosis relies on the opinions and judgments of the individuals submitting the referral. In the case of subjective disability, students are typically identified during early school-age years and usually the referral is by a general or regular teacher and not by a medical professional. Such disabilities are not readily measurable and are based on more context-dependent criteria, such as behavior, intelligence, social skills, and communication abilities (Vallas, 2009). When assessments are recommended, several specialists work together to evaluate the student. Specialists may include school psychologist, special education expert, and speech-language pathologist (SLP). Some school teams may also include a reading specialist. Assessors often have difficulty in differentiating between the subjective disabilities or social diagnosis due to overlapping similarities in the characteristics. It was suggested in the *Minorities in Special Education Briefing Report* (2009) that when subjective rather than objective criteria are used to determine eligibility in special education, overrepresentation is concentrated among the following minority groups: Blacks and Hispanics, American Indians, and Native Alaskans.

Learning Disability (LD) is a complex category which can be inconsistent when considering its identification criteria. LD identification requires teachers to consider how students respond to scientific-based instruction and early intervention when placing this

label on a student (Case & Taylor, 2005). If the question is whether an EL has a learning disability, then it becomes more complicated. With ELs, the students' culture, native language, and literacy experience might not easily factor into the LD identification criteria. In addition, the stages that ELs pass through during the natural development of the second language may resemble the signs of LD (Case & Taylor, 2005). According to the literature, there are five stages of language acquisition. Given individual differences among students, the period of time it takes to pass through each stage may vary; in addition, language acquisition is an ongoing process and therefore the stages may overlap (Berg et al., 2012).

The first stage of language acquisition is the silent/receptive/pre-productive stage. At this stage, ELs are building their oral communication skills and their ability to infer meaning from context clues. They are primarily taking in language input. If they make any attempts to communicate, those are likely to be nonverbal. The next stage is early production; during this stage, students are continuing to build their communication skills. They may begin to communicate verbally using short phrases. During the third stage, speech emergence, ELs are able to communicate with simple sentences. They may ask simple conversational questions, which may or may not be grammatically correct. In the fourth stage, intermediate fluency, ELs are using more complex sentences in their speaking and writing. They now begin to think in English rather than translating from their native language. They are able to express their own thoughts and opinions. In the final stage, advanced fluency, the focus is now on reading, writing, and building academic language. Students at this stage are able to engage in non-cued conversations. There may be some gaps in the language with using or understanding idioms.

The *2009 Minorities in Special Education Briefing Report* stated that the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) has conducted compliance reviews and received numerous complaints regarding special education and LEP students (SpEdLEP) throughout the years. In a compliance review, the OCR documents several compliance concerns related to SpEdLEP students:

- lack of consistent affirmative steps to address language barriers;
- referrals for special education testing that did not take the LEP student's language and culture into account;
- special education eligibility decisions were based on a student's limited English proficiency; and
- lack of meaningful communication with parents.

OCR has addressed the above concerns through voluntary resolution agreements with the school districts to address these concerns. Additionally, *ESSA*, like *NCLB*, requires states and local agencies to provide language instruction programs that are based on scientific research and implemented by highly qualified teachers. The term *highly qualified teachers* was defined by NCLB as holding a bachelor's degree, having full state certification, and demonstrating competence in the core academic subject they teach.

The risk of disproportional identification of ELs in special education is largely believed to be a result of the complications in differentiating between learning disability and limited English proficiency (Shifrer, Muller, & Callahan, 2010). Drawing on the above literature highlights some key concepts and ideas that teachers are expected to be mindful of during the referral process.

Definitions of Key Terms

Several key terms require explanation to ensure a clear understanding of how they are used in the context of this study. The terms include *specific learning disability* (SLD), *learning differences*, *language acquisition*, *English Learners*, *English to Speakers of Other Languages* (ESOL), and *culture*.

Specific Learning Disability (SLD) and *Learning Differences.* Specific learning disability (SLD) is commonly referred to as learning disability (LD), and both terms are used interchangeably throughout this study. The definition of learning disability has met with controversy because of the inconsistent identification criteria (Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, Smith, & Leal, 2002). Educators have primarily referred to the definition from the *Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA)* with a reference to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR)*. *IDEA* continues to use the original definition first enacted as Public Law (PL) 94-142 in 1977. The general definition means:

> A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.
>
> Disorders not included: Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. [34 CFR §300.8(c)(10)]

Learning disability is a complex category that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. *The DSM-IV-TR* outlines six classifications within the LD category: Reading Disorder (Dyslexia), Mathematics Disorder (Dyscalcula), Disorder of Written Expression (Dysgraphia), Expressive

Language Disorder, Mixed Receptive-Expressive Language Disorder, and Phonological Disorder. The operational definition usually focuses on the aptitude-achievement discrepancy. However, the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA required states to adopt a new criterion for identifying specific learning disability. It stated that states must not require the discrepancy model to be used to identify a student with LD. The identification criteria place greater reliance on practice-based data. LD determination has been expanded and states are required to adhere to the following criteria:

- must not require the use of a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement in determining whether a child has a specific learning disability;
- must permit local educational agencies (LEAs) to use a process based on the child's response to scientific, research-based intervention; and
- may permit the use of other alternative research-based procedures for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability.

Schools must provide research-based interventions, monitor students' progress, and analyze students' performance to determine the presence of a learning disability.

Learning Differences. Learning disability and learning differences are sometimes used interchangeably. However, in this study, learning differences look at the fact that individuals learn differently. The unique ways in which an individual acquires, processes, integrates, and utilizes knowledge and skills reflect a learning difference (Klingner, Hoover, & Baca, 2008). Learning difference may result from cultural and linguistic factors. The difference between learning disability and learning difference is that for learning disability, there is an interference with one's learning regardless of the

instructional methods used. For learning differences, when students receive appropriate instruction that supports their learning, they are likely to show progress. Students may fall into one or more than one category, which impacts how they learn. The students' learning style might not match the conventional style of teaching. Therefore, teachers may be required to utilize various teaching modalities to meet students' needs.

Language Acquisition. Language acquisition is the ability to acquire and comprehend language as well as the capacity to use language. Second language acquisition refers to the acquisition of additional languages (Orosco, Schonewise, Onis, Klingner, & Hoover, 2008). The term *English as a Second Language (ESL)* refers to the acquisition of English as a non-native language (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). For this study, I used English language acquisition (ELA) to describe the process of acquiring English as an additional language within the academic setting. Scholars have made a distinction between social language and academic language. Social language is described as simple, contextual, and usually supported by physical cues such as facial gestures and body movement, whereas academic language is often more complex, specialized, and abstract (Zacarian, 2011). Students are required to use and understand academic language in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and learning. Language acquisition is a complex process that is influenced by several factors such as the sociocultural environment, proficiency and literacy skills in the first language, the first language and its similarities and differences to the additional language(s) being learned, attitudes, motivation, age, personalities, and perception of native language compared to English language (Klingner et al., 2008). These are some of the factors that educators and those involved in the referral process must consider when referring students to special education.

*English Learners***.** English Learners (ELs), previously known as English Language Learners (ELLs) refer to students who speak a language other than English as their first or home language and require instructional support to acquire the general education curriculum; these students are not yet proficient in English (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Klingner et al., 2008). With the passage of the *ESSA* of 2015, ELL was replaced with the term *English Learner* (EL). Peregoy and Boyle (2008) defined language proficiency as "the ability to use language effectively and appropriately throughout the range of social, personal, school, and work situations required for daily living in a given society" (p. 34). They stated that as educators we want our students to be competent in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Students' language proficiency is usually determined by standardized English language proficiency tests.

Federal law requires English language proficiency tests address listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). The World-class Instructional Design and Assessment, Accessing Comprehension and Communication in English (WIDA-ACCESS) Placement Test (W-APT) is one of the most commonly used tests. Approximately 15 states use the W-APT to determine students' English language proficiency and initial placement in language support programs. WIDA also has a test that measures students' annual gains in English language proficiency (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). For my own discussion, I use the term *EL*. Other researchers have used other terms such as *Limited English Proficient* (LEP) and *language minority students*. LEP is frequently used in government documents.

All English learners are not alike. There are four EL subgroups: newly arrived students with adequate formal schooling, newly arrived students with limited formal

schooling, students exposed to two languages simultaneously, and long-term ELs. Newly arrived ELs are described as those students who have been in the country for less than 5 years. They possessed strong academic backgrounds before coming to the United States and started school and are usually literate in their native language. These students demonstrate the greatest potential to attain educational success if they receive appropriate instruction in English language and content-specific academic areas (Echevarria et al., 2008; Freeman & Freeman, 2003). The second group of ELs, newly arrived learners with limited formal schooling, are also recent arrivals with less than 5 years in the United States but have had interrupted or limited schooling. They have weak literacy skills in their native language, are below grade level in their academic performance, and are at higher risk for academic failure (Echevarria et al., 2008; Freeman & Freeman, 2003). The third group is students exposed to two languages simultaneously; they were born or have grown up in the United States but were raised in households where another language other than English is spoken. They speak both native and second language but have not developed academic literacy in either. The final category is long-term English learners; these students have been in the United States for 7 or more years, demonstrate below grade-level performance in reading and writing, may perform adequately in class but score low on tests, and have received ESL classes or bilingual support but continue to require substantial ongoing language and literacy support (Echevarria et al., 2008; Freeman & Freeman, 2003). Since the Hispanic population is now the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the United States (*Education Week, 2012)* and their enrollment in schools have increased significantly (3 million to 4.5 million) between 1976 and 2000 (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006), I chose to focus on Hispanic ELs for this study.

*English to Speakers of Other Languages***.** English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is often used interchangeably with English as a Second Language (ESL). Both terms are very similar and, as related to teaching, the goal is teaching English to speakers of other languages. Beginning in the 2007-2008 academic year, every state in the United States offered a form of ESOL teacher credentialing or licensure. Each state is responsible for developing and monitoring K-12 ESOL certification. The linguistic knowledge required of these teachers to teach ELs is "complex and multifaceted" (Reeves, 2010, p. 360), namely knowledge of the nature, structure, usage of English, and—very importantly—"how to make English Learnable for students" (p. 360). In the school district where this present study took place, the term *ESOL* is used; therefore, I use ESOL throughout my discussion.

Culture. The term culture has been used in many different ways throughout our history. Trueba, Guthrie, and Au (1981) described culture as "a form of communication with learned and shared, explicit and implicit rules for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting …. What people talk about and are specific about, such as traditional customs and laws, constitutes their overt or explicit culture. What they take for granted, or what exist beyond conscious awareness, is their implicit culture" (pp. 4-5). In this study culture is referred to a set of attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviors shared by ELs and their families who are from various cultural experiences (Sternberg, 2007) specifically as it related to their communication and interaction with American English-speaking educators and school system.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this review, I discuss the research and theory that frame the issues of general education teachers' referral of ELs to special education. There is a substantial knowledge base about the identification, assessment, and intervention of and for learning disability (LD) in monolingual native-speaking students; therefore, I drew from this knowledge base to inform the general education referral of ELs to special education. I begin by addressing the political initiatives that have shaped procedures and practices for the referral, assessment, and identification of ELs. I then discuss the literature on over- and underrepresentation in special education, referrals, teacher challenges and preparation, instructional practices for ELs, response to intervention (RtI), and students' challenges. I believe there is a need to understand the challenges facing students as this may impact their availability to learn as well as their learning style. Examining some of the sources of academic difficulties many of these students are facing will also speak to the context in which they are learning. I believe it is of paramount importance to discuss the challenges and background of students in order to frame the critical need of identifying instructional practices that work as well as to recognize similarities and differences between and among students.

Scope and Methodology for Selecting Articles

In this review of literature, I focus on the referral of ELs to special education, distinguishing between ELA and LD as well as ELs' response to intervention. Selecting articles for this review involved choosing research from various electronic databases,

such as JSTOR, ERIC, and SAGE. I applied the following strategy described by Creswell (2003):

Step 1: Identify keywords (e.g., Hispanic, special education, intervention, referral, culturally relevant pedagogy).

Step 2: Search for these and combinations of these keywords in computerized databases (e.g., Education Research Information Center, PsychINFO).

Step 3: Obtain copies of articles or books from the search.

Step 4: Identify articles and books that are useful and relevant (i.e., include articles that tie into the broad themes of the literature review).

Step 5: Sort these articles into broad theme categories.

Step 6: Summarize articles and organize themes and concepts.

Step 7: Assemble the literature review by broad theme and important concepts and identify areas for further research.

Policy, Case Law, and Referrals

Both Federal policy and case law have shaped the procedures and practices for referring, assessing, identifying, and servicing ELs in special education. In this section, I identify some of the case laws and policies specific to ELs as they speak to how policy impacts teachers' practices and the referral process.

***Civil Rights Act* (1964).** According to the *Civil Rights Act*, it is a violation to exclude children from effective participation in school because they cannot understand English. This impacts classroom practices based on the following requirements:

- take steps in school districts to rectify the child's language "deficiencies";
- avoid labeling students as mentally retarded based on criteria that reflect their English language proficiency;
- ensure tracking systems/groupings are not "dead ends"; and
- notify minority parents of school activities.

***Diana vs. State Board of Education* (1970)**. The awareness of the overrepresentation of minorities and disadvantaged students in special education led to litigation regarding the use of linguistically or culturally biased assessment procedures to determine student eligibility for special education. The lawsuit, *Diana vs. State Board of Education* in California, later influenced policy decisions, specifically that a student cannot be identified as mentally retarded based on an IQ test administered in English. Students must be assessed in their first language and in English or use nonverbal IQ tests. In addition, culturally biased items must be eliminated from tests used.

***Individuals with Disability Education Act* (1975)**. The *IDEA* first enacted in 1975 was previously known as the federal special education law. Several amendments have been made since then that speak directly to the referral, assessments, and identification of ELs. This law acknowledged that studies have shown discrepancies in the referral and placement of Limited English Proficient children in special education. I outline the statute requirements according to the amendments.

The 1997 Amendments to *IDEA* stated that ELs are not eligible for services if their learning problems are primarily the result of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. The statute requires:

- assessments and other evaluation materials be administered in the child's native language, unless it is not feasible to do so [P.L. 108-446 §614(b)(3)(A)(ii)];
- assessments must be "used for the purposes for which that assessments or measures are valid and reliable" [P.L. 108-446 §614(b)(3)(A)(iii)]; and
- assessments must be "administered by trained and knowledgeable personnel" [P.L. 108-446 §614(b)(3)(A)(iv)].

The 2004 amendments required states to provide annual data on "the number and percentage of children with disabilities by…limited English proficiency status…" [P.L. 108-446 §618(a)(1)(A)]. Another 2004 amendment included the exclusionary rule, which states that "in making a determination of eligibility…a child shall not be determined to be a child with a disability if the determinant factor for such a determination is…limited English proficiency" [P.L. 108-446 §614(b)(5)(C)].

The *IDEA* also requires that in order to ensure the underachievement in a child suspected of having a specific learning disability is not due to a lack of appropriate instruction in reading or math, the school must include the following as part of the child's evaluation:

- data that demonstrate that prior to, or as a part of, the referral process, the child was provided appropriate instruction in regular education settings, delivered by qualified personnel; and
- data-based documentation of repeated assessments of achievement at reasonable intervals, reflecting formal assessment of student progress during instruction, which was provided to the child's parents.

The above cases and federal policies outline several requirements that address educational practices and procedures for the referral, assessment, and placement of ELLs in special education. Given the policies in place, the overrepresentation of ELs in special education continues to be a long-standing issue. It would appear that the laws designed to protect these students have failed (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002); the *IDEA* of 2004 acknowledged the studies that have shown discrepancy in the referral and placement of LEP students and have taken steps to implement change. For example, the policy does not require states to use the discrepancy model to identify students with a learning disability but rather allows for the use of RtI. The policy also requires that students be given an opportunity to receive appropriate instruction and consider the student's environmental, cultural, or economic status when making a determination for special education services.

Over-/Underrepresentations in Special Education

Inappropriate special education placement is a major educational policy concern (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). There is both an overrepresentation as well as an underrepresentation of ELLs in special education depending on the state and district (Klingner & Artiles, 2006). Overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of racial or ethnic groups of students in special education programs is higher than that in the general school population. Underrepresentation occurs when students with disabilities are not identified to receive appropriate services. Samson and Lesaux (2008) stated that the disproportionate representation is a reflection of educators' difficulties in distinguishing between limited language proficiency, LD, and an inadequate opportunity to learn. Several researchers (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005; Johnson, Lessem,

Bergquist, Charmichael, & Whitten, 2002; Echevarria et al., 2009; Samson & Lesaux, 2009) have argued that there is a disproportionate representation of minority students in special education, particularly in the high-incidence disability categories, such as LD, also referred to as specific learning disability (SLD) and speech and language disorders.

Underrepresentation takes place when educators attempt to guard against inappropriate placement in special education. Teachers may delay referring language minority students to special education because they believe that the students' academic difficulties are a result of their limited English proficiency. Deliberately delaying special education assessments or intervention may lead to unintended consequences of preventing intervention for students who are in need of services (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Some researchers who have discussed the under-representation of ELs in special education have argued that students who have legitimate disabilities are not receiving the appropriate services (Harry, Klingner, Sturges, & Moore, 2002; Olson, 1991; Ortiz & Kushner, 1997). In 1998, the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the OCR put forward their concerns regarding disproportionate representation of minority students: students might not be receiving services or receiving services that do not meet their needs; students might be inappropriately labeled or misclassified; or students placed in special education classes may be a form of discrimination (Burnette, 1998).

In the case of overrepresentation, Guiberson (2009) contended that the overrepresentation of Hispanics identified as eligible for special education services is not a national trend but rather varies across states and school districts. Samson and Lesaux (2009) produced a national overview of ELs with disability for the school year 2005-2006. In this overview, 4,985,120 students were classified as EL; of this number, 490,949

ELs were served by the *IDEA.* The number of all students served by the *IDEA* was 6,089,529. However, as we continue to look at states and school districts and the groups represented within special education, we can see a clear concern over the overrepresentation of minority groups.

The size of EL populations in school districts seems to be a contributing factor to the overrepresentation of ELs in special education. However, there seems to be a contradiction in whether overrepresentation is the result of a large population size or a small population of Hispanics. Keller-Allen (2006) presented data from Zehler et al. (2003) which stated that "districts with smaller LEP student population (99 or fewer LEP students) identify on average 15.8% of their LEP students for special education services, while districts with 100 or more LEP students identify on average 9.1% of their LEP students for special education" (p. 6). This suggested that there is a concern in districts with a small population of ELs. According to Zamora's (2007) argument, districts with a smaller population of ELs may have less capacity to distinguish between low academic performance as a result of linguistic barriers and poor performance caused by learning disabilities. On the other hand, the overrepresentation of ELs identified as eligible for special education services is said to be primarily a concern among specific districts with a large population of Els, and often these students are identified as limited proficient in their primary and secondary language (Artiles & Klingner, 2006). For example, in a study by Ortiz and Yates (1983) conducted in Texas, Hispanic students identified as learning disabled were overrepresented by more than 300%. It is unclear whether overrepresentation is a concern where there is a large population of Hispanics or a small population. Other factors that might be associated with overrepresentation of ELs in

particular districts are grade level and limited language proficiency in students' native language or English language and the availability of language support programs.

According to several researchers (Garcia, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008; Haager, 2007; Samson & Lesaux, 2009), disproportionate representation raises questions and concerns. Haager described the overrepresentation of minorities, especially language minority students in special education, as a "nagging concern in the field" (p. 214). Samson and Lesaux posited that in addition to the overrepresentation of language minority students in special education, there is a diagnostic confusion about how to classify or identify a learning disability. This has implications for the proportion of language minority students identified in this disability category.

Keller-Allen (2006) articulated that a study by Artiles (2002) found that ELs were overrepresented in several categories of disability in upper elementary and secondary grades: learning disability, mental retardation, and speech and language impairment. Echevarria et al. (2009) put forward that according to the Office of Special Education Programs (2002), more than 17% of Hispanic students are identified as LD, even though they account for only about 12-13% of the population. Meanwhile, 61% of White students have LD but account for 75% of the population.

Specific learning disability has been noted to be the highest disability category (NCES, 2012; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, & McGue, 1982), despite the decline in the number of children and youth served under the *IDEA* each year from 2005-2006 through 2009-2010 (NCES, 2012). In 2005-2006, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) reported specific learning disability to be 55% of all students with disabilities. Other categories include mental retardation (8%), emotional disturbance (2%), and developmental delay

(2%). In 2009-2010, approximately 38% of all children and youth receiving special education services were identified with a specific learning disability, 22% had speech and language impairment, and 11% had other health impairment. Other disabilities such as emotional disturbance, intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbance, developmental delay, and autism each accounted for 6-7% of children and youth served under the *IDEA*. Children and youth identified with multiple disabilities, hearing impairments, orthopedic impairments, and visual impairments, traumatic brain injury, and deaf blindness each accounted for 2% or less of children served under the *IDEA* (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2009).

Taking a closer look at the LD category showed that the percentage of Hispanic students identified as LD was higher than the percentage of Hispanics receiving special education services across all disability categories (Case & Taylor, 2005). Klingner and Artiles (2006) put forward that in a discussion about the disproportionate placement of Hispanics in the LD category, the National Research Council panel stated the following:

> The nationally aggregated data have been interpreted to suggest no overrepresentation of either black or Hispanics students in LD. But state-level data tell a more complex story…for Hispanic students, the risk index ranges from 2.43 in Georgia to 8.93 in Delaware. Clearly there is an overrepresentation for these two minorities in the LD category in some states. (Donovan & Cross, 2002, p. 67)

The OCR also put forward that among ELs in special education, 66% were males, compared to 34% females. There also seemed to be both an overrepresentation and an underrepresentation of language minority students at different grade levels, according to Samson and Lesaux (2009). These researchers reviewed a study by Park (2007) finding that of language minority Kindergarteners in special education, 85% were coded as having a speech impairment, whereas 15% were identified as LD. By the third grade, it

was noted that only 15% of the children had a speech impairment as a disability, and 69% were identified as LD. Other researchers (Dunn, Cole, & Estrada, 2009; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999) have posited that African American boys were more likely to be identified with mental retardation and severe emotional disturbance. Some researchers (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; Bowles & Gints, 1976; Hibel & Jasper, 2012) have asserted that the unequal rates of special education placement might be attributed to the education system reinforcing and rewarding the cultural characteristics of the dominant group. The disproportionality of the LD label also raises concern about the validity and reliability of the diagnosis and suggests that placement in special education may be discriminatory (Shifrer et al., 2010).

Recent work dispute the concerns of overrepresentation of minorities and instead suggest an underidentification of minority children as having disabilities, and therefore are less likely to receive special education services (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier & Maczuga, 2017). According to Morgan et al. (2017), the previous works that indicated an overrepresentation are methodologically flawed. They put forward that prior work did not control for strong confounds such as individual-level academic achievement and family-level economic disadvantage, which "may explain minority children's initially observed overrepresentation in special education" (p. 306). Morgan et al. (2017) further explicated that when recent works controlled "for children's academic achievement and other confounds repeatedly fails to find evidence of overidenfication based on race and ethnicity" (p. 306). They pointed out however, that in these findings minority children were less likely to be identified as disabled in need of special education services than similar white children. In addition, it was noted that underidentification was observed

"during elementary, middle, and high school grades (Morgan et al., 2015; Shifrer, Muller, & Callahan, 2011); for special education generally (Hibel et al. 2010); and for specific disability conditions, including specific learning disability (SLD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), emotional disturbance (ED), intellectual disabilities (ID), and speech or language impairments (SLI) (Hibel et al., 2010; Morgan et al., 2015; Morgan, Hammer, et al., 2016; Morgan, Hillemeier, Farkas, & Maczuga, 2014; Morgan, Staff, Hillemeier, Farkas, & Maczuga, 2013)" (p. 306).

These controversial new findings have been described as "simplistic" and are seen as unsubstantiated. According to Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen and Harry (2016) "the patterns of over- and underrepresentation in special education are highly complex" (p. 223) and to conclude that the new findings of racial/ethnic overrepresentation in special education are primarily or entirely due to disadvantages associated with poverty is problematic. They noted previous research have found a "complex relationship between poverty and over- and underrepresentation, depending on the disability category, the race of students, and the context in which the identification data are examined" (p. 222). Therefore, to only identify disproportionate representation as solely underrepresentation is disconcerting. They also pointed out that there were concerns regarding the accuracy and validity of the data set used by Morgan and colleagues (2015).

The recurrent debate regarding the over- and underrepresentation of minority students in special education has given rise to several arguments related to race/ethnicity, poverty, fairness of testing etc. However, Skiba et al. (2016) calls for an "understanding of the very real and consequential problem of the disproportionate representation of the marginalized groups in special education" (p. 224). It is important to give focus to the

instructional influence on student learning, the classroom management and essentially the decision-making process of the referring teacher. When teachers are provided with collaborative support to problem-solve, make decisions about early interventions for the students in the general education classroom, assess and provide appropriate instruction it can reduce the odds of special education referral and ultimately placement in special education (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006).

EL Referrals to Special Education

Referring ELs to special education has been questionable as teachers are often unable to identify whether students are experiencing difficulty as a result of comprehension struggles or limited English language (Gersten, 1996). When teachers have little or no training or experience with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners, the likelihood of inappropriate referrals to special education increases (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003).

The general education teacher plays a key role in the referral to identification process to special education. It is their reasoning that will often encourage or deter the referral of a student to special education (Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 1998). According to Dunn (2006), who conducted a qualitative study with 15 general education teachers in a Southern Ontario school, teachers used five main referral criteria: (a) inattentiveness, (b) needing assistance, (c) inability to apply the presented information, (d) inability to complete tasks, and (e) students' "look" (such that a student's demeanor/comportment projected a disposition or attitude of not wanting to learn) (Dunn et al., 2009, p. 28). According to the results of this study, inattention and aptitude accounted

for 50% of the common reasons for teachers' referral (Dunn et al., 2009). The survey items addressed culture, ethnicity, and race; one item addressed ELs.

According to Harry and Anderson (1994), the referral process for CLD learners may begin with "any behavior that causes discomfort for a classroom teacher" (p. 94). A student's behavior that may look different or be seen as bothersome for the teacher may warrant a referral. However, a student's behavior can be a manifestation of other underlying concerns such as academic frustration or student misunderstandings. Klingner et al. (2006) made reference to Harry and Klingner, who observed literacy classrooms and found that many teachers working with beginning-level English proficiency students almost exclusively provided verbal explanations with no forms of scaffolding during instruction. When students did not understand, teachers were likely to scold students for "not listening" or "not paying attention." It was observed that one teacher even referred some of her students to the special education team, with concerns of learning disability, mental retardation, or emotional/behavioral disorder. It is critical that teachers be knowledgeable about their students. The success of their instructional practice is dependent on their knowledge base and their instructional decisions.

As Echevarria et al. (2009) stated, "teachers have a tremendous impact on who is referred and who is not" (p. 196). Previous research (Weishaar, Weishaar, & Budt, 2002; Ysseldyke, 2001) suggested that classroom teachers are highly accurate in referring students who were later identified with a disability. Accuracy is determined by the number of students who were referred and later determined to be eligible for special education. According to Gottlieb and Weinberg (1999), while the referral of a classroom teacher does not automatically result in a special education placement, the probability

that a child referred to special education will be determined eligible for special education services is substantial. Gottlieb and Weinberg found that 88% of students referred by their teachers were found eligible for special education services. The referral-to-placement process puts classroom teachers at the frontline of the process; they are the ones who usually initiate the referral to special education, while frequently school psychologists confirm the teachers' referral. This pattern of events has been labeled confirmation bias (Podell & Soodak, 1993).

Guiberson (2009) discussed a study by Hosp and Reschly (2003) on referrals to special education, which found that for every 106 Hispanic students referred to special education, 100 European American students were referred. The study suggested that Hispanic students (89) qualified less often than did European American students (100). He stated that this overreferral might be a result of teachers' difficulty in understanding Hispanic students' culture and language differences.

In an *Education Week* (2012) article titled "Evaluating ELLs for Special Needs a Challenge," Maxwell and Shah (2012) shared that a kindergarten teacher in a San Diego public school referred six of her students, all of whom were EL students, to be evaluated for special education services. It turned out that none of the students needed special education services; all those who were referred needed eyeglasses and one needed a hearing aid. Maxwell and Shah quoted Sonia Picos, a special education program manager in San Diego, who suggested, "Special education had become the default intervention" (p. 12).

According to the article, San Diego had "a history of lopsided referrals of English-learners to special education" (p. 12) and, as a result, had to develop a step-by-

step process to ensure that referrals, which included interventions and explanations for students' low performance, were carefully examined. Maxwell and Shah (2012) pointed out that accurately identifying EL students who also need special education services has been an ongoing problem for educators. They noted that educators and researchers have asserted that the heart of the problem is distinguishing between whether students are struggling with acquiring the English language or having a disability impeding their progress.

Case and Taylor (2005) pointed out that a student who is learning a second language goes through a process with specific stages that may resemble signs of learning disability. Some of these signs include pronunciation of words that may be seen in the form of omissions, substitutions, and additions. Other common characteristics between ELs and students with a learning disability include difficulties with syntax, such as negation, word order, and mood. These behaviors may prompt general education teachers to refer students for assessments to determine eligibility for special education services. According to Case and Taylor, the literature on this subject fails to provide sufficient information about what a teacher should know about second language acquisition before making a referral to special education. They asserted that more research needs to be done "to unravel the knots surrounding language difference or disability" (p. 130).

Layton and Lock (2002) argued that there is an overidentification of students with linguistic and cultural differences for special education services. Other researchers have suggested there is an overrepresentation and an underrepresentation of linguistically diverse groups in special education, which is the result of inappropriate instruction (Linan-Thompson, Cirino, & Vaughn, 2007). A study of the referral process of 46

Hispanic LEP students in a New York City public school found that the most common reason for referral was largely academic deficits; 73% of the students were classified as LD and 15% as Speech Impaired (Rodriguez & Carrasquillo, 1997). However, it was found that few interventions were tried with the students prior to special education referral, even though 63% of the students had been in the United States for less than 3 years (Rodriguez & Carrasquillo, 1997). In addition, a review of the students' records suggested that no interventions had been tried with 43% of the students. The authors concluded that ELL overrepresentation in special education can be reduced by using a pre-referral process.

In another study of referred K-12 Hispanic students from four large urban school districts (n = 1,319), Rueda and Mercer (1985) found that the majority of students were referred for academic concerns, primarily reading problems. The referrals were mostly for the students in the early grades, who were males and had a Spanish language background. The findings indicated that only one fifth of the students received ESL or bilingual classes prior to the referral, but 63% of the students were determined eligible for special education services as LD.

There is an argument that there is no harm in placing language minority students at risk for failing into special education to receive individualized support. However, it was found that after years of special education services, Hispanic students classified as LD regressed (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988). The students' verbal and performance IQ scores fell and their achievement scores remained the same when compared to their initial scores upon their entry into special education. Garcia and Ortiz concluded that neither regular education nor special education programs provided effective academic supports to meet the needs of

these language minority students. In addition, inappropriate placement into special education caused increased cost to the education system as a whole. “The federal government spends 90% more to educate a child in special education than in a mainstream setting” (Hibel & Jasper, 2012, p. 504). Furthermore, in accordance with federal law, the school is required to provide all students with a free, appropriate public education (FAPE), “identifying students with disabilities and inappropriately placing them into special education represents a different yet no less significant example of equal opportunity denial” (p. 505).

In this study, I examined the referral process, specifically how general education teachers are adapting their instruction to support ELA students prior to the referral to special education. In a survey instrument that Reeves (2006) used to examine secondary teachers’ attitudes and perceptions of EL inclusion, the questions within the survey addressed four essential themes:

1. What are teacher attitudes toward EL inclusion in mainstream classes?
2. What are teacher attitudes toward the modification of class work for ELs?
3. What are teacher attitudes toward ESL professional development?
4. What are teacher perceptions of second language acquisition processes?

I built on this research to explore how the above factors might influence general education teachers’ decisions to refer ELs to special education. One of the biggest challenges for general education teachers is figuring out whether students’ struggles are attributed to second language acquisition processes. Few teachers within the general education mainstream classroom have advanced degrees in second language education, thereby resulting in many misconceptions about second language learners. Several factors

contribute to these misconceptions, including a lack of understanding that ELs' academic success is a negotiation between what students bring to the classroom and what they are offered by the schools. The lack of preparation and teachers' confusion about linguistic and literacy development in the students' second language tends to lead to a deficit view of ELs' learning potential (Klingner, Schonewise, Onis, Mendez Barletta, & Hoover, 2008). Teachers need to understand the language acquisition process, which may alleviate many misconceptions about ELs. Klingner et al. outlined several misconceptions and realities about ELs (see Table 1).

Some of the misconceptions listed above can affect the way classroom teachers view ELLs and how they provide instruction. It can limit the extent to which ELLs receive appropriate instruction and can possibly lead to inappropriate referrals to special education (Klingner et al., 2008).

This situation calls for attention, given the significant increase in the EL population in U.S. classrooms and the overrepresentation and underrepresentation that are occurring. Dantas (2007) referenced Darling-Hammond (2005), who stated that "preparing accomplished teachers who can effectively teach a wide array of learners to a high standard is essential to economic and political survivals" (p. 79). Appropriate

Table 1

Misconceptions and Realities (Klingner et al., 2008)

Misconceptions	Realities
Bilingualism means equal proficiency in both languages.	Bilingualism rarely means equal proficiency in both languages- ELs' background and linguistic proficiencies in the native language and English vary.
Semilingualism is a valid concept and non-non-classifications are usual categories.	Semilingualism and non-categories are the results of tests that do not measure the range and depth of students' language proficiencies.
Native language assessments present a clear picture of linguistic proficiency.	Commonly native language proficiency assessments provide a limited view of ELs' oral language proficiency.
Literacy instructional framework developed for monolingual students are appropriate to developing ELs' literacy skills in their native or second language.	Literacy instruction in a second language differs in key ways from native language instruction; a different framework is needed.
The more time students spend receiving English instruction, the faster they will learn it.	Students who receive some native language instruction achieve at higher level in English than students who do not receive any native language instruction.
All ELs learn English in the same way at about the same rate.	The length of time it takes students to acquire English varies a great deal, from 4 to 7 years or more. There are many different variables that affect the language acquisition process.
English language learners acquire English in the same way they acquire their first language, through exposure and interactions with others.	Exposure to English and interactions with others are important, but they are not enough to provide the support ELs' need to be able to participate fully in classroom learning and achieve to their potential; explicit instruction at an appropriate level helps.
Errors are problematic and should be avoided.	Errors are a positive sign that the student is making progress and are a necessary aspect of second language acquisition. Errors provide clues about a student's interlanguage.

instruction is a right for all students; for students suspected of having a learning disability, it becomes even more important because teachers are required to show evidence of instruction in order to avoid inappropriate referral and placement of students.

Teacher Challenges and Preparation

The onus is on the classroom teacher to provide appropriate instruction that meets the students' linguistic and cultural needs, conduct formal or informal class assessments, document data, and interpret results. It is primarily the classroom teacher's documentation of intervention as well as students' academic progress and difficulties that will determine referral to special education. Gersten (1999) discussed the art of teaching much like a balancing act. The general education teacher is continuously trying to meet the needs of every student, whether he or she is on grade level (OGL), below grade level (BGL), above grade level (AGL), or talented and gifted (TAG). Challenging those who need to be challenged but not frustrating them and helping those who need help the most is a constant demand while also always including all students in engaging instruction.

Many teachers have been overwhelmed by the complexities of the everyday difficulties they encounter, especially teachers working in urban schools serving minority students (Gersten, Darch, Davis, & George, 1991). Slavin and Cheung (2005) asked the same question many teachers are asking: "When a child enters kindergarten or first grade with limited proficiency in English…how can the child expect to learn the skills and content taught in the early grades while he or she is learning English?" (p. 249). The controversial debate over whether a child should be placed in a bilingual setting or an English immersion setting involves questions that policymakers, researchers, and even educators are asking; however, the important question at this moment is: What are the

instructional practices that work for ELs and how do we provide appropriate instruction for Els?

Quinn (2001) asserted that teachers rarely receive courses or even lessons in teaching linguistically and culturally diverse students. According to Knapp (1975), "college courses in linguistics are seldom required of teachers and, if prescribed, are seldom geared to the language and reading differences of minority groups" (p. 232). Quinn further asserted that in the "sea of pedagogy, theory, and subject area and assessment instruction, cultural education has been lost in many pre-service teacher education programs" (p. 45). However, Tellez (2005) put forward that there has been a reform effort in teacher education programs known as multicultural teacher education, which many teacher education programs have embraced. Furthermore, the national accreditation agency for teacher education enacted standards for preparing teachers for diverse students (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2008). Nonetheless, Tellez suggested that even with these changes, the academic achievement of Latinos remains troubling, but he conveyed his belief that teacher education cannot be held solely responsible for students' failure. Not everyone shares Tellez's belief. A number of proposals have been made to change how teachers are prepared in light of questions about teacher effectiveness (Imig, Wiseman, & Imig, 2011). The criticism directed toward college-/university-based teacher preparation has been intense (Coble, 2011). The criticism has escalated over the years for three main reasons, according to Coble (2011):

> First, the well- being of the nation's economy is seen as increasingly and vitally linked to developments in the sciences, mathematics and technology. Second, repeated research studies have shown that the quality of the teacher is, not surprisingly, the number one in- school causal factor related to student

> achievement (Sanders and Rivers, 1996). Third, the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act greatly increased the focus on accountability for student results regardless of race, ethnicity, and past performance. (p. 3)

As a result of the criticisms, alternate routes of preparing teachers have become very popular. In the case of minority teachers, specifically Hispanics, the alternate routes are bringing more Hispanics into the teaching profession. Hispanics are the fastest-growing group entering teaching through alternative certification (Feistritzer, 2011). Many researchers have agreed that it is important we understand how to prepare teachers to meet the challenges they will encounter as they enter the teaching field, especially in urban schools (Boyd, Grossman, Laukford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2009). Grossman, Hammerness, and McDonald (2009) suggested a set of core practices in preparing new teachers. Included in the core practice is learning about student learning. According to Grossman et al., teachers should learn about their students and use that knowledge to inform instruction. Learning how students learn involves several components, some of which are addressed in traditional teacher preparation, such as understanding cultural differences among students and how to assess learning. Other core practices include learning how to elicit student thinking during interactive teaching and anticipating student responses.

One of the challenges teachers face is establishing effective teacher-student communication. It is true that one of the primary mediums of communication in the classroom is language (Lee, 2006) and it is through this communication that knowledge is imparted both for the teacher and the student. When there is a barrier that blocks that communication, teachers must find ways to get beyond that barrier. However, limited knowledge of the unfamiliar language and culture creates challenges and, in some

instances, a divide between the teacher and the student. The student's expression may deviate from what the teacher considers as standard and he or she may view this as rude, incomplete, or erroneous. If a teacher is unfamiliar with the student's language, how can he or she determine and respond appropriately to what may be an error or what may be related to language? This dilemma is caused by a lack of training, according to Knapp (1975). Others have noted that even with training, practitioners may need specific guidance linking theory and practice (Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, & Carpenter, 2006). Having knowledge of and appreciation for the cultural and linguistic differences of students means it is more likely that modifications, accommodations, and interventions will be implemented in the general education classroom (Echevarria et al., 2009).

Because students' language is closely tied to their literacy development, the interface between school and home cultures is an important predictor for students' outcome as well as for designing interventions that might bridge those cultures and better equip teachers and parents for effective communication. In their study, Au and Jordan (1981) looked at a Hawaiian school where teachers integrated aspects of the students' cultures into reading instruction. Teachers allowed students to use the communication style of the Native Hawaiian children and, with this, help students achieved higher levels on standardized reading assessments.

In a similar study, Mohatt and Erickson (1981) observed Native American students in their classrooms using language interaction patterns associated with the students' home culture. Odawa teachers used a combination of Native American and Anglo language interaction patterns in their instruction to increase teacher-student

interactions and student participation. According to researchers, the use of language patterns, which was closely tied to their home culture, improved the students' academic performance.

These studies showed how the use of culturally relevant teaching that draws on students' cultures, languages, and experiences can increase engagement and academic achievement. Ladson-Billings (1994) asserted that culturally relevant teaching engages and empowers students. She pointed out that culturally relevant teaching requires teachers to have a thorough knowledge of content and modes of presenting knowledge to students through various cultural lenses, thus connecting new knowledge to students' lived experiences of home, community, and global settings.

In her discussion on the importance of teachers developing knowledge about diverse groups, Dantas (2007) talked about acquiring the knowledge and using "knowledge in action." She referenced Hammerness et al. (2005), who stated that having knowledge about something but failing to use that knowledge to guide one's thinking and actions makes knowledge inert. According to Dantas, the term *inert knowledge* was discussed many years ago by Alfred Whitehead (1929) when he addressed its dangers. Inert knowledge means that although one can talk about a topic, the knowledge is not used as a guide for one's thinking or future actions. Having the knowledge of linguistically and culturally diverse students and the funds of knowledge students bring from their culture, families, and communities, but still not acting on such knowledge places "teachers at risk of perpetuating the deficit view and misconceptions of diverse students and their families' resources and abilities" (Dantas, 2007, p. 89). When teachers place knowledge in action, they are able to build on the capital that students bring to the

classroom and align educational opportunities and engagement that are empowering to students (Dantas, 2007).

The referral of ELs must be informed by students' response to evidence-based interventions. The effectiveness of instruction inside the general education classroom as well as specific intervention needs to be addressed in research. Because no single intervention will work for all children, it is important to identify which interventions are effective for which children or groups of children and the factors that enhance or reduce effectiveness (McCardle et al., 2005). While I did not test the effectiveness of classroom interventions, appropriate instruction and interventions for ELs and students' response to intervention are important factors when referring ELs to special education.

Another challenge teachers face is identifying whether a student is having comprehension difficulties as a result of learning abilities or whether the difficulties are related to language acquisition. The characteristics of learning disabilities closely mirror the characteristics associated with second language acquisition (Klingner & Artiles, 2006). Therefore, when ELs struggle with reading, it can be difficult to distinguish between learning disabilities and the language acquisition process (Klingner & Artiles, 2006). Determining the cause of academic failure, whether it is related to extrinsic (e.g., a lack of adequate instruction) or intrinsic factors (e.g., listening skills deficits), is a challenge (Lock & Layton, 2002). This challenge to distinguish between extrinsic and intrinsic factors in ELs can lead to a misdiagnosis of a learning disability (Ortiz & García, 1995). When students are receiving special language support but do not show significant progress like other diverse groups of students, too often the next step to consider to consider is retention or referral to special education. Approximately 40-50% of Black and

Latino students, for example, by ages 15 to 17 are enrolled in classes below their age level, which indicates that they may have been retained (Hondo, Gardiner, & Sapien, 2008).

The concern here is that when students are faced with academic struggles, the focus is to name the problem within the child rather than to search for solutions (Echevarria et al., 2009). Lack of academic growth can be associated with impoverished curriculum, poor teaching, and low expectations; this is especially true in the case of EL students where teachers' unfamiliarity with different languages and the history of how particular words or phrases are used in specific cultures is a factor. Differentiating whether EL students demonstrating academic difficulties reflect a learning disability, limited English proficiency, or other background characteristics which might be impacting their performance can be challenging. In the case of dialect differences, students may experience unique problems as they learn to read, which may be identified as a reading disability. According to White (1979), the language patterns of speakers of non-mainstream dialects are different from the academic language in schools, especially in the written format, which creates obstacles for the student and the teacher. The unique challenges faced by students and teachers can have a lasting impact on the students' academic experience.

It is important for teachers to be able to make this distinction between language acquisition (LA) and a suspicion of LD to make appropriate referrals for special education assessments. The existing literature that discusses distinguishing between LA and LD in ELs, especially when considering referral for special education, has revealed little information about the decision-making process of general education teachers.

Researchers Klingner and Harry (2006) examined general education teachers' special education referral and decision-making process for ELs, with a focus on school teams, also known as Child Study Teams (CSTs), Student Support Teams, or Student Study Teams. In an ethnographic study in a major urban school district, they observed CST meetings and placement conferences for 19 students. The school populations included students of African American, European American, Hispanic (predominately from Cuba, Nicaragua, and Mexico), Haitian American, and Jamaican American ethnicities. They found that the teams displayed confusion about when to refer, did not know when a child was ready to be assessed in English, misinterpreted a lack of full proficiency in English as low IQ or learning disabilities, and had an over-reliance on test scores.

In another study, although not directly related to ELs or specifically general education teachers, Ysseldyke et al. (1982) examined 20 videotaped placement team meetings and analyzed the decision-making process. They found that decisions were often made ahead of time and were independent of collected data on students. They also noted that, on several occasions, identical data were used to support different outcome decisions. Similar to the findings of Ysseldyke et al. (1982), Mehan et al. (1986) examined how decisions were made and also found that decisions were reached before the team meeting and only formalized at the meeting.

The focus of the previous studies was primarily school teams, not the classroom teachers and their decision-making process when distinguishing between LA and a suspicion of LD in considering the referral of ELs for special education. Bailey and Drummond (2006) identified several reasons why it is important to understand teachers'

decision making. The first reason was the "increasing urgency to identify and assist children who display early difficulties and build teacher competency and efficiency in individually tailoring interventions in the context of the mainstream classroom" (p. 152). The second reason was ensuring that teachers' perceptions, and ultimately their decisions, are not based on biases about students from linguistic and ethnic minority backgrounds, but that their reasons for identifying weaknesses are valid and not based on erroneous assumptions (p. 153). The final reason was understanding teachers' initial impressions of a student's reading ability, which may lead to formal screening or tests. If school administrators, educational institutions, researchers, and others understand teachers' reasoning and their decision-making process, they will be better able to help teachers with identifying at-risk behaviors and the most suitable decision-making processes, including tailoring the intervention choices they make.

Instructional Practices for ELA Students

Keller-Allen (2006) indicated there are resources on best practices to serve ELs with disability. However, several researchers (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Keller-Allen, 2006; Lesaux, 2006; Slavin & Cheung, 2005) who have discussed ELs' academic performance have often focused on the effective strategies for students, but there is still a noticeable gap in the knowledge base of instructional practices being used by mainstream or general education classroom teachers to promote ELs' literacy development (Lesaux, 2006). How are general elementary education teachers modifying or adapting their instruction and utilizing resources in their schools and districts to support their teaching of ELs? How effective are these adaptations? Research needs to examine how teachers are using

resources such as the role of parents, family, and the home environment (McCardle et al., 2005).

The available studies describing what teachers can do in their classroom are often anecdotal reports about the effectiveness of such approaches (Lesaux, 2006). In his research to find effective teaching approaches to use with ELs in the content areas of history, math, English Language Arts, and science, Janzen (2008) found most of the articles to be descriptive, referring to the authors' experiences as teachers or researchers. They did not "refer to research in which the effectiveness of the recommended techniques was measured through assessment or focused observation" (p. 1016). Vaughn et al. (2006) also asserted that there are few studies with specific evidence on best practices for ELs requiring supplemental reading interventions.

Peregoy and Boyle (2008) stated that while a large body of research has investigated early literacy development in a first language, "relatively little research documents early literacy development in English as a second language, particularly among students who have not had literacy instruction in their first language" (p. 154). Vaughn et al. (2006) agreed that few studies, and even fewer with scientific evidence, have informed us about best practices when teaching reading to ELs. They mentioned a small number of scientific studies: Gunn, Biglan, Smolkowski, and Ary (2000); Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Hickman-Davis, and Kouzekanani (2003); and Denton, Anthony, Parker, and Hasbrouck (2004). According to these researchers, instruction in the areas of phonics and word-level decoding and comprehension has resulted in positive outcomes for ELs.

Vaughn et al. (2006) also conducted a study with 22 intervention students and 19 contrast students, for whom 13 teachers provided core reading instruction. Based on this study, ELs responded favorably to phonological awareness or beginning reading skills and comprehension. Vaughn et al. suggested these findings are significant given the close association between phonological awareness and reading acquisition. Peregoy and Boyle (2008) added that it is not beneficial for English language learners to participate in phonics instruction that isolates sounds and letters from meaningful relevant context. They pointed out that phonics instruction should take place with whole text such as poems, songs, and predictable stories so that students experience enjoyment and understanding of that text. Peregoy and Boyle suggested that in doing so, "both language and literacy acquisition are served first, and children receive explicit phonics instruction subsequently" (p. 170). It is important for teachers to make instruction meaningful and relevant.

Another study was conducted by Gersten (1996). This 2-year research study attempted to understand how schools and teachers were currently trying to meet the needs of language minority students. The study included 27 teachers, eight of whom were bilingual and the remaining 19 of whom spoke English only. From observations and interviews, Gersten arrived at six key instructional activities that were important for EL instruction:

1. structures, frameworks, scaffolds, and strategies;
2. relevant background knowledge and key vocabulary concepts;
3. mediation/feedback;
4. involvement;

5. challenge; and
6. respect for and responsiveness to cultural and personal diversity.

From this research and from knowledge of previous research about effective instructional variables, Gersten developed a conceptual framework of instruction (see Appendix A). These six areas were broken down further into subcategories and each specific area was noted to reflect productive learning for ELs. Another finding that Gersten suggested was useful is the use of instructional practices that are recommended for "at-risk" students. He briefly suggested the importance of direct instruction and active teaching, and asserted that such instructional practices could be effective for teaching language minority students. He also noted that many teachers were overwhelmed and unsure of themselves. Nonetheless, he conveyed that monolingual English-speaking teachers were productive with their language minority students. He pointed out that these teachers needed to alter their teaching approach, but more importantly, they needed to give close attention to specific features of instruction, such as vocabulary selection, careful feedback, and active encouragement of students.

Other researchers and organizations such as Klingner (2010) and the Alliance for Excellent Education have produced useful information for working with ELs, but as stated previously, these are mainly anecdotal, suggesting they are not experimentally researched. The Alliance for Excellent Education, for example, suggested six strategies they indicate are effective in working with ELs:

1. Vocabulary and Language Development,
2. Guided Interaction,
3. Authentic Assessment,

4. Explicit Instruction,
5. Meaning-Based Context and Universal Themes, and
6. Modeling, Graphic Organizers, and Visuals.

They organized a tool highlighting these strategies (see Appendix B) and have suggested that there has been a positive impact in the use of this tool; however, they did not present data to substantiate this point. Many of the suggested strategies do overlap with those presented by Gersten (1996). The strategies presented by The Alliance for Excellent Education are geared toward new teachers. According to Gersten, these instructional practices are currently being used in classrooms. However, more research is needed to determine how elementary teachers' knowledge of ELs and second language acquisition influence their instruction and their decision to refer ELs to special education.

Echevarria et al. (2016) discussed several instructional practices that can be used with ELs. The Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol (SIOP) model, also referred to as sheltered instruction (SI) or as simplified English, has shown to be effective for some ELs. SIOP is "an approach for teaching content to English learners in strategic ways that make the subject matter comprehensible while promoting the students' English language development" (p. 5). The SIOP model has been field-tested and refined; it is the product of years of research by Echevarria et al. The protocol is composed of eight main components: Lesson Preparation, Building Background, Comprehensible Input, Strategies, Interaction, Practice/Application, Lesson Delivery, and Review/Assessments. The components emphasize the instructional practices critical for ELs as well as other students. Echevarria et al. and other researchers (Harry & Anderson, 1994) opined that the use of the SIOP model is one means of improving the academic success of ELs.

The SIOP model of instruction scaffolds the material for ELs through carefully planned lessons that builds on background knowledge, comprehensible input while incorporating strategies, interaction, practice, and application as well as assessments (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Levy, 2008). For students who might not have the background knowledge for the lesson, SIOP teachers create activities that will provide a meaningful experience for students to engage and understand the lesson. Some of the classroom strategies and techniques that Echevarria et al. have identified as successful when working with ELs include visual aids, modeling, demonstrations, graphic organizers, vocabulary previews, adapted text, and cooperative learning. Guiberson (2009) pointed out that the SIOP model includes key modifications, such as "(a) speaking clearly and slowly (b) repeating key points multiple times, (c) defining and explicitly teaching vocabulary, and (d) pairing language with visual supports (e.g. pictures, graphs, objects, gestures)" (p. 172). In addition, the SIOP model encourages teachers to be considerate to their students' affective needs, cultural background, and learning styles (Echevarria et al., 2009).

Although the SIOP model of teaching seems to be used increasingly across the United States, it does not appear that the sheltered curricula are well known among general mainstream classroom teachers (Echevarria et al., 2009). Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) have become familiar with instructional strategies for ELs in the public school. However, many content area teachers have only recently begun to view ELs as an important issue in teaching and teacher preparation (Janzen, 2008). According to Echevarria et al. (2009), "ESL and bilingual teachers alone cannot provide the necessary educational opportunities these learners [ELs] need" (p. 12).

Many, if not all, of the instructional practices identified by Echevarria et al. as beneficial to Els' academic success may be familiar to the general education teacher in the mainstream classroom. However, Chang (2008) pointed out that instructional supports will have to be intensive if these students are to perform on the same level as their English-speaking peers.

In a series of observational studies of first grade classrooms with a large population of ELs, students' reading gains and instructional practices were investigated (Haager, 2007). According to the findings, only one practice used was unique to ELs: the extent to which the classroom teacher adjusted his or her voice to make it understandable for students. Other instructional practices, which showed gains in reading for ELs, were described as simply good teaching: leveled instruction for low performers, phonemic instruction and decoding, interactive teaching, vocabulary development, and sheltered English techniques. It was also noted that students in the high-gain classrooms had higher rates of accurate passage, or oral reading for all subscales except *Sheltered English Techniques*. Haager (2007) pointed out that Sheltered English instruction might not be sufficient for starting off ELs in beginning reading. She noted that to make significant reading gains, teachers need to use effective instructional techniques in general, adjusting their instruction according to students' needs, and engage students in interactive and engaging vocabulary and comprehension development as well as high-quality explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and decoding.

For teachers to meet the challenges before them, they need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills required to provide high-quality instruction. Ballantyne et al. (2008) put forward that "even the most committed teachers cannot

provide high-quality education without appropriate skills and knowledge" (p. 7). Students need to be given the educational opportunity to succeed. To do this, they must be provided with appropriate instruction to meet their needs.

Response to Intervention (RtI)

Not long ago when ELs did not make adequate academic progress, the only option was to refer them to special education (Echevarria & Hasbrouck, 2009). The eligibility decision was frequently based on evidence of significant discrepancy between intelligence and level of school achievement (IQ—achievement discrepancy formula), often without looking at the context in which the student was underachieving (Klingner & Harry, 2006). The context may include the student's linguistic and cultural background, academic exposure, or attendance. The reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (*IDEA,* 2004) gave states the option to discontinue the use of the IQ-achievement discrepancy formulas and to use the response to intervention (RtI) as a diagnostic tool as a part of their special education referral process (Klingner & Harry, 2006).

RtI services can be provided in one of two ways: a problem-solving procedure or a standard treatment protocol. In the standard treatment protocol, the school has a particular set of interventions and students with a certain profile of needs are placed in the most appropriate intervention program. For the problem-solving procedure, students are given intervention based on assessment results, observations, classroom performance, and so on, with the intervention tailored to their needs. Dunn et al.'s (2009) review of the U.S. Department of Education website indicated that all states are initiating the use of

RtI. RtI is a three-tier instructional framework with strategic steps driven by data to enhance outcomes for students (see Figure 2).

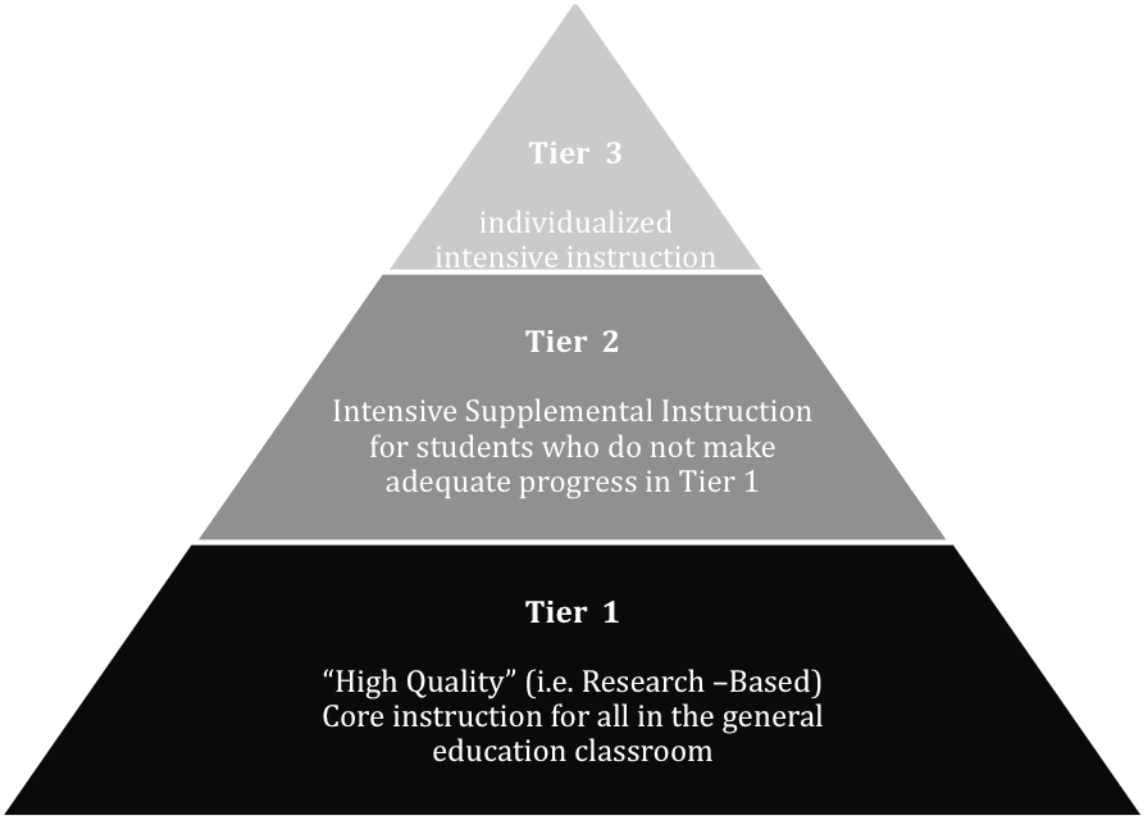

Figure 2. Three-tiered response to intervention model
(Klingner, Hoover, & Baca, 2008, p. 40)

The general educator is the key instructional provider in Tier 1, who also provides ongoing support in Tier 2. In Tier 1, high-quality instruction should be taking place in the general education classroom. Instruction should be research-based or evidence-based, differentiated and administered both in small groups and in whole group instruction. For ELs, instruction should be made comprehensible, meeting students' needs and utilizing various teaching and learning techniques. One of the core elements of Tier 1 is that effective instruction is occurring for all students (Zacarian, 2011). "An RtI model is heavily dependent on high-quality services being provided in the general education

classroom and schools taking time to ensure that this is occurring" (p. 139). If students do not make adequate progress in Tier One, as determined by monitoring data such as assessments, work samples, and teacher observations, they are moved to Tier 2 where instruction is more intensive. Although Tier 2 is not always identified as the "pre-referral" step to special education, the purpose is similar and it is here that students are closely monitored by administrators, a special education teacher, a general education teacher, parents or guardians, and other school staff.

In Tier 2, the student is provided with supplemental instruction in addition to Tier 1 instruction. Tier 2 instruction is evidence-based intervention support, which can be provided by the classroom teacher or a specialist in a small group inside the general education classroom or pulled outside of the classroom. The difference between Tier 1 and Tier 2 is "the individualized nature of the instruction, the intensity of the instruction, and frequency of assessments" (Echevarria et al., 2009, p. 198). The special education referral begins when students do not respond successfully to Tier 2 interventions. At this phase, the general education teacher plays a crucial role in ensuring that the student receives effective instruction according to monitoring data. Under the federal regulations of *IDEA*, students must be provided with adequate instruction prior to their referral to special education (Rinaldi & Samson, 2008). If students continue to demonstrate limited progress, they will then be moved to Tier 3, which often involves evaluation for possible placement in special education (Klingner & Harry, 2006).

Klingner and Harry (2006) argued that students must be given adequate opportunity to learn in Tiers 1 and 2; this is fundamental to the exclusionary clause when determining eligibility for special education services. In the case of ELs, we must ensure

that students are provided with "culturally responsive, appropriate, quality instruction… before a special education referral or placement is made" (Klingner & Harry, 2006, p. 2249). Klingner and Harry (2006) discussed an earlier ethnographic study they conducted (Harry & Klingner, 2005) that looked at the referral process of 12 schools. They found that:

> school personnel gave little weight to classroom ecology when making decisions about special education eligibility and placement. Though many children were referred by teachers with weak instructional and classroom management skills, no classroom observations were conducted by the evaluating psychologist or anyone else. (p. 2249)

The change from using the IQ-achievement discrepancy formula to RtI has significant implications for ELs and the special education referral process. If carried out efficiently, the number of ELs inappropriately referred to special education should decrease, but this is highly dependent on the quality of instruction within the general education classroom.

RtI appears to be the ideal model for providing individualized help for students. However, Zacarian (2011) cautioned us when using the RtI model with ELs. Zacarian gave several reasons why we should be concerned when applying the RtI model to ELs. One of those reasons is the idea that "many of the actual interventions that are applied are not enough and/or do not address the specific needs of students from diverse linguistic and cultural experiences" (p. 138). Research (NCES, 2002; Reeves, 2006) found that practicing teachers "feel inadequately prepared to teach ELLs" (Ortiz et al., 2011, p. 317). According to Klingner et al. (2008), many teachers have received little or no training in ESL, English language acquisition (ELA), or bilingual/bicultural education. Klingner et al. stated that the 1999 NCES report indicated teachers were least likely to report being very prepared in three areas: integrating educational technology into the

grade or subject taught, addressing the needs of limited English proficient or culturally diverse students, and addressing the needs of students with disabilities. To provide effective language and literacy instruction, classroom teachers must understand the relationship between first and second language development. Teachers are not only called to understand a student's language since language is tied to the student's culture, but to go beyond language and provide culturally responsive teaching. Educators are seeking answers on how to provide effective instruction for Els; however, they are often left feeling isolated and unsupported (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006).

Student Challenges

To provide ELs with a high-quality education, it is important for us to understand the source factors contributing to their academic difficulties as this will give us knowledge of the learning context in which many of these students are forced to learn. Lesaux (2006) discussed several possible reasons that contribute to the academic struggles of ELs. First, Janzen (2008) conveyed that children from immigrant families represent 20% of the population of U.S. schools. In the case of recent immigrants, their school attendance varies based on their home country. Klingner et al. (2008) contended that, according to Garcia (2004), "recent immigrants with high level education are disproportionately from several nations in the East and South Asia, while those with little schooling are largely from a number of Latin American countries" (p. 6). Mexicans are the most predominant group in the United States today and one of the least educated. They represent 59% of the Hispanic population. Klingner et al. (2008) also pointed out the economic and environmental conditions in which many ELs live. A large number of ELs live in poverty, which is one cause of academic failure (Janzen, 2008). Slavin and

Cheung (2005) stated that many children from immigrant families do succeed in reading, but too many are failing.

Lesaux (1996) drew from several researchers (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990; Suarez-Orozco, 2004) who suggested that immigrants arriving in the country frequently relocate because of "employment opportunities, housing and transportation, and upward mobility" (pp. 2414-2415). This increased propensity to relocate can lead to a lack of instruction or limited time to develop academically as students. When we consider classroom instruction, time is a crucial determinant of student learning (Hiebert, 1983). To facilitate academic progress, students need to be available for instruction and for learning. In the area of reading, for example, exposure to print within the classroom can make a significant difference in the reading experience and vocabulary development. Stanovich (1986), in his review of a study by Allington (1984), found that over a 1-week period in a first grade classroom, the total number of words read ranged from a low of 16 for lower-performing students to 1,933 for higher-level students. Being available to learn can affect the reading experience and vocabulary growth. This is very important for ELs because Lesaux (2006) suggested vocabulary knowledge may be another reason for academic difficulties. Klingner et al. (2008) affirmed that vocabulary development is very critical, as vocabulary knowledge affects reading fluency and reading comprehension.

According to researchers (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005) discussed by Lesaux (2006), ELs often lack the English vocabulary needed to support learning or comprehend difficult text. As August, Carlo, Dressler, and Snow (2005) stated, "second-language learners have been shown to be impaired in depth of word knowledge, even for frequently occurring words" (p. 51). The depth of word knowledge means knowing many

things about the word such as its literal meaning and an array of semantic associates such as its synonyms and antonyms. Researchers (Beck et al., 1982; McKeown et al., 1983; Stahl, 1983) have demonstrated that there is a direct connection between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Therefore, ELs like other students with low vocabulary knowledge may experience comprehension difficulties. Lesaux (2006) also pointed out that learning to read in a language in which students are not yet proficient is likely to lead to reading difficulties. Many teachers understand that explicit instruction and pre-teaching of key vocabulary words are important. However, they might not provide instruction of some basic sight words, which can be confusing for ELs, such as "prepositions (e.g., "on," "in," "above"), pronouns (e.g., "she" in sentences, "Maria was not feeling well. She hoped she would be able to leave early."), and cohesion markers (e.g., "therefore," "however")" (Klingner et al., 2008, p. 64).

In addition to the above sources of academic struggles, Lesaux (2006) referenced researchers (Gandara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003; Jimenez & Teague, 2009; Snow et al., 1998) in pointing out that ELs tend to attend schools with limited resources and are exposed to inferior curriculum and teaching quality more so than their native-English-speaking peers. This, Lesaux suggested, calls into question whether a large majority of ELs have received effective instruction and rich opportunities to develop language and literacy skills. Gandara et al. (2003) raised similar concerns in their review of California's education system. California, as stated previously, has the largest population of ELs. According to Gandara et al., California provides an inequitable education to its students based on wealth and language status. They listed seven aspects of schooling, which the authors asserted demonstrate inferior education for ELs. Several

of the aspects outlined are common to other ELs across the country, such as less qualified teachers, inferior curriculum and limited instruction time, inferior facilities where ELs are often segregated from English speaking peers, and invalid assessment tools (Glass, 2003). These are some of the reasons ELs continue to lag behind their native-English-speaking peers. In addition to the reasons stated, Roseberry-McKibbin (2002) gave other reasons: "culture shock and difference in home and school expectations" and "fluctuating funding for programs designed to assist students learning English as a second language" (p. 81). These challenges are real for many students because these are obstacles some students face and teachers need to be very cognizant of them as they plan their daily instruction and consider referring ELs to special education.

Conclusion

The rapid growth of English language learners within U.S. public schools is evident and can be seen in Tulloch George's County Public Schools. The increase in population has brought several challenges for the teachers. One such challenge is distinguishing between ELA and LD when referring ELs to special education. General education teachers are now required to provide appropriate instruction and interventions before they can refer students to special education; this is usually done through the RtI process. Researchers have discussed concerns with over- and under-referrals of ELs and inappropriate referrals. Given the steady increase of ELs in U.S. public schools, these concerns are more critical. More research is needed to understand the referral process. This study was aimed at building that knowledge base by exploring how general education teachers distinguish between ELA and LD during the referral process.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This qualitative study was designed to examine the identification and classification practices of third and fourth grade general education classroom teachers as they engage in the special education referral process for English learners (ELs). The study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. How do third and fourth grade general education teachers differentiate between English language acquisition challenges and a possible learning disability when considering referral to special education?
2. What is the identification process used by third and fourth grade general education teachers to recommend English learners (ELs) for referral during the special education process?

In this chapter, I describe the research design and methodology used in this study in the following sections: (a) rationale for research approach, (b) selection of participants, (c) context of the sites and participants, (d) role of the researcher, (e) data sources and collection procedures, and (f) data analysis. In this section, I also give a detailed description of the participants to offer readers a full understanding of each participant's background and experiences as they relate to this study.

Rationale for Research Approach

Rationale for qualitative case study approach. The purpose of using a qualitative case study approach was to gain a detailed understanding of the decisions general education teachers make about referrals of ELs to special education, and to illuminate how they differentiate between English language acquisition (hereafter ELA)

and learning disabilities (hereafter LD) in their decision-making processes. The case study approach allowed for close collaboration between the researcher and the participants and allowed for an opportunity to understand the teachers' perspectives in depth. The qualitative methods used here capture the richness and fullness of an experience in its natural setting and allow for full and saturated descriptions of the experience under investigation. Such research attempts to make sense of participants' experiences and provide meaning and understanding for the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Merriam, 2002). The participants' decisions and the factors that led to their decisions during the referral of ELs to special education were also closely examined. An underlying question is "How do participants differentiate between ELA and LD during the Response to Intervention (hereafter RtI) process?" The study explored the teachers' decision-making process during the RtI process and how they distinguished between ELA and a suspicion of LD when providing interventions in Tiers One and Two of the RtI process and when referring ELs to special education.

Using a qualitative approach encourages researchers to focus on the meaning-making process rather than on the outcomes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). It also gives participants the opportunity to tell their story (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) and allows the researcher to better understand the participants' actions (Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993).

This study was a multiple-case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003), focusing on each of the three participants as a specific case. The multiple-case study approach was chosen to provide accounts from different perspectives. Multiple cases allow for comparison and contrast of the participants' perspectives and circumstances, with the opportunity to

identify essential aspects that might appear across cases, as well as to recognize variations in how the experiences may appear. Yin (2003) described multiple-case studies as either predicting similar results or predicting contrasting results but for predictable reasons. That is, findings from participants may show similar results, and in cases where the results are contrasting, the reasons for those contradictions are foreseeable. Multiple cases can also give a deeper understanding of the investigated experience and serve as a triangulation on the experience, identifying the main factor or factors through different accounts.

Selection of Participants

Selection criteria. To select teachers for this study, I used purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2001, 2009) to choose the participants. Very often qualitative research uses a small number of participants. "The concern is not how much data were gathered or from how many sources, but whether the collected data were sufficiently rich to bring refinement and clarity to understanding an experience" (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 140). "The logic and power of purposeful sampling [is] derive[d] from the emphasis on in-depth understanding" (Patton, 1990, p. 46). It allows for the selection of information-rich cases that will bring out important information central to answering the question under study. My goal was to select up to five general education teachers in two schools from Grades 3 and 4. Upon receiving the consent from the principals, I met with the principal and the third and fourth grade classroom teachers at the two elementary schools in the same large metropolitan district in mid-Atlantic United States. During this time, I described the study and invited the teachers to participate. Participant criteria included teachers in Grades 3 and 4 who were currently working with ELs, had some knowledge

of the RTI process, and shared an interest and willingness to participate in the study. Four teachers agreed to participate in the study; however, because of a time conflict with one of the participants, I was not able to collect meaningful data for the study.

Ethical considerations. Aligned with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations, I sought informed consent from all participants prior to conducting the study. By virtue of the role of gatekeepers (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), I first enlisted the help of my advisor in finding a study site. He facilitated the contact person in the school's county English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) office. She gave several suggested schools, and with her guidance, the schools' principals were then contacted via email and I followed up via phone to set up a meeting to discuss my study. I then visited the schools to solicit teachers' participation. In the meeting with the teachers and the principals at the prospective schools, I explained the purpose of the study, the data collection methods, anonymity and confidentiality, dissemination of findings, and the voluntary nature of the participation.

School contexts and participants. There were two study sites, both located in Tulloch County Public Schools (TCPS) (the names of schools, participants, and county are pseudonyms). The total population of students enrolled in TCPS was 130,814, as stated in the state's 2017 report. The majority of ELs in Tulloch County were Hispanics/Latinos; of the total population, there were 40,928 Hispanics/Latinos. The total number of students enrolled in TCPS decreased from 2011 to 2013; in 2011, the total number of students was 126,671; in 2012, it was 123,833; and in 2013, it was 123,737. In 2014, the population began to show an increase. In the specific school year for 2016, the year in which I conducted the study, it was 128,936, and in 2017, it was 130,814.

The population of Hispanics has shown a steady and significant increase, including during the years when the overall enrollment decreased in the county. In 2011, it was 26,637; in 2012, it increased to 27,727; and in 2013, it reached 29,904. Looking at the year 2016, enrollment for Hispanics/Latino was 38,134 and, in 2017, 40,928. The state's demographics also indicated a steady increase in Hispanic/Latino enrollment during the 3 years (2011-2013) of declining enrollment in the total population in Tulloch County. In 2011, the number of Hispanics/Latinos enrolled was 98,404; in 2012, it was 103,594; in 2013, it was 118,204. The Hispanic/Latino population has continued to grow in the state from 2014 128,175; 2015, 135,999; and 2016, 145,800. Additionally, the data I reviewed for TCPS indicated that the number of Hispanic students identified as receiving special education services was 6,759 of the 31,133 students receiving special education services in the county.

The major criterion for selecting the two schools in which the focal teachers were employed was the large Hispanic/Latino population. The large increase of Hispanic/Latino population in Tulloch County has brought attention to those communities with a high Hispanic/Latino population. During the time of my research, I overheard conversations about lack of participation in after school activities due to immigration raids. After inquiring with staff members, I was informed that there was an immigration raid and, as a result, there was low attendance at a school event for parents. The immigration raid also impacted student attendance in school for the days following. The staff from both schools shared that this has happened several times in the past. The families fear sending their children to school could result in detaining the children at school due to the family's immigration status in the country.

The fears surrounding the immigration raids were not limited to only these two study sites but to several schools in the county, so much so that the superintendent wrote a letter in an effort to put parents' fears at ease and encourage them to continue to send their children to school:

> To our TCPS students and families:
>
> We stand with you.
>
> All of us in TCPS will continue to provide a high-quality education to all, regardless of their immigration status. We urge parents and guardians to continue to send their children to school so they can learn in a safe and supportive environment. As always, we will continue to work closely with the Office of the County Executive and our community partners to keep our school communities aware of the supports available to them. (Letter from Superintendent, 2016)

The two schools selected for this study, Middletown and Harriston Elementary schools, are located in neighboring communities in a large metropolitan district in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Two of the participants, Gwen and Catherine, taught at Middletown Elementary School, and Meredith taught at Harriston Elementary School.

Middletown Elementary School

The first study site was Middletown Elementary School. At the time of the study, 815 students were enrolled in Grades Pre-K through 6. The school served 59.2% (476) students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP), 6.3% (51) received Individualized Education Programs/Plans (IEPs), and 92.4% (743) received free or reduced lunch. The growth of Hispanic/Latino students continued to increase in the district, with 85% of the students in the school identifying as Hispanic/Latino at the time the study was conducted. Within 5 years (2011-2016), this population had seen an increase of 14%.

Historical context. The population in the community of Middletown started showing an increase with the development of a highway, a railroad, and later the streetcar in the 1900s. These developments brought in new people who lived in the communities but commuted for employment. As the community began to develop with the growth of its commuters, factories were built and blue-collar jobs became the dominant work in Middletown. However, today many of the jobs have gone further outside of Middletown and the town is now experiencing the negative effects of suburbanization: congestion, population density, high levels of traffic, and the general perception of a lower quality of life.

Middletown's total population is 9,148, according to the 2010 census. In this growing community, Black or African American represents 65.58% of the population, some other race alone 16.56%, White alone 12.56%, two or more races 2.69%, Asian alone 2.04%, American Indian and Alaska native alone 0.55%, and Native Hawaiian and other Pacific native alone 0.02%. Persons not of Hispanic or Latino origin represent 73.08%, while persons of Hispanic or Latino origin represent 26.92%.

Harriston Elementary School

The second study site is Harriston Elementary School, which had 740 students enrolled in Grades Pre-K through 6 at the time of the study. The school served 45.9% (331) students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP), 15.1% (109) received Individualized Education Programs/Plans (IEPs), and 89.3% (644) received free or reduced lunch. Hispanic/Latino students were a rapidly growing population in the district, with approximately 70% of the students in the school identifying as Hispanic/Latino at

the time the study was conducted. Within 5 years (2011-2016), this population had increased by 22%.

Historical context. Harriston is primarily a residential community, and like Middletown, experienced a growth in population in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In the case of Harriston, the population increased as a result of the urban expansion that occurred in a neighboring city, which created a demand for housing. Many people wanted the amenities of the urban living but preferred the tranquility of the rural home. The improved transportation, specifically the railroad and the streetcar, allowed for both. The development of the streetcar led to a rapid growth in the population throughout the late 1910s and 1920s. Harriston continued to see an increase in population in the 1950s; however, in the late 1950s, the streetcars were replaced with buses and in the 1960s, the population dropped. The decrease in population continued until the 1980s, but the community is now seeing a growth with younger families moving to the area. The total population is 8,080, according to the 2010 census. Black alone represents 52.8% of the population, some other race alone 20.9%, White alone 19.9%, two or more races 3.6%, Asian alone 2.3%, American Indian alone 0.6%, Pacific Islander alone 0.0%, and Hispanic origin represents 31.4%.

The School District's Pre-referral Process

According to the district's Special Education Process Guide, a student suspected of having a disability under the *IDEA* must be referred to the IEP Team for an evaluation. Prior to making a referral, the IEP Team must implement and document pre-referral strategies and interventions and their results. The pre-referral process is called Response to Intervention (RtI) and its purpose is to help struggling students as soon as signs of

difficulties are identified. This process involves identification of specific behavior and/or learning concerns and the development of a strategic plan for improvement. The identification process must include using strategies that measure the student's response to scientific research-based interventions. The RtI process is a three-tiered service delivery approach that provides services and interventions of increasing levels of intensity to students who struggle with learning. The student's progress is monitored frequently to make changes in instruction or goals and apply child response data to important educational decisions.

Tier 1 of the RtI process begins in the general education classroom. Students who are at risk for behavior or academic challenges are identified for more intense support. Instructional supports are implemented and documented during the following:

a. whole class instruction,
b. flexible grouping, and
c. differentiated instruction.

The amount of time spent in Tier 1 depends on the expected timeframe given for the student to gain targeted skills, the determination of benchmark expectations, and summative assessments based on core programs. Student progress is monitored by:

a. continued growth and improvement as demonstrated by research-based instructional approaches and practices; and
b. evidenced-based interventions and resources that are used within the core curriculum.

After implementation and documentation of research-based instructional practices and strategies, a student who continues to experience difficulty is referred to the School Instructional Team (SIT) by the general education teacher.

School Instructional Team (SIT). The SIT is a support system provided at the building level in each school. A SIT was in place at both Middletown and Harriston Elementary Schools at the time of the study. The primary purpose of a SIT is to provide an organized way for teachers and staff to assist each other in resolving student problems, which could be in the form of program modifications, supplemental assistance and enrichment, or academic opportunities. The purpose of a SIT is to ensure that each individual student is afforded the opportunity to receive the best instruction available to meet his or her needs.

The SIT is a problem-solving group that typically consists of the principal and/or designee, referring teachers, and one or more building-level specialists (e.g., school psychologist, professional school counselor, reading specialist, etc.).

The SIT process. The SIT begins the problem-solving process by first identifying the problem behavior, whether academic or behavioral. The general education teacher provides relevant and quantifiable data, such as progress monitoring assessments, test results, student work, anecdotal notes, and observations, to support the referral and also illustrate why the student is not benefitting from Tier 1 classroom instruction and strategies.

According to the County's Process Guide, all schools in the district have been provided with resources to guide their instruction in selecting appropriate strategies and research-based interventions for Tier 1 support. The Pre-Referral Intervention Manual

(PRIM) was provided specifically to the SIT, while other resources were given to all schools, including:

- Collier, C. (2010). *RtI for diverse learners*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Lujan, M. L. (2010). *Intervention strategies guide: Response to Intervention (RtI).* Tyler, TX: Mentoring Minds.
- Lujan, M. L. (2010). *Accommodations wheel*. Tyler, TX: Mentoring Minds.

Once the general education teachers share the data pertaining to the student, the SIT members recommend possible strategies and/or research-based interventions using data provided by the referring teacher. Interventions and/or strategies will vary depending on the specific needs of the student, but may include changes to the classroom environment, classroom management, instructional procedures, and/or curriculum. In some cases, a simple strategy and/or an additional Tier 1 intervention may produce the desired outcome without needing to implement a Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention. If more intensive support is needed, the team will recommend appropriate Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 interventions. The team agrees on the intensity and duration, based on specific procedural guidelines. The team also identifies a monitoring system to assess the student's progress over time and a person to be responsible for the implementation and monitoring of the intervention.

Parent liaison. Both Middletown and Harriston Elementary Schools were staffed with a parent liaison. The participant teachers used several titles interchangeably when referring to the parent liaison. In addition to parent liaison, parent coordinator and parent consultant were used. The title used by the county was Parent Involvement Liaison. The job of the Parent Involvement Liaison involves more direct support for parents and the

school, such as parent involvement workshops for school-based staff to encourage effective family and parent involvement. Middletown and Harriston Elementary Schools both had parent liaisons in their schools. The duties and the responsibilities of a parent liaison included:

- designing and developing parent training workshops;
- researching topics, providing goals, objectives, resource materials, and evaluation tools;
- conducting parent and community needs assessment;
- developing, administering, and assessing surveys;
- interviewing parents, program staff, and community service agencies;
- maintaining an effective recording system for services provided;
- preparing reports related to parent education programs, workshops, and activities conducted;
- gathering and presenting detailed data pertaining to parent involvement activities occurring in schools;
- participating on various committees, panels, work teams, and task groups as appropriate;
- participating in school meetings, forums, and other district-wide meetings pertaining to parent involvement;
- researching and procuring resource materials for dissemination to schools;
- devising an equitable system for rendering services to schools;
- reviewing current literature to determine future relevant areas to be addressed by the program; and

- maintaining an in-depth knowledge of current effective practices and trends for implementation.

In both schools, the parent liaison was a female and bilingual, speaking both Spanish and English.

Participants

Gwen O'Sullivan. Gwen is a native-English speaking Caucasian female in her 20s. At the time of the study, she was attending graduate school, working towards her masters in reading. She was a fourth grade teacher who had received her bachelor's degree in elementary education, where she was required to take enough ESOL classes to graduate with an endorsement in ESOL. The goal of this requirement by the state was to provide ELs with equal access to comprehensible education. She received 15 semester hours in ESOL coursework in the following areas:

1. methods of teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL),
2. ESOL curriculum and materials development,
3. cross-cultural communication and understanding,
4. applied linguistics, and
5. testing and evaluation of ESOL.

Gwen had also received training in Sheltered Instructional Observational Protocol (SIOP) at her Middletown Elementary School. All 4 years of her teacher career had been at Middletown Elementary School.

Classroom composition. In Gwen's self-contained general education classroom, she taught all subjects to 29 students; four were African American and 24 were Hispanic, of which 16 were ELs. She had seven students in her classroom who were identified as

at-risk: six for reading challenges and one for behavior challenges. The six identified for reading challenges were ELs. She worked with an ESOL teacher who pushed in daily during the reading block to provide ESOL services for a group of students; a Reading Specialist who provided pull-out reading intervention services; and a Paraprofessional who was assigned to provide additional support for these students.

Classroom setting. Gwen's fourth grade classroom had numerous anchor charts around the classroom. There was a chalkboard, centered on the wall at the front of the class, and cursive letters of the alphabet from A-Z were posted immediately above the chalkboard. Below the letters of the alphabet were the date and the following signs: schedule, objectives, and spelling words. Gwen had the class schedule posted for the day, along with the objectives for reading, math, social studies, and science. The spelling words for the week were listed next to the objectives. Immediately underneath the spelling words was the day's homework and alongside the spelling words and the homework was the routine writing for the day.

On the left side of the classroom were large upper-case letters that spelled the word behavior and underneath was a behavior chart. Across from the behavior chart was another set of smaller lower-case letters which spelled the word groups, with four pocket folders underneath: red, yellow, orange, and green. Inside each folder was a sheet of paper with one of following: Work With Me, First in Math, Independent Work, and Skill Practice. Each color folder identified each group in the classroom. The sheet of paper was rotated in each folder throughout the day as students transitioned between activities.

At the back of the classroom were three desktop computers and immediately behind the computers was a carpeted area with several pillows, stuffed toys, a rocking

chair, and a bookshelf. On the wall in the back was a board entitled "Check Out Our Work," with several student work samples hanging from clothespins. Next to the board was the teacher's desk and across from her desk was a semi-circular table where the teacher met with her groups. In the middle of the room were tables and chairs arranged in groups of four, except for six tables in the front of the classroom where sat specific students who needed direct assistance from the teacher.

Catherine Murphy. Catherine is an African American female in her 40s. She had a B.S. in Early Childhood Education and a M.Ed. in School Counseling. Of her 16 years of teaching experience, 4 were at Middletown Elementary School, one of the two school sites for teachers who participated in the study. While Catherine had limited or no exposure to issues related to the teaching of ELs from her preservice teacher preparation, she participated in in-service professional development at her school; at the time of the study, she was taking a course on how to teach ELs. Catherine's primary language was English; however, during her 4 years at Middletown Elementary, she made an effort to learn key words and phrases in Spanish that she felt were helpful for communication with her students and their parents.

***Classroom composition*.** At the time of the study, Catherine taught all the content areas in her third grade classroom, except for math and science. She taught two groups of students, a total of 52: one Asian, four African Americans, and 47 Hispanics. She noted that approximately 95% of the students were ELs. There were 24 females and 28 males. A large percentage of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch.

Catherine worked with the ESOL teacher and a Reading Resource teacher assigned to her grade level. The ESOL teacher pushed in daily during the reading block

to provide ESOL services for a group of students, while the Reading Resource teacher pulled students out to provide services.

Classroom setting. In Catherine's third grade classroom, the walls were bare except for the front wall above the chalkboard; the letters of the alphabet were posted from A-Z in cursive. Both upper- and lower-case letters, with pictures representing the letters that appeared to be colored by hand, were displayed. The desks were arranged in groups of six. In the front center of the classroom was a cart with a projector. Next to the cart with the projector was a rolling recharging cart to store Chrome books.

The back wall of the classroom had several reading anchor charts. Many of the charts appeared to be teacher- or student-created, as the writing varied and looked mostly like children's writing. A single desk and chair facing the wall were located at the back of the classroom, across from Catherine's desk, which was to the right of the classroom. Immediately in front of Catherine's desk was a carpeted area.

Also, to the right of the classroom on the wall next to the window was a small two-column chart with colors and students' names listed. A group of names were in one column and across from each name was a color—red, green, yellow, or blue. Situated on the left side was a bookshelf with leveled readers and other reading resources.

Meredith Fischer. Meredith is a Caucasian female in her 20s. Her 3 years of teaching experience at Harriston Elementary School had been in the third grade. At the time of the study, she was in the process of getting her master's degree in education through the Teach for America program and was teaching third grade. She had completed one course and one professional development in Linguistics. Her primary language was English; she also spoke some Spanish but did not consider herself fluent.

Classroom composition. Meredith's third grade class was departmentalized; at the time of this study, she taught reading and social studies to two groups of students. Meredith described her classroom demographic make-up as Latino and African American. She shared that more than 50% of her students were ELs and there was a wide range of reading levels. Meredith stated, "I have students that are new to the country, some that just came from El Salvador all the way to students that just recently excited ESOL. So it's a huge range of abilities and language levels, so students on Kindergarten up to fourth grade level of EL students" (Interview 1). She added that 10 students in her first class and 13 in her second class received ESOL services. ELs received push-in and pull-out services from the ESOL teacher assigned to Meredith's class. At Harriston Elementary, the teachers used the term *scholar* when addressing the students. Meredith used both *students* and *scholars* during the study.

Classroom setting. Meredith's third grade classroom had numerous materials for scholars to utilize. There was a Smart board, centered in the front of the class; next to the Smart board was a desk with a computer on it. On the wall above the Smart board were letters of the alphabet from A-Z and underneath were the numerals 1-100. To the left of the Smart board were pocket charts with the lesson standards for reading, math, science, and social studies; lesson objectives for each academic area; essential questions and challenge questions for reading and math. On the right side of the wall were behavior charts: a behavior chart for the whole class in the shape of a beehive; another chart for team points; and a third chart showing incentives for the class once the class beehive was shaded in completely, incentives for team points, and incentives for individual students who receive a targeted number of tickets.

Three desktop computers were at the rear of the class on a rectangular table where students sat when they worked in teams (small groups) or for center activities. The ESOL teacher also used this table as her workstation when she came in to work with scholars. Next to the rectangular table, to the right, was another rectangular table where the teacher worked with scholars in groups. On entering the classroom, to the right, was a small-enclosed cubby area where the scholars stored their book bags and jackets. The teacher also used this space for storing class materials such as textbooks.

Role of Researcher

As the researcher, I chose a reflexive approach in relation to my identity and the effect on this study. Reflexivity requires seeing the interrelationships between myself and the assumptions, biases, and personal experiences that I bring to the research (Weber, 2003). As a researcher, I acknowledge that my observations and interpretations are shaped by my personal experiences. Therefore, what I documented and how I interpreted events were influenced by my lived experiences.

I was self-aware that I entered the study site with many assumptions. As a special education teacher for approximately 14 years, I have only worked in schools with very small EL populations and families who were largely native English speakers. However, I have experienced some challenges with ELs in the schools where I have worked. Many of the challenges I encountered dealt mostly with assessment procedures, and very little had to do with instructional practices. Over the years, through my experience in the classroom and at the county central office where I worked along with my studies, I became more adept in the assessment procedures as related to ELs in the school district where I worked. I recognized that while procedures were in place to assist teachers like

myself who are working with ELs, those procedures might not be carried out in a manner, as they should, which impacted not only the teacher but even, more importantly, the students.

Given my experiences, I see similarities in how the classroom teachers encounter many challenges inside the general education classroom and the challenges special educators face. Although I may be an outsider, I believe that my experiences helped me better understand some of the complexities that general education teachers encounter when working with ELs and the various channels they must go through to obtain support. Being cognizant of the similarities I shared, I as the researcher had to examine how my experiences may or may not influence the research process (Dowling, 2006). It was imperative that I queried my identities and roles related to the study. One way in which I did this was to bracket my own thoughts through reflective note keeping; this enabled me to examine any assumptions, attitudes, or biases that came up (Dowling, 2006).

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

Data collection was done through interviews, observations, and document review. In the first phase, the three teachers (one third grade and one fourth grade teacher from Middletown Elementary School and a third grade teacher from Harriston Elementary School) who agreed to participate and met the participant's criteria were given written informed consents (see Appendix E). Once the teachers completed the consent, they received a copy of the completed written informed consent for their records. Consenting participants were then given a hard copy of the teacher demographic form (see Appendix F) and a hard copy of the open-ended survey (see Appendix G) to complete. The teachers were also given the option to complete the survey online. All three teachers chose to

complete the surveys online; surveys were completed for individual teachers at different times. It was estimated that surveys would take approximately 30 minutes to complete. The survey included a total of 11 questions, of which the researcher developed nine. Two questions were from Reeves' (2006) study, with slight modifications to meet the requirements of the present study. The purpose of the survey was to obtain an understanding of the participants' experiences working with ELs: to gather information on the teachers' background, their beliefs and practices working with ELs, their preparedness to teach ELs using RTI, and how they assess ELs' language proficiency.

In the next phase, I conducted multiple observations of each teacher's reading classes after initial interviews were conducted with them; the participants were each interviewed three times. In addition, I had informal conversations/debriefing interviews with teachers after each observation throughout data collection, whenever the time allowed, to clarify questions that arose during the observations.

Each participant was asked to identify ELs in her classroom who were going through the referral process. For ELs whose parent consents (see Appendix L) were signed and returned, I reviewed referral documents, which included students' limited access folders (LAF), student reports, teachers' data forms, and referral forms. I also reviewed the special education process guide, policy, and procedures.

Interviews. Many of the interviews I conducted with the participants occurred inside their classrooms. Due to time conflicts, some of the interviews were completed over the phone at an agreed-upon time with the teachers. Each interview with individual teachers was audiotaped and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Notes were also taken

during the interview and my reactions to the interview were written following the interviews.

The purpose of the interview was to garner full and detailed accounts from participants in the study. Semi-structured interviews, which are predetermined, open-ended questions, were used to ensure that key questions were asked, but also allowed for flexibility to explore themes when they emerged during the interview. In so doing, participants had the opportunity to share salient information or provide insight into an experience. The purpose of a semi-structured interview was not to receive simple yes or no answers, but rather to obtain descriptions of an episode, a linkage, and/or an explanation (Stake, 1995). Three interview protocols were developed for this study and a final interview protocol at the end of the study. The initial interview protocol (see Appendix H) consisted of 13 questions that addressed (a) instructional practices, (b) referral decisions, (c) language acquisition and learning disability, and (d) teacher preparation.

The questions that addressed instructional practices focused on the classroom teachers' instructional choices for differentiating between ELA and LD, and how this may or may not influence referral decisions. In his study, Gersten (1996) developed a conceptual framework of instruction (see Appendix A), which I utilized to inform my interviews. The framework consists of specific constructs that were determined to be effective for ELs. The earliest version of this framework (Gersten & Woodward, 1990) was largely built on the effective teaching research of the 1980s and the cognitive research of the 1980s and 1990s. The present framework underwent modifications to its constructs after observations of 18 classrooms with teachers who taught language

minority students. I found this tool especially useful for this study. To guide my research, I also had some specific questions that assisted me in gaining a deeper understanding of the teachers, their knowledge of their students, and how such knowledge influenced their decisions to refer ELs to special education. The questions are listed below:

1. How did teachers determine whether students' difficulties were a result of language acquisition or learning disability?
2. What are teachers' knowledge of language acquisition and learning disability?

The second interview protocol (see Appendix I) had eight questions that addressed: (a) teacher collaboration, (b) parent involvement, (c) differentiation, (d) intervention and RtI, (e) student referral, (f) similarities between ELs and students with LD, (g) using first language in the classroom, and (h) professional development. The third protocol also consisted of eight questions, which garnered information on: (a) intervention timeline, (b) ELs' academic progress, (c) assessments, (d) referral decision, (e) assessment data, (f) academic difficulties, and (g) the RtI process for ELs. In the final interview protocol (see Appendix J), I asked participants to reflect on and answer questions about their experiences: (a) working with ELs, (b) the benefits of the RtI process for ELs, (c) the support they received in their schools, (d) what they would do differently, and (e) what is needed for teacher preparation.

Observations. An observation protocol (see Appendix N) was developed for the classroom observations. The observation protocol was used during the observations for taking notes. During observations of the classroom teachers' reading lessons, I took notes on the instructional practices used by the classroom teacher as it related to the general classroom instruction, but specifically as it related to the instruction for ELs.

Observations allowed for a "relatively incontestable description" (Stake, 1995, p. 62) of each teacher's work. It also provided the opportunity to gather information so that "the reader can vicariously experience the setting of the study" (Merriam, 1998, p. 238).

I documented the instructional practices used by the teachers and the instructional decisions that were made when they worked with ELs who were demonstrating challenges. I noted if attention was given to ELs, whether they were afforded the opportunity to utilize their native language during class, if other modes of communication were used to provide access to the content, and if a variety of choices were given for students to respond. This was important to gain an in-depth understanding of the instructional decisions teachers made related to their referral decisions.

I also took note of the classroom environment and how lessons were structured. I took into account the physical arrangement of the classroom; the groupings, visual aids (e.g., charts), and strategies that were frequently used; and the materials that were used, including supplemented materials, accessibility to text, and whether activities were differentiated. In addition, I tried to capture the dialogue between teacher and students and how teacher and students navigated during the exchange. Moreover, I noted if teaching strategies were varied and effective for ELs. For example, I documented if teachers adjusted their rate of speech during instruction. I also noted if the focus was mainly on vocabulary or included comprehension tasks.

I was able to observe a SIT meeting for two of the referred students in Gwen's class. During the time of the study, these two students were scheduled for their initial SIT meetings. Data were collected through field notes. After the observations, I wrote descriptive and reflective notes (Creswell, 2007).

As a participant observer, my goal was to experience the observations simultaneously both as an insider and an outsider and I recorded what I observed as well as how I experienced the events (Krathwohl, 1998). In my documentation, I was careful in distinguishing between my observation and my experience of the events. It must be noted that teachers' availability resulted in variations in the number of observations.

Gwen. I observed Gwen 15 times and had five debriefing interviews. The days I observed her varied as a result of the county's 4-day reading cycle and 3-day writing cycle. I started out observing Gwen's class 2 days weekly; however, the number of days started to vary due to schedule conflicts related to countywide testing and professional development. Gwen often made an effort to rearrange her class schedule and her personal time in order to allow for classroom observations and interviews. She had a self-contained classroom, which allowed her some flexibility to make changes to her schedule. She was observed between 8:05 and 9:45 a.m., which was her reading block.

Catherine. Catherine was observed 12 times and had four debriefing interviews. Her reading block was held between 10:05-11:45 a.m. daily. Like Gwen, I started out observing Catherine's class 2 days weekly; however, the number of days started to vary, along with the agreed-upon days due to schedule conflicts caused by testing in the county.

Meredith. Meredith did not have a full reading block; instead, the first segment of her reading block was 10:45-11:30 a.m., after which the students had lunch and recess. The second part of her reading block was 12:25-1:50 p.m. Meredith's class was observed five times, in three reading sessions between 10:45-11:30 a.m. and two reading sessions

between 12:25-1:50 p.m. The days varied and were based on her availability. Three debriefing interviews were conducted when it was convenient for her.

Document review. With the permission of Tulloch County Public Schools and parental consent, I reviewed public and private documents identified by the classroom teachers for students identified who were going through the referral process. Gwen identified six students in her classroom who were going through the referral process, while Catherine identified one and Meredith identified two. Each teacher was given copies of the parent letter, explaining the study and copies of the consent forms. Both letters were written in English and in Spanish. The consent form was returned for all six ELs from Gwen's class, but none were returned from Catherine's or Meredith's classes.

In selecting documents, I followed Scott's (1990) four criteria: authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning. Including documents in this study offered information that interviews may not have captured. Documents included students' limited access folders (LAF), student reports, teachers' data forms, and referral forms. In reviewing documents, I was able to extract information on student academic history, attendance, teachers' observations, and current and/or previous intervention.

I also reviewed the special education process guide, policy, and procedures. I was able to gain information on county and school policies for the referral process, particularly as it related to ELs.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began as soon as I started collecting data and continued throughout the research simultaneously with data collection. Because I conducted a multiple-case

study, I analyzed data from several cases. I created documents from the survey from each participant, interview transcripts, write-ups of my reactions to the interviews, and notes from the observations and write-ups of the observations for each participant. The data analysis procedure involved two stages: single-case (or within-case) analysis and cross-analysis. As I engaged in the coding process, I used a constant comparative method (Patton, 1990) to compare and contrast themes and patterns across the cases.

At the preliminary stage of data collection, I used structural coding to initially organize and categorize teachers' responses to the survey questions completed online. Structural coding is a question-based code that "acts as a labeling and indexing device, allowing researchers to quickly access data likely to be relevant to a particular analysis from a large data set" (Namey, Guest, Thairu, & Johnson, 2008, p. 141). In structural coding, participants' responses are organized under a broad code generated from the research question. For the survey, the broad codes included: educational background, teachers' beliefs and practices, years of teaching experience, teachers' preparedness to teach ELs, teachers' experience teaching ELs, and how teachers assess ELs' language proficiency. This preliminary analysis allowed me to gather relevant information on teachers' backgrounds, their knowledge of the RtI process, and their experience with ELs, which were two of the criteria for participants in this study.

During this first cycle of coding, each case was "treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself" (Merriam, 1998, p. 194); within-case analysis was used to look for recurrent patterns in each participant's data sources. I read each teacher's transcripts of all interviews and observations in their entirety to gain an overall understanding. While reading through each document, I made notes of my comments, observations, and

queries. After reviewing each data source and documenting my notations, I used structural coding once again to organize the participants' interview responses into broad codes, which included: differentiation, interventions, collaborate, instruction, preparation, ELA vs. LD, resource support, parents, RtI, and culture. As I identified each code, I color-coded and labeled it. Dyson and Genishi (2005) put forward that in the initial stages of coding or open coding, some categories might be broad as well as redundant. Therefore, I revisited the data sources repeatedly to find recurrent patterns. I reviewed each teacher's transcripts of all interviews and observations line by line, using In Vivo coding to identify key words and phrases directly from the participants. In doing so, I could refine established categories and identify emerging ones. Marco files were then created to organize the In Vivo coding. The organized responses were further coded for a more detailed qualitative analysis (Saldaña, 2009).

During the second cycle of coding, I used focused coding to identify the most frequent or significant codes to generate categories, themes, or concepts that responded to the research questions. The established codes were streamlined and grouped to identify more developed categories; themes and subthemes were developed based on the emerging data. I continuously revisited the research questions to ensure that the categories were aligned with the research question.

Once the analysis of individual cases was completed, themes were compared across cases to demonstrate similarities and differences among teachers in order to identify patterns across the cases. I used a cross-case analysis of the surveys, field notes, interviews, and documents to "group answers…to common questions [and] analyze different perspectives on central issues" (Patton, 1990, p. 376). I developed a visual from

the extracted streamlined codes, to display the themes across cases in tabular form. As I looked at the recurrent patterns across cases, I was able to identify the variation across teachers' views on how each teacher classified ELs' academic challenges as either a language acquisition concern or a possible learning disability concern, and the challenges they each faced with the referral process.

The findings based on the use of the visual tool are displayed in table 3 in chapter 5 of this document. Several dominant themes were evident for each case, but in some instances, some themes went across all three cases or only two cases. For example, four themes that emerged across the three case studies were: (a) first year teaching ELs, (b) collaborating with colleagues during the referral process, (c) the support of the parent liaison as a key resource, and (d) the SIT process timeline. The next two themes emerged across only two teachers: (a) ELs oral language development and exposure to English, and (b) student expectations.

Validation Strategies

I utilized several methods of validation in this study: member checks, triangulation, and peer review.

Member checks. During the ongoing data collection and coding process, as I refined the codes and analyzed my data, I conducted member checks (Stake, 1995) to verify data accuracy, interpretation, and conclusions. Member checks were done biweekly during the early stages of data collection. However, as time went by, participants' availability became less due to time conflicts; as a result, member checks were done based on participant availability. Specific descriptions or takeaways from interviews were discussed with participants to determine whether they felt my

interpretation was accurate. Based on the participants' responses, I asked clarifying questions and made warranted corrections.

Triangulation. I analyzed documents, field notes, and transcriptions of interviews to triangulate the data sources and ensure that the themes represented the data. I triangulated the themes by revisiting the data and looking for confirming and disconfirming evidence across data sources as well as within individual sources (Erickson, 1987). The recurring evidence of the themes across the data sources and within individual sources indicated that my assertions fairly represented the data collected. The descriptive data revealed patterns of events representative of each teacher's reading instruction, which were used to create vignettes about each case that introduces the reader to each case.

Peer debriefing. The purpose of peer debriefing was to "enhance the accuracy" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196) of a given account. Two individuals were used in this capacity: one was an associate professor at a university and the other a doctoral student. They reviewed my document and posed questions about the study to ensure that it was clearly understood by someone else other than myself.

Chapter Four: Findings of the Within-Case Analysis

This chapter presents findings and analyses related to the following research questions:

1. How do third and fourth grade general education teachers differentiate between English language acquisition challenges and a possible learning disability when considering referral to special education?
2. What is the identification process used by third and fourth grade general education teachers to recommend English Learners (ELs) for referral during the special education process?

First, I present a detailed description of each teacher case study, beginning with a vignette of classroom instruction, followed by emerging themes from the case as related to Research Question 1. Analytic narrative vignettes are used to introduce each case because they were generally representative of lessons observed and captured the instructional practices used by the teachers. To answer Research Question 2, I present findings thematically across cases.

The three teacher case studies are grouped and presented by schools, beginning with Middletown Elementary School teachers, Gwen and Catherine. I begin with Gwen, who was a fourth grade teacher, followed by Catherine, who taught third grade. I then continue with Harrison Elementary School, where Meredith taught third grade. Presenting Middletown, then Harrison gives readers a sense of what took place in each individual school; following Catherine with Meredith gives a comparison of the third grade classes.

Gwen O'Sullivan

Due to Gwen's school population, her teaching experience has only been with English Learners. She shared that she did not feel prepared to teach ELs when she first started as a new teacher, even though she received some training from her undergraduate institution. She noted that her college courses and professional development contributed to her preparation, but she mostly learned from doing. She said, "Experience trumps all those things, in my opinion" (Interview 4). As she stated:

> My first year I don't think I knew what was suppose[d] to be on grade level for fourth grade and I taught all the fourth graders cause I taught reading to three classes and I could compare the kids but I didn't really understand until half way through the year when I said oh now I get it, I know where you should be and I see how far behind you guys are. Whereas now I have a better clue. (Interview 4)

In addition, Gwen said, "My first year I really didn't know what I was doing.… I wasn't as apt to differentiate between English problems and learning problems" (Interview 4). This statement not only tells that if EL students were having difficulty, Gwen was not readily able to identify whether it was due to language or learning challenges; it also suggests that Gwen may not have known to provide the instruction for specific needs based on students' challenges. Gwen expressed that her 4 years of experience teaching ELs has made her more knowledgeable about how to teach ELs. She now uses the World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) results and classroom observations to determine ELs' language proficiency levels. She conveyed that she also participates in the Response to Intervention (RtI) process, along with the math and reading resource teachers, and uses culturally responsive teaching within the RtI framework whenever possible. For Gwen, culturally responsive teaching would be to draw on students' cultures, languages, and experiences by including culturally relevant

text, having students share their experiences as appropriate and she would use English-Spanish cognates to assist with understanding. Although incorporating culturally responsive teaching was not always possible, she stated, "Students need to know that you value them and their culture" (Interview 1).

> *At the beginning of each reading class, Gwen starts the day by checking homework. The homework is often sentence check, but on this morning she starts with a spelling test, which includes spelling words and correcting sentences. There are two formats for the test: for the spelling, one form is to write the correct spelling words, and the other is to bubble in the correct spelling word. The sentence portion of the test is also differentiated: one form, students are required to correct the error in the sentence, while the other is to fill in the blank with the best word. The spelling patterns for the week are words with -er,-ar, -al, -le, and -en.*
>
> *Gwen instructs students to open their books to Eye of the Storm, page 411. She then explains to the class the importance of reading a text multiple times. Gwen then calls on several students to share why they think it is important to read a text several times. Gwen tells students they are going to listen to a story on tape and explains what the expectations are while they listen and follow in their text.*
>
> *Gwen then calls on a student, Lisa, to read the objectives for reading. The objective is "I can identify and explain cause and effect relationships in a text; I can write to explain cause and effect in a text." Gwen explains to the class that they are going to continue finding cause and effect relationships. She then states, "I wanna know if Warren likes his job, and if he does you're going to tell me why or why not...got it? We are going to start the book now."*
>
> *Teacher and students listen to the book on tape as the class follows in their texts. While the students listen, Gwen walks around the classroom to ensure students are on task. Gwen stops the tape player periodically to ask students questions; she gives students opportunities to discuss the question at their tables after which she asks different students to share their responses to the question. Gwen repeats the actions of listening to the tape, pausing for questions, table discussion and student participation as she guides the students through the text. After the story ends, Gwen gives each group directions on what they would do at their tables. She asks the red group to come over to work with her.*
>
> *There are five students in the red group. They go over and sit at the table where Gwen does her groups. Gwen tells the students that before they do their reading they will first discuss the routine writing. Gwen asks a student, Juan, to read the routine writing. Juan reads most of the sentence, but does not know the word 'cite,' which Gwen tells him. The sentence reads "Does Warren like his job, why*

or why not? Cite evidence from the text to explain your thinking."

Gwen processes with the students on how to answer the routine writing question. Gwen reminds the group about the rubric, which is "how Ms. O'Sullivan grades it, what we should have," Alejandro says, "A3EC." Gwen goes on to ask the students to explain what A3EC means. The students respond, A stands for answer

the question, 3E stands for three evidence, and C stands for conclusion. Gwen asks the group to repeat the routine writing question. She then asks Melissa to repeat the question.

Gwen asks the class a partial part of the routine writing question once more, "Does he love or does he like?" The class says, "Does he like." Gwen says, "So for my answer, my first sentence should probably start with Warren, and then what are we going to say?" The group responds, "Warren likes his job because." Gwen acknowledges the response and states, "Because is the answer to why, very good; but we need to decide, did Warren like his job or Warren does not?" The students all agree that Warren likes his job; Gwen engages in a shared writing activity with the students and begins writing the sentence on the white board "Warren likes his job." At the end of the sentence, Gwen pauses and asks the group what punctuation goes at the end of the sentence; with her guidance, the students agree "a period."

As Gwen continues to complete the requirements of the A3EC for the routine writing rubric, she asks guiding questions of the students to complete the 3Es. She explains, "This is where you are going to answer why or why not." She allows the group to identify Warren's job, which is a storm chaser. She then asks the group to find evidence from the text to confirm that he likes his job. Gwen relies heavily on guided questions to assist students in finding three evidence from the text to support their answer.

Gwen then moves on to the conclusion. She points to the vocabulary words, which are color-coded; green words are used to identify the beginning of a paragraph, yellow words are used in the middle of a paragraph, and red words are used when ending a paragraph. She highlights the word "lastly" and models her choice process by thinking a loud. After completing the shared writing activity, Gwen asks, "Show me with thumbs what do you think, was that super easy, kinda in the middle easy or was it really hard?" Some of the students give thumbs up, while some give a thumb sideways. Gwen asks, "so we think we could do it by ourselves?" The group reluctantly says yes. Gwen says, "maybe, sorta, kinda, ok. Good job!"

Gwen ends the routine writing activity and says, "Now we are going to move on to our book. Before we do, what is the title of this book, what does it say?" The group says, "Hurricane." Gwen begins to ask probing questions about hurricanes; this is their second day reading this book.

After reintroducing the text, Gwen asks the group to open their individual books and read the first sentence together. After the students read the first sentence, Gwen points out that the book does not mention the word hurricane, but instead has big storm. She affirms, "It definitely doesn't say hurricane, 'cause what letter does big start with? Look at the word big." The group responds "b." She then asks everyone to point to big and asks, "What letter does that start with?" The

group says "b." Gwen then asks, "What sound does b make?" The group responds "/b/, /b/." Gwen then reiterates, "So it doesn't say hurricane."

Gwen tells the group that they are going to do what they normally do during their groups. She says, "You are going to read to yourselves and I'm going to come around and have you read to me and ask you questions. Sounds like a plan?" The students say "yes." Gwen then replies, "Get to it; go ahead."

As the students read quietly, Gwen listens and works with individual students. As she works with the first student, Jonathan, she provides him with some of the words he does not know and also helps him decode other unknown words.

Gwen listens and helps Jonathan with the following words: blow, faster, hard, come. She provides assistance sounding out a word in order for Jonathan to decode. She says, "/i/ - /t/." Gwen gives ongoing support as Jonathan reads, "What's that word we're learning?" Jonathan says, "hurricane," Gwen replies, "good." Jonathan makes some attempts to independently sound out some of the words. Gwen notes, "I love that you're sounding it out, what does that e at the end tell the vowel to do?" Jonathan says, "Say its name." Gwen then replies, "Good. What's that vowel saying?" Jonathan responds, "/u/ ... huge." Gwen says, "There you go, very good." Gwen also tells Jonathan she loves how he is monitoring as he reads. She states, "Jonathan, I love how you fix it, you said mile and then you changed it to miles; you said which and you changed it to where, and here you said later and then you changed it to land, it tells me you are thinking about what you are reading, very, very good."

In addition to decoding support, Gwen also asks comprehension questions after listening to Jonathan read. She asks, "Why do they want to predict where it [the hurricane] will hit land?" Jonathan responds, "So they can tell people that a storm is going to come so they can prepare to make shelters." Gwen responds, "Great words 'prepare' and 'shelter.'"

Gwen listens to each student in the group and provides individual support as needed. All of the students require similar support with decoding unknown words. Some students also need support with vocabulary words; occasionally Gwen uses students' native languages in order for students to comprehend specific vocabulary words. She gives each student one or more comprehension questions at the end. After Gwen works with each student in the red group, she asks the class to put their materials away and asks Angela to read the objectives. She then asks for thumbs up or down if the class performs that objective during the reading class. Some of the students are not sure; Gwen explains what they did today and asks again for thumbs up or down, the class gives thumbs up.

At the end of the reading block, Gwen asks the class to write down one thing they did today, write down all their homework and then line up for the bathroom.

The above vignette highlights one of the reading classes that I observed in Gwen's class on February 11, 2016 between 8:05 a.m. and 9:45 a.m. On the day of my observation, Gwen wanted the students to read a story, *The Eye of the Storm* and identify cause-and-effect relationships. Gwen stated the purpose of the reading and then had the class listen to the reading on tape while they followed in their books. She supported the students' learning during the reading by asking guiding questions and allowing the students to engage in accountable talk. After the students finished listening to the story on tape, they answered the question posed at the beginning of the class.

During my observations of Gwen's reading classes, I noticed she often did most of the reading in the form of read-alouds. On other occasions, she instructed the students to take turns reading passages from their texts, such as the class anthology, chapter books, or other supplemental materials Gwen brought in. Gwen shared that having students read depended on the purpose of the reading and whether it was the first read. She explained that a large portion of her students struggled with reading and, therefore, she was selective in who read to the whole class, what they read, and how much they read. She also stated that it was very helpful for her students to first listen to the text on tape and during the second read, and then have students read.

Vocabulary was discussed before or during the reading with students. Before reading, Gwen gave the meaning of selected words; during reading, she sometimes gave the meanings of words or called on students individually to use the reading context to give the meanings of selected words. For most discussions, during reading, she asked a question, had students discuss at their tables, and then responded to the question. Similarly, in the writing session, vocabulary was reviewed and sometimes was the focus

of lessons. The teacher of English to Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) also participated in class discussion when she was in the classroom.

The vignette shows the ecology of Gwen's classroom and brings to life the Tier I instruction that was provided to ELs each day. This is significant because general education teachers must provide appropriate instruction to students before a referral can be made to the School Instruction Team (SIT) with concerns of a learning disability. Some of the instruction or strategies that Gwen utilized included small group instruction, guided interaction, peer-to-peer interaction, and modeling, and allowed for primary language interaction to clarify concepts. Gwen felt all the instructional practices she used with ELs were appropriate instruction for them in her classroom.

Important themes. Two major themes emerged from Gwen's data pertaining to Research Question 1: *How do third and fourth grade general education teachers differentiate between English language acquisition challenges and a possible learning disability when considering referral to special education?* The two themes—It Is Not a Language Concern and Differentiated expectations and rate of progress, along with subthemes that emerged for each of these themes—are discussed below.

It is not a language concern. Gwen identified several factors that she considered when making a decision to refer two of her students. She shared that she did not have referral criteria and the decision to refer differed depending on the student. For the two students she referred, Jonathan and Melissa, she identified factors that fell under academic performance and student behavior. She had referred both students at the beginning of the school year. Four other students who were currently in her class were already referred from the previous school year. Gwen stated, "Jonathan and Melissa are

my lowest of my low, I refer like day three because I just could tell" (Interview 1). While Gwen struggled to identify the reasons why some of her other students were having academic difficulties, she was certain about referring Jonathan and Melissa. She explained specific student characteristics that led her to refer these students.

Students' developmental milestones. The first characteristic was the students' behaviors in relation to their ages. Gwen stated:

> The two who I referred…one of them is just incredibly slow…really both of them I guess, it's step-by-step directions, where at this age you should be able to hear three directions and do it. With these kids it is take out your book, and once your book is out, I'll let you know what page to open to, and once you are on the page, I'll let you know what we are doing. They can't do it all at once, even to copy stuff that I have written takes an insane amount of time. (Interview 1)

As Gwen described the students' behaviors, the question that came to mind was: Are the students proficient enough in English to understand the directions? Gwen continued to give her reasons for referring these two students as follows:

> With both the kids I have referred what I have noticed is that, they use[d] to, they have gotten better about this, but when you would ask a question, they wouldn't even think. They would just give a random answer; I mean it would have nothing to do with what was in the text. I mean totally made up, out of the back of their heads. (Interview 1)

The students were demonstrating difficulty following multistep directions and poor comprehension skills. Both behaviors could have possible EL explanations or a possible disability explanation. It is well documented (Anderson, 2004; Artiles et al., 2005; Cheng, 1991; Echevarria et al., 2009; Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003; Guiberson, 2009) that the second language acquisition process can be misinterpreted as language or learning problems. According to Hamayan, Marler, Sanchez-Lopez, and Damico (2013), there are only so many ways students' academic difficulties can be manifested behaviorally, regardless of underlying cause. Hamayan et al. listed several possible explanations for

typical academic difficulties encountered by ELs, the possible EL explanations, and possible disability explanations (Table 2). For Gwen, the behaviors she observed were related to a possible learning disability.

Table 2

Excerpts from Special Education Considerations for English Language Learners *Showing Possible EL or Disability Explanations of Observed Behaviors*

Observable Behavior	Possible ELL Explanations	Possible Disability Explanations
Omits words or adds words to a sentence; forgets names of things that he or she knows, has to describe them	• Word not in English (L2) vocabulary yet • Word/concept not learned in home language (L1)	• Limited vocabulary due to poor oral comprehension and lack of opportunity to use vocabulary • Memory limitations • Word retrieval problems
Does not transfer learning from one lesson to another; has to relearn each concept from scratch	• Maybe in the early stages of learning English • English was learned orally with no context to make it meaningful	• Memory limitations • Comprehension difficulties • Poor ability to create inclusive conceptual categories to generalize learning
Has trouble following directions	• Not enough English proficiency to understand what is being said • No demonstrations or context given for directions/procedure	• Cannot process the entire set of directions with sufficient speed • Distractibility • Memory limitations • Not able to understand the temporal or spatial concepts
Cannot retell a story in sequence or summarize	• May understand story but may not have enough expressive language to retell • Does not understand directions in English and needs task to be modeled	• Organizational issues • Poor lexical cohesion • Experiential coherence problems • Comprehension difficulties

Students' backgrounds and language development. Gwen explained her second reason for referring Jonathan and Melissa: the students' backgrounds. She stated, "Melissa, she speaks Spanish at home, she has been here since pre-K I think, maybe kindergarten, so she has been in the school forever…two of them, really her and Jonathan" (Interview 1). This statement suggested that Jonathan and Melissa have been in

the school for a long time and implied they have been exposed to the English language and should have learned the language.

Gwen talked about the language acquisition process, as far as the time it takes for students to acquire conversational English and academic English, and acknowledged the difference between the language ELs use with friends in daily conversations and academic language needed for the classroom. "Students might be able to hold a conversation about their weekend, but that doesn't mean they understand content specific words, such as fractions, photosynthesis, or higher order words, example analyze" (Interview 1). The two different languages that Gwen spoke about were Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). According to DelliCarpini (2008), BICS refers to the everyday conversational or social language, which is used to communicate in one's environment, whereas CALP refers to the language skills needed to master English and be successful academically. BICS may develop within 2 years, but "CALP can take up to twelve years, depending on the types of educational and literacy experiences students have had in their native countries" (p. 99). Gwen suggested if ELs do not develop proficiency in CALP over an extended number of years, it is a concern that may warrant referral.

Students' challenges evident across languages. Gwen gave her third reason for referring Jonathan and Melissa. She stated:

> Even speaking they can't say what they want to say. We had a no uniform day the other day and Melissa came up to me and said, "What did they say in the announcements?" and I said, "You don't have to wear uniforms."… I said, "It's a no uniform day tomorrow." She said, "Oh, what does that mean?' I said, "You don't have to wear your uniform." She walked away, came back five minutes later and said, "What's a uniform?" She's been here since PreK and in Spanish it [is] uniforme or uniformo, it's the same word, so to me that's not a language problem, that's a, you don't know what a uniform is. (Interview 2)

Gwen shared a similar anecdote for Jonathan:

> Jonathan…called it [birthday] his happy birthday, he doesn't know when his birthday is. One time I did a little experiment; his birthday is in January, it was December, we are celebrating someone else's birthday and he said, "When is my happy birthday?" again they don't say, they don't call it my feliz cumpleanos, I get it for a [very young] child because that's all you hear all the time happy birthday. I told him it was January 18th and then the next day he asked me when his happy birthday was, and I said it's in a month that starts [with] J, let's try to figure out which one and all he could come up with was July and I literally told him the day before that it was January so it's like those are not problems with language. (Interview 2)

In both incidents, Gwen was raising concerns for memory, comprehension, and the students' ability to shift between languages or transfer vocabulary from one language to another. Gwen pointed out that Jonathan did not know his birthday or his age. She stated, "The fact that my student is 10 years old, he thinks he's 11, he doesn't know when his birthday is, and half the time you ask him what his brother's name is, he doesn't know, that's not a language thing. He doesn't know those things in Spanish either" (Interview 2). Gwen observed that the students' difficulties were not only seen in the English language setting but across languages, outside of the academic contents. While ELs and students with special needs may exhibit similar learning challenges, for ELs, if it is a true disability, it will be manifested in both languages and across most learning settings (Crago & Paradis, 2003; Cummins, 1984, 2000; Damico & Hamayan, 1991; Damico, Oller, & Storey, 1983; Hamayan et al., 2013).

Students' academic progress. The fourth reason Gwen gave for referring Jonathan and Melissa was related to their academic progress. Gwen shared that when she begins to have concerns and is considering referring students, she looks at the students' past academic data. When she is in the process of collecting those data, she talks to the

students' previous teachers. She acknowledged that she is cautious about talking to teachers because she does not want to be influenced by their experiences. She stated:

> I know the third grade teachers, we talk and I know all the ESOL teachers so we talk, but that also, I don't like getting too much of a background on the kids cause some kids just have better or worst years. But yeah, you have an idea of what you're working with, and where they are coming from. (Interview 3)

She also shared that across grade levels, the teachers developed a spreadsheet with the reading scores for all the students, which was accessible to teachers from the previous grades. Gwen explained that these shared data are helpful when making decisions to refer. She stated, "Ms. Murphy has [the] spreadsheet that we share. I share with fifth grade teachers, she shares with me so that I know their past couple DRA scores, because making progress is one thing, but if you go from a sixteen to an eighteen in three or four months, that's a red flag. You should be more in the mid-high twenties by then, so those are the main things I look at" (Interview 3).

According to Gwen after she looked at the data for Jonathan and Melissa, they "did make progress, they went from a three and four to a sixteen, which is obviously a DRA progress but I'm still adamant that they need an IEP…sixteen is a first grade level, a three or four is beginning Kindergarten level…. I think you are suppose[d] to leave first grade on a sixteen. So they made a year and half worth of progress, which is good but they are still so insanely below" (Interview 3). It was nearing the end of the school year and both students were 3 years below the fourth grade level going into the fifth grade, which indicated they would be 4 years below once they get to the fifth grade. Both students' performances were significantly below grade level; however, Gwen's statement that students need an IEP implied that she had already identified them as students with

special education needs without considering what the possible assessments and evaluation might reveal.

Differentiated expectations and rate of progress. Gwen spoke about her expectations for her EL students; she stated she had "very differentiated expectations" (Interview 1). Gwen explained what she meant as she continued:

> That's not the right way to say it, 'cause that sounds like you don't have high expectations for everyone and that's not what I mean. It's just high expectations for someone on grade level is a lot different for someone who is on a Kindergarten level so like you'll see on the essay that we just did, my highest kids had to write three paragraphs and my lowest kid wrote one paragraph. (Interview 1)

Gwen's explanation suggested that her expectations are based on students' ability levels. Cavazos (2009) cautioned teachers on using ELs' ability levels to determine their expectations of students. She shared her experiences as a Latina student-teacher and articulated that many teachers had different expectations for ELs based on students' perceived abilities. According to Kang (1994):

> Since language is one part of the total knowledge that readers use to process information in text, there is a significant relationship between language proficiency and reading proficiency. Low proficiency in a second language may inhibit a reader from transferring his or her good reading skills to the L2 reading context or prevent him or her from making full use of the syntactic, semantic, and discourse cues in reading. (p. 648)

The expectations many teachers hold about ELs' abilities are largely based on how well ELs are able to perform on tasks given in their second language, which is not always an accurate illustration of students' true abilities. Gwen distinguished her expectations between students who are experiencing challenges as a result of language and those who might have other underlying problems and how much progress she expected for each. She stated, "When it is an ESOL problem they move, they might move

more slower than a kid who exited or a native speaker but they move. They are going to make progress" (Interview 3). The implication from this statement was that students who are identified as students in need of special education services do not make progress. However, these students do make progress, but the rate at which they demonstrate progress might be different from nondisabled peers.

According to the Center for Public Education (2009), most students receiving special education services (that is, appropriate instruction with special accommodations and support services) are able to demonstrate academic proficiency. In an article released by The National Center of Learning Disabilities titled *Preparing General Education Teachers to Improve Outcomes for Students With Disabilities*, Blanton, Pugach, and Florian (2011) stated, "Students with disabilities can perform across the spectrum of proficiency from low proficiency to high proficiency" (p. 3). Therefore, the difference between students with language difficulties and those who might be in need of special education services is not that one group will make progress and the other will not; rather, it is the rate at which they show progress. Sanatullova-Allison and Robinson-Young (2016) cited Burr et al. (2015), who stated that one of the questions teachers should ask in reference to progress is "How does the student's progress in hearing, speaking, reading, and writing English as a second language compare with the expected rate of progress for his or her age and initial level of proficiency?" Gwen seemed to have grappled with this question for several of her students. She gave an example of one of her EL students, Maria, as she pointed out:

> I'm still not like 100% on [sure about] Maria like I am with the others. I mean the spelling is pretty bad and so it's like phonetic [skills are] is still emerging... it's definitely worth referring in getting tested. But with her she will really sit there and really, really think and sometimes if you give her enough time she will get it and that's another thing, it's like with some of the kids, you don't know if they are taking so long 'cause they do have their answer in Spanish and need to translate it in their mind and they do whatever...where they really do need that extra time or if they are taking so long because there is an issue. (Interview 2)

In this example, Gwen shared in a debriefing that Maria was making progress, but it was often inconsistent. Gwen made the decision to continue with the referral that was made the previous year, although she was not completely convinced she should move forward with it. At the SIT meeting for Maria on March 2, 2016, Gwen expressed her uncertainties and observations of Maria inside her classroom. The SIT team decided not to refer Maria to the IEP team for assessments, but for Gwen to continue to provide interventions inside the general education classroom.

Validity of assessments. Gwen said she was careful about using particular assessments as a measure of ELs' abilities. She shared that many of the tests the students were required to take did not reveal their true abilities. She stated, "Tests are rarely assessing what they are meant to be assessing. I think they're assessing can you read in English" (Interview 3). Several researchers have confirmed that assessments given in English are also assessments of English (American Educational Research Association [AERA], 1985; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Lenski, Ehlers-Zavala, Daniel, & Sun-Irminger, 2006). Gwen asserted that because of the vast amount of emphasis placed on assessments, the school system should allow ELs, especially newcomers, to complete assessments in a language they understand; in that way, they can demonstrate what they really know.

Gwen shared her experience of informally assessing one of her students to demonstrate that assessing in English might not always convey a true representation of the student's learning. Gwen described the student as a newcomer; he was new to the country, and he spoke very little English. She said while on a field trip, they saw a cow. She asked the student what it was in Spanish and the student said "toro" (Interview 3), which means bull. Gwen proceeded to provide prompting for the correct response. She made the sound the cow makes and the student correctly responded "baca" (Interview 3), cow in Spanish. Although the student needed some support, Gwen said, "I understood that he comprehended...so that's learning, even though it's not English, it's still you're learning, that's comprehension" (Interview 3). She added that giving the students assessments in English did not give her meaningful instructional information about the student. However, giving the assessment in the student's home language would provide her with useful data that would inform her instruction for the student.

Gwen shared that she has found alternative ways to assess her ELs to garner student data effectively, monitor students' progress, and plan instructionally. The alternative forms of assessments include teacher observations, anecdotal records, and performance assessments. She has also modified and provided accommodations to teacher-made tests. She explained that she and/or the ESOL teacher often read assessments to the whole class or specific groups of students. She gave an example of a grammar test that she gave to her fourth grade class. She stated, "Grammar, we'll read it 'cause I don't care, not that I don't care, I care that you can read the sentence, but right now I am not assessing whether you can read the sentence, I'm assessing if you know which one is the noun" (Interview 3). She pointed out that because almost every test is a

reading test, this could significantly impact ELs' grades. They are at a disadvantage when assessments do not include accommodations that take into account their distinct differences (Lenski et al., 2006).

Assessments are critical for making instructional and evaluative decisions for all students. For ELs, it is a challenge to identify students' true academic levels as a result of their language barrier. Gwen is very mindful when selecting assessments to measure ELs' abilities, especially when making referral decisions. She shared that one of her concerns was that she did not want to over-refer or let any of her students fall through the cracks.

Supports that help teachers make referral decisions and barriers they face in the identification process.

Collaborating with colleagues in the identification process. When a classroom teacher identifies a student who may be at risk for academic or behavior challenges and he or she is going through the decision-making stages of whether to refer the student to the IEP process, an important aspect to consider is whether the student's educational needs were met inside the general education classroom and whether instructional supports were implemented where needed. To ensure that students were receiving appropriate instruction according to their needs, collaborating with resource providers was crucial for the general education teacher. Collaboration is defined as "an interactive process that enables people with diverse expertise to generate creative solutions to mutually defined problems" (Robinson Buly, 2007, p. 84). For Gwen, two of the resource providers with whom she collaborated included the ESOL teacher and the Reading Specialist.

Gwen stated, “It’s absolutely important to collaborate with other teachers, with your team, to get different ideas, see what works” (Interview 2). She collaborated with the ESOL teacher who was assigned to her class to plan lessons for their small groups. They planned the weekly instructions and there was a specific group routine the students followed each day. She explained, “My ESOL teacher and I do the same thing every day, unless she wants to teach a whole group lesson, so it’s like her kids know who they are so when she walks in, her groups just comes over…. They are doing vowels right now while the rest of us do grammar and spelling words” (Interview 2). The small group activities varied depending on the class objectives and needs of the group. The Reading Specialist was also scheduled to provide additional intervention to the students for an hour daily. In addition, Gwen shared that she often communicated with the Reading Specialist about how she could do things differently for her students.

Collaboration between teachers is necessary to facilitate and support language development and access to the general education curriculum for ELL student success. In the past, ESOL teachers and classroom teachers often worked in isolation of each other. Today, the educational landscape for ELs has changed drastically as EL students are expected to meet the same requirements as their non-EL peers. Therefore, both ESOL and classroom teachers are responsible for the achievement of ELs. They must find ways to work together to address language, literacy, and comprehension inside the classroom (DelliCarpini, 2008).

According to Gwen, she collaborated with the teachers to plan and provide additional support for students who were performing below grade level to ensure that their needs were being met inside the classroom. However, she shared that there were

some barriers to that collaboration; for example, the resource teachers were being pulled from classes and used for other duties and, as such, Gwen frequently found herself alone in many instances because the resource teachers were not available. When the resource providers were removed from the classroom, that expertise was also removed from the classroom and students' educational needs were impacted. Gwen pointed out, "We are doing WIDA testing so the ESOL teachers haven't been in since the beginning of January 'cause they have been testing so we just haven't had ESOL services at all" (Interview 1). She explained that the students needed more assistance and "it would help if ESOL teachers weren't pulled for three months of testing" (Interview 2).

Collaboration between the general education and ESOL teacher is especially important in reading tasks. In a reading task, three variables interact: linguistic variables, knowledge variable, and literacy variables (Kang, 1994). During reading, specifically cognitively demanding activities, ELs may encounter difficulty related to these variables, which may lead to reading frustration. To eliminate the chances of such frustrations, the ESOL teacher and the general education teacher can work together to provide the instruction, support, and guidance for such ELs. Both teachers would be able to combine their knowledge and expertise to implement the instruction needed for student achievement more effectively. In addition, collaboration between the teachers would make the task more manageable for any one teacher. Gwen expressed her desire for more ESOL support in her classroom, but she also conveyed the immutable nature of the circumstances she and her students are in. She stated:

> I wish that we had more support from ESOL teachers, that's not a blame thing, [it's a] testing culture thing, they just have to be taken out because they have to give those tests, I do wish we have more support obviously with my having twenty-nine kids in the class, these are things beyond our control. (Interview 1)

Gwen also spoke about not having the scheduled reading intervention by the Reading Specialist, saying, "For reading they were pulled out, it was supposed to be for an hour, which Ms. Green did her humanely best. It's certainly not her fault—often the resource teachers are pulled for meetings or the first ones pulled if there's a problem or anything, which I get" (Interview 1).

Although Gwen expressed that she understood why the resource teachers were pulled from her room, she also realized she needed help in her classroom if she was going to provide the support her students needed. She shared that she voiced her concerns to the school administration and received some support, but not long after given the support, it was taken from her. She stated:

> I technically got a paraprofessional in response to all my complaints and he's been in my class for maybe ten times, I don't really have him and when he comes in he hasn't been in three weeks, so I had no idea he was coming so I have nothing prepared. First, I had things planned for him to do with them, but he wasn't here. That is school-wide, I guess. (Interview 4)

Gwen said the paraprofessional was assigned in February or March, and he was scheduled to come in her classroom once a day for 30 minutes. He came briefly and she had not seen him since. She explained, "They are always pulled for subs [to substitute] or to help someone else. So when he comes in, I don't have anything prepared so it's like can you make these copies" (Interview 4).

For students who are struggling, the pre-referral process required that teachers identify students' learning problems and then develop a strategic plan for improvement. Gwen had done that and she needed to collaborate with her colleagues to implement the plan, but the reality in her classroom prevented her from engaging with the resource teachers to provide the needed supports for her students. Therefore, she was left to

navigate the different areas of language, literacy, and comprehension, utilizing her own expertise to single-handedly provide general instruction to the whole class, give needed intervention for her ESOL students at risk for reading problems, document progress, and determine the decision to refer.

***The need to collaborate with parents and the support of the parent liaison*.** For many educators, parent involvement, regardless of ethnicity, is crucial for students' academic achievement (Smith, Stern, & Shatrova, 2008). As Gwen put it, "The more cooperation [from parents], the better" (Interview 2). Nevertheless, she explained that "Sometimes it's difficult…they [the parents] really care and they love their kids very much, but sometimes they just don't know how to help them so they want to help them, but not only can they not read the homework, even if it was in Spanish they don't know how to do it, so just encouraging them to read to their kids" (Interview 2). For many teachers, parent involvement is viewed as the formal participation in school activities such as meetings and school events. On the other hand, for many Hispanic parents, parent participation is defined as informal home activities such as checking homework. However, Gwen's statement suggested that parents were not able to help their children due to a language barrier, and even if the homework were in Spanish, they would still not know how to help.

The language barrier and lack of education (Smith et al., 2008) are two of several reasons Hispanic parents often demonstrate low levels of parent involvement. Other reasons include lack of time for many Hispanics who work long hours, lack of understanding the operation of school, lack of trust, and logistical issues. The obstacles deterring parents from being involved at Middletown Elementary has been a longstanding

concern. Gwen shared that the parent liaison, Ms. Lopez, became the parent representative in many parent meetings. She stated, "I don't think any of my parents have ever been at SIT, but she [Ms. Lopez] comes and she has notes and stuff from parent meetings in the past. She's kinda like the parent representative so she knows the parents and she speaks for them" (Interview 2).

Ms. Lopez's participation in SIT meetings as a parent representative was not directly stated in the job description; however, she was an important connection between teachers and parents. In addition to representing parents at meetings, Gwen shared that Ms. Lopez also tried to inform the parents of their rights, but it did not always translate into parents advocating for or working with their children. She stated, "Parents don't understand their rights as much as they should; and our bilingual coordinator tries to get that across to them…it doesn't necessarily work" (Interview 4). According to Smith et al. (2008), culture may dictate what parent involvement looks like, and many Hispanic parents believe it is the school's role to instill knowledge in their children while they provide nurturance and teach moral respect and behavior. Therefore, they may be reluctant if asked to assume added responsibilities as they might view it as overstepping their boundaries (Smith et al., 2008).

Ms. Lopez had been at Middletown for several years, and she had taken on the role as parent representative, even though her job description did not directly list this role. She had worked with the families over the years and had developed a relationship and trust with families. The teachers also trusted her, which made her an important bridge between teachers and parents. The language barrier between parents and teachers made communication very difficult. Most teachers "speak little or no Spanish, making

communication about grades, behavior, or homework difficult" (Smith et al., 2008, p. 9). Gwen shared that they have had translators from the county as well as student volunteers from a private school, but she trusted Ms. Lopez. She stated:

> The girls from St. Peter's volunteer. They come over and translate for us, which is very sweet, but I always feel a little awkward about that 'cause parents want to know like private information about their kids and I mean they are in their uniforms, the parents know. With the county translator it would be different, but I like when I have Ms. Lopez because I trust her I know what she is saying. If I don't know you, I don't know. (Interview 2)

Gwen shared that Ms. Lopez translated most of what she sent home and assisted her with communicating with parents during parent conferences or phone calls home. She stated:

> Everything we send home, newsletters, I have a behavior report that I send home on every Friday that tells their effort, their behavior and everything, it's in Spanish and English. Everything we send home is translated, so Ms. Lopez translates that. She'll do call outs for the entire grade level if we are having a problem. She's very flexible…you just pick a day and she'll do as many conferences as you need. She's been here for so long that she has had these parents like forever, they are often very big families so they know her and they form a relationship and it's also helpful because I only know what is happening in fourth grade unless I've talked to other teachers which I often try not to do, at least until I get to know the kids, but if you are in a conference and you're saying yea blah, blah, blah…she'll say…she has notes on every kid she has ever been on…oh yeah, this was happening in second grade and third grade too, so she's a great resource to have. (Interview 2)

It is important that parents are kept informed, and while Gwen does not speak Spanish, with the support of Ms. Lopez she was able to inform parents about their children's performance and progress. In addition, families are an important source of information about their children's background and an important part of the students' support team; therefore, when students are experiencing difficulty, it is important that parents understand the challenges students are having in school. Keeping the families informed builds trust and a positive relationship for working together. When families are

informed, it also reduces the likelihood that the referral process will be combative because parents know and understand what is happening.

The School Instructional Team (SIT). The first team that the teachers refer students to is the SIT. Once a teacher refers a student to SIT, that team assists the teacher with clearly identifying the observed student concern(s) and recommending ways to resolve the identified problem. Gwen's experience with SIT was very different, however, as she stated: "The SIT process is so long there are so many kids here that…it's very difficult for the one counselor and…it just takes forever.… We say we have to have a six-week intervention and we'll meet again but in reality we meet in six months…it's very, very inefficient and it's absolutely harming the children" (Interview 2). Gwen's statement about the inefficiency of the SIT process related to students being referred but never scheduled for a meeting; or if the student was scheduled and a meeting held, the follow-up meeting for progress monitoring may never take place. Gwen's concern was that many of these students were passed on to the next grade without any follow-ups and the students continued to fail. She stated, "My problem is I think way too many kids slip through the cracks" (Interview 2).

Gwen talked about going through the referral process with the students whom she referred and the amount of time it took for one meeting. She said:

> I put some kids up in September and just met on them [about them] in February. It's like you don't meet on them [about them] right away and then intervention,... like Jonathan, you were at the meeting with him, that was our first meeting. I put him up the second week of school, so August, so you don't meet on them forever and then they want you to do all these eight weeks of interventions and then eight more weeks and another one and it's like we can't. (Interview 2)

Like all the other students Gwen referred, Jonathan may have had one or no meetings, and at the end of the school year, these students were all passed on to the next

grade level. Gwen was worried whether there would be any follow-up for these students: "Who knows if they are even going to come [up] next year especially with a different counselor. Again this is a disservice to the kids" (Interview 2). She contended, "I put them up early, because you have to in order to get anything done" (Interview 2), but even with the students she referred early, nothing had been done for these students at the end of the school year.

Gwen explained that the two students, Jonathan and Melissa, whom she referred early in the school year, were also referred in previous grades. According to referral documentations, both students were referred in the second and third grade. Gwen made reference to the third grade referral: "You have to do so much to prove that there is something wrong and I mean the teacher that had Jonathan and Melissa last year, she has her master's in special education, she knows what she's doing and it's now May 26 of their fourth grade year and they do not have an IEP" (Interview 3). She shared that many teachers have refused to refer students because they realized nothing will change. She conveyed:

> I have heard teachers say I'm not going through that because it's too much paperwork and nothing is going to get done and I understand that concept.… Teachers don't want to do it because it is too much paper work and they know what happens when they try to do it and they don't want to waste their time, which I understand, I very much understand. (Interview 3)

While Gwen understood what many of her colleagues experienced, she asserted, "It feels like a waste of time, but I wouldn't feel right not fighting for some of these kids" (Interview 3).

Gwen attempted to explain why SIT was unable to meet regularly. She stated:

> When you only have one counselor and she's the only one and she has to be in every SIT meeting and I guess we have...our SIT meetings and IEP meetings, they

> are always on Mondays and they are every other Monday. They don't want to make them on days other than Mondays because they also want Ms. Brown and we need a translator. There is [sic] so many factors going into what makes it so impossible to meet. (Interview 3)

She continued by stating that "I don't fault a specific person. I just think there's so many components, but it's not serving the purpose of (a) identifying who needs it and (b) giving them the help they need. It's disheartening, you go through it and you keep pushing and a lot of teachers give up" (Interview 3).

Catherine Murphy

Catherine was an experienced teacher who had been teaching for 12 years when she first began working with predominantly ELs at Middletown Elementary. She stated that she had limited training related to ELs and expressed that "Year one, [I was] fully incompetent. I was not prepared for what I was going to walk into, having taught third grade for the majority of my career, I had no idea that I had walked into third grade by number, but second grade mid-year" (Interview 4). Catherine further expressed that her lack of preparation also made her question whether she should continue her career as a teacher. She became overwhelmed and wondered if she was being an effective teacher.

Catherine conveyed that when she was in college, there were no courses on teaching ELs, and in the schools where she taught previously, there were no ELs; therefore, no professional development was centered on working with that population. As a new teacher, Catherine said she was learning on the job, and while it was not fair to the students or to her, there was nothing she could have done. At the time of the study, Catherine expressed that she was beginning to realize she was not a bad teacher nor was she incompetent.

When Catherine was asked if she used culturally responsive teaching in her classroom, especially with ELs who might be at risk and going through the RtI process, she indicated she was not familiar with that terminology and RtI was in its developing stages at her school. She did not feel that the RtI process was carried out as it should be.

> *Catherine sees two groups of third graders, and on March 3, 2016 the classes transition and the students are completing their warm-up activities on their individual Chrome books, getting their pencils sharpened and settling in for their reading class. As the students finish their warm-up activities, Catherine tells them to put their headphones away. After which she tells the class to "please take out your inferencing chart," she then adds, "You're also going to need your reading book." The students are still in the process of settling down and it is noisy in the classroom. In response to the noise, Catherine says, "If people don't pay attention, then it's going to be hard."*
>
> *Catherine's class is working on inferencing using the story "Tops and Bottoms" and this is the second day of the lesson. She starts the class by reviewing what happened in the previous lesson. Catherine jokes with the class about Raymond answering all of the questions the day before and she expresses happiness in him showing up for class today. The class giggles as Catherine posts a chart on the chalkboard with the heading, What I know, What I Read, and Inference. She asks the class, "What do we know about this so far?" When the class does not respond, she points to the chart and says, "The chart, why are we doing the chart? The inferencing chart, why are we doing the chart? Am I just doing it to look at myself?" The class says no.*
>
> *Catherine goes on and gives a brief review of the previous lesson, "Okay, so far we read and we came up with different things about what we know, so yesterday your job was to come up with this empty box all by your lonesome." Catherine points to the box with the heading inference. Catherine says, "Let's go back and review. We have to come up with some things that we knew before we started reading, I believe my box was, when I read fables or stories I know that the hare is usually what kind of character?" The class says "clever." Catherine follows up by asking "What is happening in our story so far?" One student says, "The bear is always sleeping." Catherine adds that yesterday Ann-Marie said, "Bear didn't want to do anything." Catherine asks Toby, "How do we know that Bear did not want to do anything?" Toby responds and Catherine exclaims, "Whoooaaa! Is that a sentence?" Toby gives a different response, "I can see that Bear is lazy by looking at the pictures in the story." Catherine confirms Toby's response and points out that using the text features, pictures, and photographs helps us to see what Bear is doing and where he is doing it.*

Through questioning, Catherine prompts students to find several details and where to find the details. She asks students, "What's that 'e' word I like?" "Nobody knows the 'e' word that I like?" She calls on Yandi to answer the question, and she says "inference." Catherine responds, "Inference is 'i' woman, what's my favorite 'e' word?" Another student, Michanya, says "evidence." Catherine acknowledges the response is correct. Another student then says, "We find the evidence on page 310." Again, Catherine confirms the response is correct and asks another question, "Why do we have according to page 310?" She reminds the students that this was something she taught yesterday. As the students raise their hands to answer the question, Catherine announces that it is the same people answering questions every day. She then says, "Oh Jazi" as if she was singing, "Why does that say according to page 310?" The student, Jazlyn, begins to answer the question, but as soon as she starts to answer, Catherine immediately reminds her that she needs to respond in a complete sentence. Jazyln gives the incorrect response and Catherine says, "Ah ah ah, listen to the question, my question is, why does our answer start with according to page 310?" When none of the students responds, Catherine says, "Oh boy, turn and talk to you neighbor."

After giving the students time to talk with their neighbors, Catherine says, "Talk to me!" One of the students gives the correct answer and Catherine tells her to get a treat from the pumpkin. She then says, "He said our sentence starts with, according to page 310, so that we can go right to that page and find the information, that is one reason."

Catherine and the class discuss other sentence starters, after which she explains further that copying directly from the text only shows that they are good copiers, it does not illustrate that they understand what they read.

Catherine then asks the class to read aloud one section of the text. After the students read, Catherine asks what does the word divvied means. One student responds, "divide." Catherine reminds the student to respond in a complete sentence and the student does. Catherine then asks students to share their inference based on what they have read so far. After several students share, Catherine asks the class to read page 312 aloud, but quickly asks Leo to read aloud. After Leo reads, Catherine says, "There is something in there that I find interesting; it says that Hare and Mrs. Hare are going to cook up a plan. What does that mean? They are going to cook up a plan." Many of the students share that they think cook up meant to trick Bear. Another student, Cameron, says, "Cook up means they are going to make a plan." Catherine said, "Yes! They are going to cook up, meaning come up with a plan, to do what?" The class gives pieces of the answer such as "trick"; after several promptings from Catherine, they say to trick Bear. Catherine repeats, "To trick bear about the crops, very good; that's inferring, you just did it again."

Catherine explains that "cook up" is an idiom. "It's not regular speech; it's supposed to mean something different. Cook up in this case means put their heads together to come up with a plan." Catherine asks the class if they thought tricking Bear is going to be easy. Many of the students immediately respond with a "no." Another student quickly changes his answer and says, "Yes! Because he is always sleeping."

Catherine adds, "He's not awake long enough to think smartly, he just wakes up uh uh, what did you say? Didn't it say that, he opened one eye to talk? Let's read page 313." The class reads together aloud while Catherine reads with one student individually to find the evidence that Bear can be tricked easily. Catherine occasionally stops the reading and points to specific vocabulary words or asks the class comprehension questions. Each time she points to the page number in the text, she asks the students to find the evidence from the text to answer the questions.

Catherine asks the class to "Put your finger on that word d-e-b-t" and said, "That word [is] debt, what does that mean?" One student begins to answer, but thinks the word is "bet." Catherine corrects her and gives a sentence the word, "Not bet but debt. The family is poor because of that debt." Catherine asks another student and she says, "A debt is something you have to pay back someone, like when you owe somebody something."

Catherine gives the background of why Hare and his family did not have any money by asking the class questions about Hare and the Tortoise. After listening to the answers from several students, Catherine says, "Those are all good inferences. Ladies and gentlemen, you should not have had a problem filling in the last box."

Catherine begins to explain to the class what she expects to see in their writing. She starts by saying, "Hare is a character. What kind of letter should his name start with?" The class correctly says, "Capital H." She repeats the same expectation for the character Bear. Catherine then says, "Keep that in mind when you get on that Chrome book, I will be looking for?" The class says, "CUPS." One student raises her hand to share what she has written after she shares; Catherine goes around the classroom and reads individual students' responses. As she reads, she says, "Very good." Catherine then asks different students to share; as they share, Catherine says, "I'm liking it, I'm liking it."

One of the students, Jacquline, raises her hand to ask a question, "Does the Bear get the top of the carrot or bottom?" Catherine says, "Jacquline is having a wondering, back to that inner conversation. She's wondering if Bear is going to get the top of the carrot or the bottom. So that is something you continue to read for. I'm not giving you the answer, but that's something as you read you do have that question. That is absolutely fine." Catherine directs the students to open their Chrome books and go to the classroom. As students start to get on their Chrome

books, Catherine assists some of the students who are having difficulties. After a few moments have passed, Catherine says, "Five, four, three, two, one, everybody should be in classroom."

She asks a student, Selena, to read the question they are answering. Selena reads the question aloud, "Please answer the question by using evidence from the text. Based on the story so far do you think Hare decided which vegetables to plant before or after bear said he wanted the top?" Catherine gives additional directions to the class to use their books to find the evidence to answer the question. She then goes back to discuss CUPS. She asks the class what CUPS means, she asks the meaning of each letter and the class responds: C, capital letter; U, understanding; P, punctuation; S, spelling. She reminds the class that they are writing for strangers and she expects to see the correct use of capital letters.

A teacher comes to the door and calls a student. Catherine looks over to the door and calls a group of students to take their "stuff" and go with the teacher. As soon as she tells the group to go, she quickly brings her attention back to the class. While the students are working, Catherine works with individual students to help them understand what the question is asking. As she works with individual students, she also begins to call on groups of students at different tables to go to the bathroom.

Catherine sits with a student and asked the student to read the question aloud. As the student reads, Catherine tells the student words he is not able to read. After the student finishes reading, Catherine explains the question to the student. Catherine meets with another student and follows the same routine as she does with the previous student. However, this time she also uses the text to help the student identify evidence to answer the question.

After Catherine calls the students at all the tables to use the bathroom, it is time for lunch. She tells the class they will continue to work in the next class. She asks them to stop working and prepare to leave for lunch.

This vignette of the lesson on March 2, 2016 brings to light the classroom culture and the instructional exchange between the teacher and students, as well as the exchange among students. Catherine was very buoyant and witty in her interaction with her students and the students also used humor with the teacher and each other. Catherine shared that this light-hearted atmosphere was important to her because she wanted the students to feel comfortable and safe, which would allow them to build their confidence.

While Catherine's focus for this lesson was inferencing with the use of evidence, she also gave a lot of attention to speaking in complete sentences. She gave her students repeated opportunities to give examples of inferencing after reading portions of the text, *Tops and Bottoms*. Catherine reported that the students needed a lot of examples to truly understand. In one of the interviews, Catherine pointed out that "We do a lot of examples. When you talk about stuff and they don't have a clue and you give it to them and they are like, oh, okay, so we do that" (Interview 1).

Throughout the lesson, Catherine used questioning to guide her students' thought process to understand the concept of inferencing. She also allowed students to confer with each other to discuss specific questions. After giving students time to demonstrate their understanding of inferencing through examples from the text, Catherine had the class transition to the question she posted in an online classroom. However, the class ended before the students were able to complete the assignment. Catherine told the class they would complete the assignment in the next class.

Catherine used the suggested texts in the curriculum for all of her reading lessons, with a range of graphic organizers or organizational charts. Catherine's style of read-alouds varied, but in many instances, her students did the majority of the reading. Although Catherine's school did not support choral reading, she allowed her class to engage in it frequently. She used popcorn reading with her students as well. Catherine noted that:

> Nowadays they want the teachers to do a lot of modeling, even though they tell us stop talking, most of the reading they want us to do, but I personally don't think that's fair. When you have students who are willing to read, I can't shut them down. Sometimes I say I'm reading now, but other times if half of them have their hands in the air I'm not going to say no. (Interview 1)

Catherine acknowledged that her school preferred to have teachers model during read-aloud, but she believed it helped the students to see other students read. She said, "So if you want to ding me, ding me, but if I have children that are willing to read and participate, you can go right ahead. I don't understand why you can't do that anymore. I think when other kids hear kids, sometimes it's better for them. They hear me all the time" (Interview 1). Catherine has never been reprimanded for having her students do most of the reading, be it choral reading or popcorn reading, but she was willing to take that risk and have her students read. Catherine's class was also very participatory during lessons. She shared that when her students are an active part of their own learning, it also raises their self-confidence. She stated that "I don't know they seem to participate better when you say you can write it on here, put your sticky up here. They are proud" (Interview 1).

The curriculum provided a specific format for teaching vocabulary. "The vocabulary words are on PowerPoint with definitions and pictures, [and] sometimes they give examples" (Interview 1). The vocabulary lessons were not taught every day, but Catherine reviewed vocabulary words with students daily as they read texts and had class discussions.

The vignette shows the ecology of Catherine's classroom and highlights the Tier I instruction that was provided to ELs daily. It is essential that the general education teachers provide appropriate instruction to students prior to a referral to the SIT for any concerns of a learning disability. Some of the instruction or strategies that Catherine employed included small visual organizers, focus on key vocabulary words, interactive journals, peer-to-peer interaction, sentence starters, and explicitly teaching academic

language. Catherine felt all the instructional practices she used with ELs were appropriate instruction for ELs in her classroom. Although Catherine shared that she was not familiar with the term, culturally responsive teaching, during interviews and observations she did provide culturally relevant text, text in Spanish, had students share their experiences as appropriate and she would speak to the students in Spanish or had peers share information in Spanish when students needed clarification or to assist with comprehension.

Important themes. Two major themes emerged from Catherine's data pertaining to Research Question 1*: How do general education teachers differentiate between English language acquisition challenges and the suspicion of a learning disability when considering referral to special education?* The three themes—Looking Beyond Surface Behaviors for Underlying Cause to Determine Referrals of ELs, Familial Patterns Among Siblings, and the Development of Oral Language and Written Language Expression for American-born ELs—are discussed below.

Looking beyond surface behaviors for underlying cause to determine referrals of ELs. Catherine reported that she had not referred any students during the current school year and "probably wouldn't refer kids to special education unless it is something very severe" (Interview 2). She shared her concerns about the school's curriculum and the fact that ELs' language further complicated their chances of understanding the content. Catherine believed the curriculum was too advanced for the students in her third grade class: "The curriculum was not created for children on my [her] grade level" (Interview 2). She added that the vocabulary the students were expected to learn was not meaningful to the students, and her students did not use words such as *evidence* and *proof*

or *supply and demand* in their day-to-day speech, which made the words difficult for them to grasp.

In several conversations, Catherine talked about the educational institution, the classroom organization, and her students' opportunity for success, particularly ELs in her classroom. She felt some of the targets set for the third graders in her class were "unrealistic" (Interview 2). McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne (2006) pointed out that "American education is compulsively competitive" (p. 12) and the classrooms are well organized to produce and display failure. The expectation is for every child to not only learn but learn better and faster than his or her peers, which makes it likely that differences will be magnified, identified, and classified. Inside her general education classroom, Catherine provided students with accommodations and interventions within her capabilities to support ELs learning.

Catherine posited that when attempting to interpret ELs' failures or lack of progress in her classroom, she tried to employ caution when considering ELs for referral with a suspicion of learning disability. Her reasons for considering referral did not focus primarily on the surface behaviors ELs demonstrated, but as Catherine deciphered between language acquisition and the suspicion of a learning disability, she was deliberate about recognizing and identifying the underlying reasons for the academic challenges she believed warranted consideration for a referral. Two of the concerns she saw in her classroom during the time of this study were students' memory and processing difficulties.

The academic impact of students' memory and processing difficulties. Catherine described two of her students whom she believed would benefit from special education

services. The first student she said demonstrated concerns with memory recall, but when another teacher referred her previously, the SIT suggested the student's language was the concern. Catherine highlighted several factors which she believed indicated the student needed specialized instruction:

> She was in Kindergarten, she was retained in K, somehow she didn't go to school the whole second year, and we don't know where she went. Then she came back she did first [grade], she did second [grade], when she came into my classroom, she was an eighty on her [Scholastic Reading Inventory] SRI. She has progressed in SRI but her [Developmental Reading Ability] DRA level is still particularly low and I think this is her second time in LLI [Leveled Literacy Intervention] and they are still arguing the point that it is something else. Two years of LLI and group buddy, she works with the ESOL teacher, you're in a reading group with six people and I don't know what other proof they needed but it was something other than language. She is still at risk; her DRA is a twelve and her ESOL level is a three. (Interview 2)

The information Catherine outlined about this particular student illustrated in general terms that the student might be experiencing academic challenges. The underlying concern Catherine believed was impacting the student's performance was her memory. According to Catherine, "If you teach her something and ask her tomorrow, she'll act like she has never heard it before. She's like searching in the air, you can see her thinking" (Interview 2).

The behaviors Catherine described may be a manifestation of special education needs, possible EL explanations, or other factors. Catherine mentioned that the student received the same interventions, LLI, for 2 years, along with other supports, and there had been minimal progress. Catherine was frustrated that the SIT was not looking further into why this student was not making more progress and she felt hopeless and alone in searching for ways to help this student advance academically. In looking for possible explanations for the challenges this student was encountering, Catherine also mentioned that the student missed an entire year of schooling. According to *IDEA*, a student's underachievement cannot be due to the lack of appropriate instruction, and for this student, Catherine shared, there was no instruction for a full school year.

The second EL student Catherine had concerns about performed well on county assessments, but inside the classroom he was not performing on grade level; he was in the lowest reading group and he was not producing. The SIT decided there was no need to look into Catherine's concerns because the student's SRI scores were high and his DRA level went up. The team felt the student's classroom performance was language-related. Catherine's response, "I feel like it's something more" (Interview 2); she stated she "personally think[s] it's a processing issue" (Interview 2).

Duran (2008) put forward the cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988), which he suggested can help shed some light on understanding the limitations ELs encounter when asked to complete complex learning or other cognitive tasks. According to the cognitive load theory, "learning and problem solving are dependent on the capacity of working memory to keep track of information relevant to performing the tasks at hand" (p. 308). The capacity of the working memory is limited to about seven, plus or minus two, chunks or sets of information at a time (Miller, 1956). Keeping this in mind, because it is difficult for ELs to process the form and meaning of information, such as sounds, words, and sentences, when presented in a new language (Gilbertson, Maxfield, & Hughes, 2007), accommodations are usually provided to reduce the processing load. However, randomly selecting accommodations, whether oral, visual, or written, can overload ELs' memory capacity instead of reducing the processing load and cause deterioration in the ability to learn. Catherine's second EL student appeared to perform well on county assessments when no accommodations were provided, but was not performing in the classroom when accommodations were provided. According to Gilbertson et al. (2007), it is important to understand the linguistic and information processing demands when

interpreting ELs' performance on tasks. The support that is provided to ELs can either help or hinder their information processing. Catherine strongly believed it was not language and she was no longer hopeful that the SIT would work with her to explore why this student was not performing inside the classroom.

Familial patterns and referral for special education services. Catherine repeatedly echoed that the referrals of several ELs by teachers at her school were met with the same statement: "It is a language concern." She shared there were four students in her class whom she felt "would be better served through SPED [special education]" (Interview 2). She said, "One of the students I don't believe it's language, I had his brother three years ago and his behavior mimics his brother and his brother is in SPED [special education]" (Interview 2). She explained that the brothers displayed similar behaviors: "the same just sit there, no motivation, works at a minimum, kindergarten, first grade level" (Interview 2). For Catherine, her observations of the similar behaviors and low academic performances shared between the two brothers led her to believe that both siblings needed special education services.

Research (Oliver et al., 2004; Stromswold, 2001) on genetics and environmental causes of ability and disability has shown that genetics is a large part of learning abilities and learning disabilities (Kovas & Plomin, 2007). LD is said to be strongly familial, but the type of disability, whether reading or math, is not directly inherited (Smith, 1992). Several environmental factors can significantly increase the risk for LD, such as "prenatal exposure to alcohol, prenatal complications, postnatal exposure to lead and decreased parental and environmental stimulation" (Pennington & Smith, 1983, p. 369). According

to Kovas and Plomin (2007), shared environmental influences indicate high correlations among learning and cognitive abilities as genetic correlations.

The SIT did not accept Catherine's reasoning that one of her EL students needed special education services based on familial patterns. However, the student's low performance remained a reason for concern; Smith (1993) noted various studies (Borges-Osorio, 1987; DeFries & Decker 1982; Owen, 1978) indicating that the parents and siblings of children diagnosed with reading disabilities also showed signs of poor reading and spelling skills. Catherine recognized that her student needed support, but her response to seek that support through special education services was not successful.

The development of oral language and written language expression for American-born ELs. Catherine pointed out that "most of the kids in my class are American born ELs [and] by the time they get to third grade, why are they still a grade or two behind?" (Interview 2). She gave an example of one of her students who demonstrated difficulties with oral and written language. Catherine stated, "I have one [student], he never speaks in sentences so I have to go back and correct him. He speaks just like he writes. He just shoots it out…I can tell you [him] everything to do, but when it's time to apply it, it's not there" (Interview 1).

Catherine acknowledged that academic language and ELs' conversational language are different, specifically as related to vocabulary. She stated:

> Children do not use words such as determine, interpret, summarize, hypothesis, intermediate directions and perimeter in their everyday language, because it has nothing to do with their everyday lives. Just as adults do not use technical terms from their jobs to speak to friends and family. Students do not use academic language when talking to friends and family. (Interview 1)

Catherine explained that for students who have demonstrated difficulty, she provided ongoing support and some have received intervention, but they continue to perform below grade level. She stated that in preparation for reading responses, she has done shared writing with the class, modeled for the students, discussed the questions with the students, and then had them share their responses. However, she has found that the "application is not where it needs to be at all" (Interview 2). She conveyed, "Those would be the kids who have done those interventions to go ahead and refer" (Interview 1).

Supports that help teachers make referral decisions and barriers they face in the identification process.

Collaborating to provide instructional support during the identification process. Catherine acknowledged that to provide appropriate instruction for ELs inside the general education classroom, collaborating with other teachers whom she worked with was "definitely necessary" (Interview 2). She stated that working with others provided "different strategies to use [and] different resources" (Interview 2). Catherine shared that in previous years, she had collaborated with a special education teacher when she was unsure about how to provide instructional supports inside the general education classroom. She added that she did not have any special education students in her classroom at the time of this study and she had not asked "anybody [special education teachers] to come in this school year" (Interview 2). Catherine said in the past she has also sought support from other co-workers and the reading resource teacher when there were serious concerns. She pointed out that there was less collaboration between her and the new reading teacher on her grade level compared to previous years. She noted, "When I had a better partner for reading I would collaborate with them" (Interview 2).

The majority of the collaboration in which Catherine engaged for the 2015-2016 school year occurred between her, her team teacher, and the ESOL teacher assigned to her grade level.

Catherine collaborated with her team teacher who taught math, science, and health. According to Catherine, they worked together across content areas to reinforce content. She stated:

> I talk to the math teacher and I see that we are saying the same thing, which means it's just not me. If we notice something across content areas we work on it together, if she's doing something I use the vocabulary, if I'm doing something and it crosses math, then she'll back it up. For those who it's not working, then we decided we had to go further, then it was past us at that point. (Interview 4)

Catherine pointed out that once they have provided the support and if there are no improvements, they may choose to refer.

Catherine also collaborated with the ESOL teacher who provided instructional supports in various ways: "[She] looks at lesson plans and she helps with the language objectives and then she tells me she is going to help me with some strategies" (Interview 1). The ESOL teacher also pushed in the general education classroom to work with students in small groups as well as pulled students out for instruction. "She [the ESOL teacher] has one that wants to learn and one that wants to when she feels like it, and she pulls the newcomer every day, they get pulled twice. She gets pulled out of the class and then she gets one-on-one" (Interview 2).

Challenges with collaboration. Catherine identified several challenges she has faced when collaborating with the ESOL teacher. She pointed out that "she has been gone for a month and a half" (Interview 1) due to testing, which has impacted planning and instruction. Once the ESOL teacher returned, Catherine informed her of what the students

were doing: “I let her know that we are doing three-letter blends and could she come up with activities for ESOL students” (Interview 1). Catherine shared ELs needed support with “getting to know those blends, it’s the ending sounds” (Interview 1).

Another challenge Catherine spoke about regarding the ESOL teacher was a disagreement on what instructional practice to use to support ELs, especially newcomers, inside the general education classroom. Catherine shared one scenario, which she believed depicted the disagreement or misunderstanding on how to support ELs in the general education classroom: “This young lady she writes her things down [in Spanish] and then she uses a translator, but she is thinking that an adult is translating, like that’s not her work. I was like, no, that’s not what I am seeing, she writes it down and then uses a translator. How is that different from using the dictionary? She was like, oh” (Interview 2). Catherine commented that there were no clear directions on how to work with newcomers and she was “grasping for straws as for like what to do with them, what to give or even what to assess what the newcomer knows” (Interview 2). Allowing ELs to complete assignments in Spanish and then translate them into English using a translator is one practice she has used and continues to use.

Catherine said that in the past, before the students were given Chrome books, she would allow ELs to use her phone to translate their written assignments. She stated, “I had newcomer[s] and they didn’t have the Chrome cart, I use my phone. I would give them my phone and they would type their work and rewrite it and that’s how we did it. Those are the things I have done to help myself and I have noticed that the students’ writings have gotten better” (Interview 2). According to Catherine, when the students completed assignments, she would also “re-write it correctly and then have them [ELs]

copy [it] and the ESOL teacher said we can't do that. I said you can't, but I can. As the classroom teacher, this is a strategy that I am using and it is showing how to correctly write a sentence." Catherine added:

> Form capital letter, [and use] punctuation, 'cause I have one student not identified but it's easier to have him dictate to me what he wants to say, 'cause I am going to end up rewriting it anyway, so I have him dictate it and give it to him. I'll re-read it and say is this what you are saying and he'll say yes or he'll say no or I'll have him rewrite it himself. (Interview 2)

Catherine highlighted that the disagreements between her and the ESOL teacher over instructional practices to support ELs in the general education classroom may partially be due to miscommunication at times. She conveyed that the "ESOL teacher and I go back and forth with this. She is from Nigeria; she speaks British English not American English, so sometimes when we are talking, it doesn't always come across" (Interview 2).

Catherine believed that more training is needed for all teachers on how to work with newcomers. She asserted, "Since I have been here, there has not been any training on how to work with the newcomers. That's still a gray area. I think that needs a different training" (Interview 2).

Teacher communication with parents and the support of the parent liaison. Catherine expressed that communicating with parents is a challenge for her. She said, "Some parents I have never met and some I probably won't ever meet. I don't understand that" (Interview 1). With some of the parents whom Catherine has met, she expressed that communication is often very difficult. Catherine stated, "Some of my parents seem to be functional illiterate; split verbs, just weird ways in which they did things. I felt that you

weren't just teaching the child, you're also teaching the parent, now it's hard to do that" (Interview 1).

The use of a translator has also been a source of difficulty and frustration for Catherine. She conveyed that in situations where she was not able to speak to some parents, she had to use a translator, as she said:

> Who knows if the translator is saying exactly what I'm saying or the way I'm saying it, not soft, blunt; this is it, this is what we need to do. And so that's a concern…the missing parent piece is a problem for me. When I'm sitting in a conference and I can't understand anything that is going on that's frustrating. (Interview 1)

Catherine believed this obstacle also affected the students' performance in the classroom. She stated, "I feel like if I could reach my parents then I would have better success in my classroom. The parents would begin to understand what we are doing and why" (Interview 1). Catherine would like parents to understand the concerns she was seeing inside the classroom, what she was doing to address those concerns, and the parental support she needed. One of the areas that Catherine tried to work on was homework completion. According to Catherine, many of her students did not receive any support at home with completing homework. She had tried to have students complete a portion of the homework in class so they were able to use it as an example and she also required parent signature. Once she started to require parent signature, she noticed an improvement in homework completion.

There is a positive correlation between parent involvement and student achievement. "Policy and program interventions aimed at improving children's academic outcomes often focus on increasing parental involvement" (Altschul, 2011, p. 159). Catherine made several attempts to communicate with parents to get them involved. In

addition to using the county-provided translator, Catherine also used her phone to type what she wanted to say and then used the translator on her phone to translate the text to Spanish. She said if it was a short letter or a note, she was able to use her phone. In other instances, she used the parent liaison at her school; as she explained, "If it's something very long, then I will send an email to the parent coordinator who would then contact the parent. Sometimes she can handle it via phone. If it's something bigger, then she'll call and see what day they can come and then we will have a conference and she's the translator" (Interview 1).

Catherine articulated that given the various attempts she had made to communicate with parents to involve them in school activities, many times nothing changed. She mentioned that change "depends on the parents' education and what they can do with their skill set" (Interview 2). The fact that the school provided a staff member who was able to speak to parents in their home language might not be enough. The limited education of some parents can create a barrier for parent communication and school involvement.

The School Instructional Team (SIT). Catherine believed that SIT had not provided her with any meaningful instructional support or guidance to support ELs who were performing below grade level in her classroom. According to Catherine, the teachers at her school were able to provide Tier 1 interventions inside the general education classroom. She said, "We have some pretty awesome teachers in our building and they will come and ask do you have any ideas or did you have this student last year or do you have materials for a specific level" (Interview 3). Catherine said she also worked with her "co-workers to come up with strategies on how to help [students who

are performing below grade level]" (Interview 1). The difficulty came when students were not making sufficient progress and needed more support. To receive Tier 2 support for any students, teachers usually first met with SIT. Catherine stated:

> When you get to Tier 2, again with the SIT process, I have never walked away, from the meeting that I have gone to, maybe one, with anything other than meeting information on data, reviewing data, but I have never left one meeting in four years which something was given for me to do outside of what I am already using: the PRIM. The PRIM is not enough. It is so basic when our students need more. (Interview 3)

Catherine pointed out that "trying to find proven interventions that work [for ELs] is difficult" (Interview 4). Identifying an intervention that worked and the context in which it worked best were ongoing challenges, especially related to RtI (Linan-Thompson, Cirino, & Vaughn, 2007). Catherine noted that the SIT did not provide any guidance; instead, the teachers were directed to find their own interventions. According to Catherine:

> When people [teachers] put up students for SIT and they say what they have done. They [teachers] are told, those are not strategies. So it's always been teachers, here's the RtI website or use the PRIM and site which one you use under which section and from what page. (Interview 2)

Catherine strongly disagreed with the approach the SIT took to provide support or resources for teachers to help students who were performing below grade level. Catherine said she might decide not to refer a student because she knew "nothing is going to happen" (Interview 2). She asserted that:

> The main reason not to refer is because you know not a doggone thing is going to happen. You don't get any feedback, [and] you don't get any strategies. You go in and you bring what you have and then when you leave, it's like, you're a teacher, you should know what strategy to use, wrong! If I refer a student, it's because I have done all that I feel like I can do and it's more than what's in the classroom. (Interview 2)

Another concern that Catherine spoke strongly about was the time it took between referring a student and being scheduled for a SIT meeting. Catherine explicated that "you could put stuff [referral] in and you might not see it for the next year, so it became disheartening to put all that stuff together and you get no help" (Interview 1). Catherine summed up her experience with the SIT by stating that there is no follow-through, no consistent support from specialists, and no valuable takeaways from SIT meetings.

Meredith Fischer

Meredith shared, "I feel like my first year coming into teaching I wasn't [prepared] because I didn't know anything about what the difference was between teaching general ed. [general education students] and teaching ELs" (Interview 1). Meredith explained the reason she did not feel prepared:

> I wasn't an education major in college. I did an alternative teaching program, the Teach for America Program, so I did not have any course work in teaching students with disabilities and English Language Learners. We got bits and pieces of that in our teacher training for Teach for America, but nothing extensive. (Interview 1)

Meredith conveyed that she was not very familiar with the language acquisition process, but explained she was aware there was a difference between academic language and the conversational language students used. When Meredith was asked how she assessed ELs' language proficiency, she stated that she used running records and the scholastic reading inventory (SRI).

While Meredith did not feel prepared during her first year as a new teacher of ELs, she expressed that with the experience she has gained, she now feels prepared. She stated, "I feel like throughout my three years teaching, I have learned a lot about how to

differentiate for them [ELs] and things that they need, so now I definitely feel prepared" (Interview 1).

Meredith posited that she participated in the RtI process in her school by providing Tier 1 interventions in her general education classroom. Meredith explained that she provided small group instruction and online interventions to support her students. She also shared that she used a variety of texts with her students to include the various cultures of the students represented in her classroom.

> *At the start of the class on June 2, 2016, Meredith has her set up directions posted on her Smart board visible for the whole class. The set-up information gives the class directions on what they are to do when they enter the classroom and the challenge question for the day. The directions for today instruct students to take out their homework and place it on the desk and to take out their writing notebook and complete the daily write, which is "If I could have one super power, what would it be and why?" When the students enter the classroom, they do not immediately attend to the set-up directions posted on the Smart board. Meredith verbally gives the scholars the directions and tells them where they should be at that time. "Everybody should be in their seats. Your writing notebook should be out. Read the daily write and answer it in your writing notebook. I am coming around to check your homework so make sure it is out." The scholars immediately respond and get on task. As the scholars complete their assignment, Meredith walks around the room checking homework. She quietly consults with each scholar as she checks his or her homework.*
>
> *At the end of checking homework, Meredith says, "I am hearing a lot of talking so I assume you are finish. Who would like to share their daily write?" None of the scholars responds. Meredith repeats the daily write, "If I could have just one super power, what would it be and why?" and calls on a scholar to stand and deliver. The scholar stands and delivers, Meredith responds, "Excellent, scholars, silent hands." The scholars begin shaking their hands for a silent applause. After the silent applause, Meredith asks the scholar to pick another scholar to share. Meredith repeats this procedure with four additional scholars sharing their responses.*
>
> *After the scholars share, Meredith asks the class to put their writing notebooks away. She then says, "You are going to get your passage back from yesterday. Yesterday we were practicing finding the main idea of the text. Yesterday many of you said what about the details, so today we are going to practice finding those details and just like there are five steps to finding the main idea, this time there are only three steps to finding the details." She reminds the scholars that "the*

detail is an extra piece of information from the text that proves the main idea, so if the main idea was dogs are the best animals in the world, the detail would prove to us why they are the best animal in the world, or if the main idea was pizza is a delicious food, the details would prove to us why it is a delicious food." She then uses the previous night's homework as a reference to remind the scholars of what a detail is. She says, "From your homework, how dogs need to interact with each other, the details would prove to us why dogs need to interact with other dogs." She then points, "The details give us proof to support the main idea."

Meredith places a chart on the Smart board and tells the class, "We have three steps to finding the details" as she points to the chart. She then asks the class to tell her the first step in finding a detail. When the scholars do not respond, Meredith says, "Now that we have the main idea, we need the details. What is step number one?" She calls on a scholar to share and the scholar responds by reading the chart. Meredith repeats what the scholar says: "Re-read the text." She then asks another student for step two, which she repeats after the student responds, "Re-read the main idea, which we already have figured out." She asks another scholar for step three. The scholar reads step three from the chart, after which Meredith says, "We find the fact in the text and then we ask: Does this prove my main idea? Or is this just an interesting fact that the author wants me to know?" She then tells the scholars they are going to follow those three steps to find the details for their first passage, "Bats and Their Amazing Ears."

Meredith hands each scholar a graphic organizer that he or she is going to use with the main idea that they came up with the previous day. She points out step one, to re-read the text, and asks someone to volunteer to read the first paragraph of the text. She calls on a scholar and asks her to read "nice and loud." She then asks two more scholars to each read one of the following two paragraphs. After re-reading the text, Meredith says, "Now that we have re-read the text, step two is to re-read the main idea we came up with yesterday." She asks a scholar to remind the class what is the main idea they came up with. The student reads the main idea from his book, Meredith then repeats the main idea, "Bats use their ears in unusual ways." She then states, "Now we can move on to step three. To actually find my details, I need to find facts in the text that prove to me how bats use their ears in unusual ways. Okay, so I am going to start by looking at the beginning of the text and I am looking for how bats use their ears in unusual ways." Meredith demonstrates and guides the scholars on completing step three, to find the facts in the text to support the main idea. She states, "The first thing I see right in that first paragraph is that they use sound to find food, is that something that is unusual that they use sound to find food? What do we do when we need food? When you need food in your home, what do you do? When you need a snack or something, what do you do?" Meredith calls on several students to share. One scholar says, "You go make it." Meredith responds, "Okay, what else do you do when you feel hungry at home, what do you do?" She calls on another scholar to share. The scholar says, "You cook." Meredith then states,

"You cook it, you go make it, you go open up the cabinet and look for something, you open up the fridge and...you use your eyes, you don't use your ears, you don't open up the fridge and listen, oh, I hear a piece of cake, no, but that's what bats do, they use their ears to find food so that is unusual."

Meredith points out the first detail and she adds it to their graphic organizer. As she continues to guide the scholars, she states, "There is one other way in the last paragraph. This time I want you to try to find it. The sentence that shares about another detail about how bats use their ears in an unusual way. So, look at the third paragraph. All eyes should be on the third paragraph. Try to find the sentence that proves to us that bats use their ear in unusual ways." While the scholars read the third paragraph to identify another detail, Meredith walks around the classroom monitoring scholars. She repeats and expands on the question, "How do bats use their ears in some way unusual, in some way that is different or weird, different from what we do?" Meredith asks one of her scholars to share. After the scholar shares, Meredith says, "Okay, good. It also says that it helps them fly at night, so they listen to help them fly. So, that is another way they use their ears in an unusual way. Usually you use your eyes when you are flying and your wings. They use their ears to help them fly." Meredith tells her scholars, "So either one of those could be a detail that supports our main idea. So, the most important thing for us to remember right now is that the details prove the main idea. Okay, so when we get back from lunch, you are going to find details on your own, so it's really important that you remember that details prove the main idea. If the detail does not tell us how the bats use their ear in an unusual way, then it's not a detail, it may be something interesting the author wants us to know."

As Meredith ends the class, she asks the scholars to flip their paper over for a second passage. She tells them they will continue finding details after lunch and recess. She calls each table, tables one through five, and asks the scholars to get in line. After all the scholars are in line, Meredith walks them to lunch.

In another visit to Meredith's class on May 20, 2016, during the second half of her reading block, Meredith is teaching vocabulary. Meredith tells the scholars they will be doing Kahoot, but before doing Kahoot, they will review the words they have been working on for the past few weeks. She asks the class, "Can someone remind us what is a verb? What is a verb?" When the class does not respond, Meredith continues, "We talked about nouns, adjectives, and verbs, so does anybody know what is a verb?" She then asks a specific scholar, "Kadian, what is a verb?" When the scholar responds, Meredith repeats what the student says, "A verb is an action word or something you do." She then asks, "Can someone give us an example of a verb...David?" The student says, "Dance." Meredith repeats the student's answer, "Good," and then asks, "What's another verb?" "Hannah?" Hannah says, "Play." Meredith repeats the student's response and calls on another scholar. The student gives an incorrect response and Meredith says, "No, that is not action, something that you do." The student then says "washing." Meredith asks two more scholars to share; each gives a

correct response. Meredith then repeats the definition of a verb for the class, "So verbs are any kind of action, anything that you do."

Meredith then moves on to asking students about nouns. She asks, "What is a noun?" When the scholars do not respond, Meredith says, "Kennedy, what is a noun?" Kennedy says, "A person, a place." Meredith responds, "A person, place or a?" The class responds, "thing." Meredith repeats the response and says "good." She continues by asking the class, "Can someone read one of the examples from our chart?" She then asks a scholar, Jasmine, to answer the question. Jasmine is not able to answer, Meredith asks another student, "Hannah?" Hannah says, "Ms. Morales." Meredith calls on several scholars; each student gives a correct response.

After reviewing nouns and verbs with the class, Meredith says, "All right, so for this Kahoot quiz, it's going to tell you to pick from the choices, either to pick a noun or a verb. Okay, so you will pick from the choices, so make sure you read the question because it will tell you noun or verb. I will keep the charts up here if you need to refer to them, if you forget what a noun or a verb is at any point." Meredith projects the game on the Smart board for the scholars. Each scholar has a Chrome book that they will use to give their responses. She then says, "This is the game, put your name, don't put a fake name, okay, we have a lot of questions—are you ready?" When the first question comes on the Smart board, Meredith completes the first few questions with the class, she says, "Okay, let's review. A noun is a person, place or thing, is sink a thing, a person or place?" The class says "No." "Is cake a person, place or thing?" The students say, "Yes." Meredith responds, "Yes, it's a what?" The scholars say, "A thing." After completing a few with the class, Meredith says, "So nouns, think of if you can hold it in your hands, so you cannot hold write in your hands, that's not an object, it's not something you can hold." Meredith then moves to independent practice for the scholars, she says, "Here's your next one, find the noun, I am not going to read them to you this time, read them on your own." She projects several items for the students to complete. As the scholars complete each item, Meredith provides guided questions and/or prompting as needed. For example, after a question was given, Meredith sees that many of the scholars have not selected the correct response. She says, "Jump, sleep, and eat are not things, they are actions, which means they are what, Joanna?" When Joanna does not respond, Meredith repeats the question, "What are they if they are actions?" Another scholar responds, "Verb." Meredith says, "Good, thank you, Devina, for helping her out." During the quiz, she also monitors students' understanding as they answer the questions. She pauses periodically and asks students to explain their answer choice, for example, she asks the class to explain, "Why is jumping the verb?" When only three scholars volunteer to explain, she says, "Only three people, everybody got it right." She continues with the quiz until it ends and she announces the scholar with the most points.

Meredith asks the class to complete the survey that came up on their screen and then to exit out of the game, sign out of their Chrome books, and put them away. She gives additional information to the scholars to put their headphones back in the bag they came in. She then calls each table to put their headphones away.

The above vignettes highlight two of the reading sessions that I observed in Meredith's class. In the first session, which occurred on June 2, 2016, Meredith wanted scholars to continue reading selected text and identify the supporting details for the main idea that they had already practiced finding in the previous class. She reminded the class what is a detail and gave examples of supporting details for several main ideas. She then explained the steps to find supporting details in a text. Meredith then explained the main idea to the class to ensure they understood before moving on to finding the details.

In the second vignette which took place on May 20, 2016, Meredith engaged students in a game; the objective of the lesson was to review verbs and nouns. Before starting the game, Meredith reviewed with the class what is a verb and a noun and discussed examples of each. For the most part, Meredith's students were correctly identifying verbs and nouns. Meredith's questions were not only limited to identifying a verb and a noun, but she also asked students to explain why a specific word was a verb or a noun. After Meredith reviewed the definitions and examples of verb and noun with the class, she told the class that the chart would be there in case they needed to refer to it. Meredith started the game and completed several items together with the class. She explained once more to the class what a noun was. As the students began independent practice, Meredith supported students throughout the game by providing guided questions and prompting to help scholars think about their responses.

Meredith's school was participating in a grant which had specific routines and guided practice that the teachers were expected to follow. The purpose for many of the

routines, such as the set-up directions, was to foster students' independence and ownership of learning. Meredith shared that her class was adjusting to the new format of doing things.

The vignettes illustrate the ecology of Meredith's classroom and some of the Tier I instruction she provided to ELs in her classroom. This is important because before a teacher can make to a referral to the SIT about any concerns of a learning disability, they must first demonstrate that they provided appropriate instruction to students. The above vignettes highlight some of the instruction or strategies that Meredith used in her classroom: explicit instruction, guided interaction, a graphic organizer, modeling how to complete tasks, connecting concepts to familiar themes, and checking for understanding during instruction. Meredith felt all the instructional practices she used with ELs were appropriate instruction for them in her classroom.

Important themes. The two major themes that emerged from Meredith's data pertaining to Research Question 1: *How do third and fourth grade general education teachers differentiate between English language acquisition challenges and a possible learning disability when considering referral to special education?* The two themes—A More Careful Approach When Considering ELs for Referrals and Communicative Supports and Comprehension—are discussed below.

A more careful approach when considering ELs for referrals.

Talk to more teachers. Meredith explained that when she was considering an EL student for referral with a suspicion of a learning disability, she was very careful:

> I am more careful of whether or not it is a language barrier or like something they need to overcome with the language versus a learning disability. Where if there's a student that I know is not an English Language Learner and they've seen some red flags, it's different. I don't consult as many teachers, do more assessments and

> stuff because the data is [sic] there where with the ELL, I have to kind of be very careful with that and figure out what is causing their understanding to break down or what is causing the difficulties. (Interview 1)

According to the North Carolina School Psychology Association (2010), "care must be taken to determine whether learning and behavior problems demonstrated by the student indicate a disability or, instead, are a manifestation of language, cultural, experiential, and/or sociolinguistic differences" (p. 1). According to Meredith's description, she chose a team approach to collect and analyze the student's data once she realized the student was experiencing academic difficulties and tried to differentiate between language acquisition and a possible learning disability. She explicated that she did not want the referral decision to be based solely on her opinion. She stated, "I usually consult the reading intervention lady here at school, Ms. Paladin, 'cause she knows a lot about reading difficulties versus language difficulties and I also talk with the ESOL teacher and I also talk with other teachers to see what they think because I don't want it to be just my opinion" (Interview 1).

Meredith shared that "with those students [English Learners], I do put a little bit more leg work into figuring out whether or not they need the special ed services or it's just the language services that they need" (Interview 1). She acknowledged that it required more of her to distinguish between whether the student's learning challenges are a result of language or learning problems. The North Carolina School Psychology Association (2010) pointed out that:

> Given the language difficulties normally expected when acquiring a second language, careful consideration should be given before referring students for special education unless he/she has a chance to learn English and adjust to the school environment for a reasonable length of time. (p. 2)

For Meredith, her careful review of the student began before the pre-referral stages when the student was considered for special education assessments. She talked with teachers familiar with the student to discuss their observations of the student and whether they were seeing a language concern or a possible learning disability.

The idea of working with a wide range of teachers allowed for immediate support, diverse perspectives, and valuable insights into the student's learning challenges. In addition, partnering with teachers who were currently working with the student and teachers who have worked with the student in the past can potentially provide an opportunity to compare a range of academic and behavioral data. This collaboration can help to distinguish the types of learning challenges the student might be experiencing and whether the information points to concerns about language acquisition or a possible learning disability.

Compare to like and unlike peers. In identifying whether a student's academic challenges were related to limited proficiency in English or related to the impact of a disability, Meredith shared that she looked at the challenges the student was experiencing and determined if it was the norm or not. Meredith pointed out that she looked at the types of mistakes her students made and if

> they missed a few words in a sentence or they forgot the period, that's a mistake that any student would make if they are below level or just rushing or something. Where if it's another type of mistake I can't think of an example right now, but if it's a mistake that not a typical third grader would make or just not a normal ESOL student would make, then that's kinda where I consult the other teachers. (Interview 1)

Here, Meredith was comparing the performance of the student she had concerns for with other students whom she described as typical for the third grade level, which included ESOL students in her class who were not experiencing academic challenges.

According to Garcia and Ortiz (1988), to validate that the behavior in question is not normal, the teacher must make inter-individual comparisons. The inter-individual comparison involves assessing whether "the perceived problem behaviors differ from those of other students in the class" (pp. 6-7). The comparison group must share similar cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and other relevant characteristics as the targeted student (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988). However, the North Carolina School Psychology Association (2010) posited that observational data should not only include a comparison group that is similar in age, culture, and linguistics, but should also include culturally and linguistically different peers. Meredith's comparison group seemed to include peers who were different. However, for the comparison ESOL group, Meredith may have knowledge of students' culture, linguistics, and socioeconomics, but may not always have immediate access to other relevant information such as academic history, especially for students who were new to the country or were very mobile.

When gathering data for academic history, Meredith stated, "It's hard, especially for students who move around a lot, it's hard to know what the instruction and the intervention they were receiving at their other school were like, even if they were receiving ESOL [services]" (Interview 3). In such cases, the parents are vital in providing this information. Meredith shared that the parents were very supportive and she also worked with the parent liaison when collecting data.

Communicative supports and comprehension. Meredith shared that she used various practices inside her general education classroom to determine if students' limited proficiency in English was the primary reason for comprehension difficulties, which essentially affects academic performance. She talked about language diversity and

providing opportunities for multiple modes of communication to support students' academic expression across languages. Meredith explained that she often differentiated the ways students demonstrated what they knew; she stated:

> I use a lot of visuals and sentence frames and scaffold, stuff like that to help them kinda verbalize what they are understanding and what they are not understanding and that sometimes helps me determine if they are really not understanding or if it's just that they don't have the language to express what they understand or what they don't understand. (Interview 3)

Several researchers (Garcia, 1991; Manyak & Bauer, 2008; Moll & Diaz, 1987; North Carolina School Psychology Association, 2010) asserted that ELs might comprehend more than they are able to communicate verbally in English. Therefore, it is important for ELs also to be able to use their first language in class to help facilitate their comprehension (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Moll & Diaz, 1987).

Meredith articulated that giving students options to convey their understanding was a part of the classroom practice for all students, including her ELs. She posited that she allowed her English learning students to use their native language with each other. Meredith shared that she had observed some of her ELs who would first try to communicate in English but became frustrated and switched to their native language (Interview 2). She stated that while she would rather her students speak English, "It's fine if they use their first language to show their comprehension" (Interview 2). She explained that "what we are reading in class is in English so their reading ability in English might be different from their speaking abilities in English, so I would hate to prevent them from expressing their knowledge of the text if they can't do that in English; then if they are able to do that in Spanish, it will show that they understood what we read" (Interview 2).

The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (Ballantyne et al., 2008) put forward that acquiring a second language is fundamentally different from acquiring a first language and, unlike their native English speakers, ELs are learning a second language in addition to the content. In the area of reading, Lesaux and Kieffer (2010) stated that reading comprehension is multifaceted and effective reading comprehension is dependent on language knowledge and language processing abilities. As a result, it is predicted that students with underdeveloped language knowledge may experience comprehension difficulties; this is especially the case for students reading in their second language. Since the difficulties that ELs encounter when learning to read English as a second language often mirrors the characteristics of LD, it is important that teachers are able to assess students' knowledge. As ELs progress through the English language acquisition process, communication in the academic setting, in speech or in writing, might not be fluent (Ballantyne et al., 2008). Therefore, providing alternative ways to demonstrate their understanding is helpful. In addition, when teachers allow students to use their first language, this will enable students to draw from their full linguistic repertoire, which will help students to demonstrate their understanding more effectively.

ELs' time in country and their language development. Meredith spoke about ELs' time in the United States, especially for those who were born in the country and their level of oral language development, as a concern when differentiating between language acquisition and suspicion of a learning disability. She stated:

> I have one student who has been born in the country, has been attending school since kindergarten, and their oral language I still feel is very, very low. So that's when that concerns me and we have referred the student. I know at home she only speaks Spanish so at school is the only time she is getting English. In my opinion

> if she has been going to school in the United States since Pre-K, Kindergarten up until third grade her language skills should be pretty solid by now and so her lack of oral language, written language it does concern me, so we have referred her. Not just to see if it's a learning disability, but also to see if it's still just the language she is missing or it's something else. (Interview 2)

Meredith was concerned that her student's time in the United States and, given the length of exposure to the English language, her student's oral language development should be further along.

Meredith understood that ELs needed time to develop their second language as she stated that she would not refer ELs who have only been in the country for "just a year or two" (Interview 2). She acknowledged that their second language would not be developed in such a short time, but she also pointed out that "maybe in a few years, if we are still not seeing skills that we need to see, then I would think of referring them, but not initially" (Interview 2). Meredith was aware that there are stages to L2 development; however, there seemed to be a specific linear expectation of the rate at which ELs should develop their second language.

Supports that help teachers make referral decisions and barriers they face in the identification process.

Collaboration for instructional support in the general education classroom. Meredith conveyed that "it is necessary to collaborate with others because everybody comes with their own experiences and background knowledge and professional development regarding teaching students that are ELs; so I think it's important to collaborate with others to hear their perspective and strategies and other things that they use in the classroom that could be beneficial and useful for my students" (Interview 2).

Meredith's view that it was important and necessary to work together collaboratively was evident in her evaluation of students' need, planning, and execution of lesson plans. According to Meredith, in an effort to ensure that ELs' educational needs were being met in the general education classroom, she worked very closely with the ESOL teacher who was assigned to her class. She shared that the ESOL teacher "is very supportive. We usually look at data together and we will discuss the students' performance openly, and whole group lessons, and guided reading lessons, we work together a lot" (Interview 2). Meredith explained that being able to plan collaboratively with the ESOL teacher complemented what was taught in the general education classroom. The ESOL lessons were not taught in isolation, separated from the whole group lessons: "Whatever she does with her small group, whenever she pulls the students out of the classroom or to the back of the classroom for their ESOL instruction, she will be giving additional support to what I am teaching in the classroom so that it goes hand in hand" (Interview 1). Meredith and the grade level-assigned ESOL teacher were able to work together to discuss problems, "brainstorm possible solutions, and develop an action plan which is then implemented" (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988, p. 3).

Meredith's collaboration was not limited to the ESOL teacher. According to Meredith, her school had a scheduled time for collaborative planning. She stated:

> Collaborative planning sessions are at a set time every other Monday where we collaborate with the other teachers on our grade level as well as the ESOL teachers, and then just throughout the week I touch base with teachers several times about different lessons that they are teaching and strategies that they are using and centers that they are doing, so I collaborate with teachers all the time. (Interview 2)

Meredith's decision to work with the teachers in her school gave her access to their diverse expertise, teaching tools, and supports which ultimately were beneficial for the students.

Inconsistency among ESOL teachers and instruction. Meredith expressed a concern about the inconsistency among the ESOL teachers with whom she has worked. She explained that there was a chart, The WIDA Can Do Chart, which can be used to interpret WIDA scores. She said:

> Our ESOL teacher this year showed it to us at the beginning of the year so that we could interpret those WIDA scores; that was my first time in my three years of teaching in Middletown, I had seen that. I think it should be more across the board that ESOL teachers show that to their teachers because this is my first time seeing it and this is my third year at Middletown where it would have been helpful especially my first year, because I had no experience teaching English Language Learners. There is a chart that shows level three they should be able to do this, need help on this and stuff like that. (Interview 4)

Meredith further added that the chart also provided information about ELs' overall ESOL level, their English Language Proficiency, based on the scores and what they should be able to do according to their performance on the WIDA. The information was not given in previous years and could have significantly impacted instructional practice. Many teachers have shared concerns about not knowing ELs' present levels and what to teach (DelliCarpini & Guler, 2013), and here a resource was available to inform teachers' practice. But like other teachers, Meredith did not have access to this resource.

Supporting parents and the parent liaison. Meredith shared that she often communicated with parents through the students' "agenda books and through sending notes home, if the phone doesn't work because of work schedule" (Interview 2). She noted, however, that when students began to experience difficulty, her first response was to invite parents to come in and observe their child. The purpose of the parent observation

was “so that they can have a better idea of what happens on a daily basis and how their child behaves and perform[s] in the classroom just so that they have a better background knowledge for when we sit down and look at their data” (Interview 2). After the observation, the next step was to have a parent conference, which was either in person or via the phone.

Meredith pointed out that parent involvement was relatively low primarily because of the language barrier and parents’ work schedule. For many of the parents, due to their economic circumstances, much of their time was spent working towards providing basic needs for their families, leaving little time for parent involvement at school (Altschul, 20110). Meredith did not believe that because parents were uninvolved they were uninterested in their children’s education. Although the parents were not very involved in their children’s education, Meredith shared that “for the most part, most parents are supportive of what I am doing in the room and they want what is best for their child” (Interview 2). Meredith believed that the parents wanted to support their children, but linguistic barriers and their work schedule were unavoidable impediments.

In an attempt to get parents involved, Meredith informed the parents that parent involvement included a wide range of parenting behaviors (Altschul, 2011). She asserted:

> The parents want to support their kids but a lot of them don’t speak English and so they seem somewhat timid to reach out to me to find out ways they can support their child so I really have to reach out to them and say look, I know you don’t speak the language but there’s still so many things you can do. You can still have them read to you, even if its English or Spanish or I try to give them things that they can do. (Interview 1)

The parent liaison also provided support to encourage parent involvement. The school held several parent nights throughout the school year during which parents engaged in information sessions or hands-on activities on how they can help their

children. Meredith said the parent liaison "helps with that [parent outreach] a lot" (Interview 1). She also posited that "she [the parent liaison] is very helpful with translating and providing other resources for them [the parents]" (Interview 1). Given the low parent involvement that Meredith spoke about, and the importance of parent involvement and student performance, the school, including Meredith, seemed to be actively seeking ways to improve meaningful parent involvement.

The School Instructional Team (SIT) and RtI process. Meredith had a positive view of the RtI process in her school but had concerns about the time it took to get a student scheduled to begin the process. She stated:

> I think the RtI process is a good process in my school. The only thing that I really get frustrated with is the amount of time that it takes. So if I refer a student to RtI or to the SIT team it might be a few months before we even have our initial meeting and then just by the nature of RtI, it takes five or six more months to actually see if they are making growth or showing growth through whatever intervention they are getting. So I wouldn't say specifically it is my school, it's just the whole process can sometimes be slow because we have to wait and see if they are responding to the intervention. The challenge is once I refer the student having that initial meeting, figuring out what they need and getting it started. Once it gets started, it's just a matter of waiting to see. (Interview 3)

Meredith explained that once a student was referred, it could be a month or two later before the initial meeting. She pointed out that it "pretty much takes all year to get two of my students who I referred to the testing stage and I think that if they had been tested earlier this year, they might have been identified earlier and they could have gotten the support that they needed. So that's a challenge" (Interview 2). While waiting to meet with SIT, Meredith explained:

> I just kinda have to go off of my own resources. It would be great if we had an online program they could use or a special workbook or something that my ELL students [could] work with because a lot of it is just me pulling from my own resources which is just three years' work, not that excessive. (Interview 2)

Meredith noted that the RtI process was beneficial for those students who were able to go through the process. However, because the process took such a long time, the students who benefited from Meredith's class were, as she said, "the students who I referred right in the beginning of the year, whereas the students who I referred later in the year, I didn't really see much of a change because it just takes so long to get started and then by the time it does get started, it was the end of the year" (Interview 4).

Meredith explicated that for the students, who were referred early in the school year, she was able to meet with the SIT, and the team "created a plan for them [the students] and it began with things that I would do in the classroom and then in addition to that, they [the students] were also getting service outside the classroom, so pulled out at certain times for interventions" (Interview 4). Meredith emphasized that "because it [the referral] was done at the beginning of the year, they were able to have that intervention for a long enough time that we were able to see results" (Interview 4).

Providing early intervention to students who are displaying reading difficulties in the first few grades of school is important to prevent the downward spiral of reading failure (Kelly, Gomez-Bellenge, Chen, & Schulz, 2008; Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1992). In addition, Kamps et al. (2007) put forward that "the number of hours the intervention lasts and the intensity of learning" (p. 154) impact student gains. Intensity of learning has to do with changes to the instructional program the student receives over time, doubling the amount of intervention time given daily and/or smaller group size for instruction. Meredith expressed that she was able to see results for the students who were identified and received intervention supports early in the school year. For the students

who were not referred at the beginning of the school year, Meredith was “hoping next year will be when they really benefit from RtI” (Interview 4).

Chapter Five: Results of Cross-Case Analysis

Multiple-case studies provide the opportunity to explore similarities and differences between participants in one or more contexts. Multiple cases in this study help us to look beyond a single case (Stake, 1995) to examine the phenomenon of how third and fourth grade general education teachers differentiate between language acquisition and the suspicion of a learning disability when considering referral of ELs for special education services. The analysis of cross-case findings highlighted patterns across cases and allows readers to make observations about the patterns that are occurring between each case. These observations may reveal the "conditions under which a particular phenomenon is likely to be found as well as the conditions when it is not likely to be found" (Yin, 2009, p. 54). Cross-case analysis can also help us to further understand a single case's findings. "By looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases, we can understand a single case finding, grounding it by specifying *how* and *where* and, if possible, *why* it carries on as it does" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29).

The cross-case analysis in this study showed four themes that emerged, which were consistent across the three teachers who participated in this study. The themes are: (a) ELs' oral language development and exposure to English, (b) collaborating with colleagues during the referral process, (c) the support of the parent liaison as a key resource, and (d) barriers during the School Instructional Team (SIT) process. The next two themes emerged across only two teachers: (a) academic progress, and (b) barriers during collaboration with colleagues. Table 3 illustrates the themes and quotes from each

participant that are reflective of those themes. Each theme is then discussed, recognizing the similarities and differences between cases.

Table 3

Themes Across the Three Cases

Themes	Quotes
ELs' Language Development and Time in The U.S.A.	"Melissa, she speaks Spanish at home, she has been here since pre-K I think, maybe kindergarten, so she has been in the school forever… two of them really her and Jonathan." (Gwen, Interview 1) "Most of the kids in my class are American born ELLs, by the time they get to 3rd grade why are they still a grade or two behind?" (Catherine, Interview 2) "I have one student who has been born in the country, has been attending school since kindergarten, and their oral language I still feel is very, very low. So that's when that concerns me and we have referred the student. I know at home she only speaks Spanish so at school is the only time she is getting English. In my opinion if she has been going to school in the United States since Pre-K, Kindergarten up until third grade her language skills should be pretty solid by now and so her lack of oral language, written language it does concern me, so we have referred her. Not just to see if it's a learning disability, but also to see if it's still just the language she is missing or it's something else." (Meredith, Interview 2)
Collaborating with Colleagues in the Identification Process	"It's absolutely important to collaborate with them, collaborate with other teachers, with your team get different ideas, see what works." (Gwen, Interview 2) "My ESOL teacher and I do the same thing every day, unless she wants to teach a whole group lesson, so it's like her kids know who they are so when she walks in, her group just comes over…they are doing vowels right now while the rest of us do grammar and spelling words." (Gwen, Interview 2) ESOL teacher—looks at lesson plans and she helps with the language objectives—and then she tells me she is going to help me with some strategies. (Catherine, Interview 1) "If I have some serious concerns I will visit one of my other co-workers or I will drive my reading resource teacher crazy." (Catherine, Interview 1) "I talk to the math teacher and I see that we are saying the same thing, which means it's just not me. If we notice something across content areas we work on it together, if she's doing something I use the vocabulary, if I'm doing something and it crosses math then she'll back it up. For those who it's not working then we decided we had to go further, then it was pass us at that point." (Catherine, Interview 4)

	"I usually ping off co-workers to come up with strategies on how to help." (Catherine, Interview 1) "I think it's important to collaborate with others to hear their perspective and strategies and other things that they use in the classroom that could be beneficial and useful for my students." (Meredith, Interview 2) [The ESOL teacher] "is very supportive. We usually look at data together and we will discuss the students' performance openly, and whole group lessons, and guided reading lessons, we work together a lot." (Meredith, interview 2) "Collaborative planning sessions are at a set time every other Monday where we collaborate with the other teachers on our grade level as well as the ESOL teachers, and then just throughout the week I touch base with teachers several times about different lessons that they are teaching and strategies that they are using and centers that they are doing, so I collaborate with teachers all the time." (Meredith, Interview 2) "Whatever she does with her small group, whenever she pulls the students out of the classroom or to the back of the classroom for their ESOL instruction, she will be giving additional support to what I am teaching in the classroom so that it goes hand in hand." (Meredith, Interview 1)
The Need to Collaborate with Parents and the Support of the Parent Liaison	"Sometimes it's difficult…they [the parents] really care and they love their kids very much but sometimes they just don't know how to help them so they want to help them but not only can they not read the homework, even if it was in Spanish, they don't know how to do it, so just encouraging them to read to their kids." (Gwen, Interview 2) "Well, everything we send home, newsletters, I have a behavior report that I send home on every Friday that tells their effort, their behavior and everything, it's in Spanish and English. Everything we send home is translated, so Ms. Lopez translates that, she'll do call outs for the entire grade level if we are having a problem. With the whole grade level she'll call, she's very flexible…you just pick a day and she's…as many conferences as you need. She's been here for so long that she has had these parents like forever, they are often very big families so they know her and they form a relationship and it's also helpful because you know when you are saying something, I only know what is happening in fourth grade unless I've talked to other teachers which I often try not to do, at least until I get to know the kids but if you are in a conference and you're saying yea blah, blah, blah…she'll say…she has notes on every kid she has ever been on…oh yeah, this was happening in second grade and third grade too so she's a great resource to have." (Gwen, Interview 2) "I don't think any of my parents have ever been at SIT, but she [Ms. Lopez] comes and she has notes and stuff from parent meetings in the past. She's kinda like the parent representative so she knows the parents and she speaks for them." (Gwen, Interview 2) "Parents don't understand their rights as much as they should; and our bilingual coordinator tries to get that across to them…it doesn't necessarily work." (Gwen, Interview 4)

	"The girls from St. Peter's volunteer. They come over and translate for us, which is very sweet, but I always feel a little awkward about that 'cause parents want to know like private information about their kids and I mean they are in their uniforms, the parents know. With the county translator, it would be different, but I like when I have Ms. Lopez because I trust her I know what she is saying. If I don't know you, I don't know." (Gwen, Interview 2) "If it's something very long, then I will send an email to the parent coordinator who would then contact the parent. Sometimes she can handle it via phone, if it's something bigger, then she'll call and see what day they can come and then we will have a conference and she's the translator." (Catherine, Interview 1) The parent liaison "helps with that [parent outreach] a lot." (Meredith, interview 1) "She [the parent liaison] is very helpful with translating and providing other resources for them [the parents]." (Meredith, Interview 1)
Barriers Encountered with SIT	"I put them up early, because you have to in order to get anything done." (Gwen, Interview 3) "The SIT process is so long there are so many kids here that…it's very difficult for the one counselor and…it just takes forever… We say we have to have a six-week intervention and we'll meet again but in reality we meet in six months…it's very, very inefficient and it's absolutely harming the children." (Gwen, Interview 3) "My problem is I think way too many kids slip through the cracks." (Gwen, Interview 1) "I don't see it being beneficial, the concept is, but in actuality I don't think it works." (Gwen, Interview 4) I think they [the county] need to quadruple the size of their BAT team, because I think we wait too long to send anyone to BAT so there hardly been enough interventions, there hasn't been enough interventions. I am sure there are other schools who send every single kid to BAT, I am sure it's just a back and forth, but there are clearly not enough in the county because I have been waiting since either February or March and they are not coming this year and who knows if they are even going to come next year especially with a different counselor. Again, this is a disservice to the kids and the county is always about students come first and blah, blah, blah but with such a high ESOL population you have to have a staff that matches that and you need a BAT team to do it." (Gwen, Interview 4) "I put some kids up in September and just met on them in February it's like you don't meet on them right away and then intervention,...like Jonathan, you were at the meeting with him that was our first meeting I put him up the second week of school, so August, so you don't meet on them forever and then they want you to do all these eight weeks of interventions and then eight more weeks and another one and it's like we can't." (Gwen, Interview 2)

	"I have heard teachers say I'm not going through that because it's too much paperwork and nothing is going to get done and I understand that concept.… Teachers don't want to do it because it is too much paperwork and they know what happens when they try to do it and they don't want to waste their time, which I understand, I very much understand" (Gwen, Interview 3) "It feels like a waste of time but I wouldn't feel right not fighting for some of these kids." (Gwen, Interview 4) "I don't fault a specific person I just think there's so many components but it's not serving the purpose of (a) identifying who needs it and (b) giving them the help they need. It's disheartening, you go through it and you keep pushing and a lot of teachers give up." (Gwen, Interview 3) "The main reason not to refer is because you know not a doggone thing is going to happen. You don't get any feedback, [and] you don't get any strategies. You go in and you bring what you have and then when you leave it's like, you're a teacher, you should know what strategy to use, wrong! If I refer a student, it's because I have done all that I feel like I can do and its more than what's in the classroom." (Catherine, Interview 2) "I think the RtI process is a good process in my school. The only thing that I really get frustrated with is the amount of time that it takes. So if I refer a student to RtI or to the SIT team it might be a few months before we even have our initial meeting and then just by the nature of RtI, it takes five or six more months to actually see if they are making growth or showing growth through whatever intervention they are getting. So I wouldn't say specifically it is my school, it's just the whole process can sometimes be slow because we have to wait and see if they are responding to the intervention. The challenge is once I refer the student having that initial meeting, figuring out what they need and getting it started. Once it gets started, it's just a matter of waiting to see." (Meredith, Interview 3) "The challenge that I face with the referral process is the time that it takes to refer a student and then a month or two later we have our initial meeting and then a month or two later we have another meeting. It just seems to take a while." (Meredith, Interview 2) It "pretty much takes all year to get two of my students who I referred to the testing stage and I think that if they had been tested earlier this year they might have been identified earlier and they could have gotten the support that they needed. So that's a challenge." (Meredith, Interview 2) "I just kinda have to go off of my own resources. It would be great if we had an online program they could use or a special workbook or something that my ELL students [could] work with because a lot of it is just me pulling from my own resources which is just three years' work, not that excessive." (Meredith, Interview 2) "The students who I [Meredith] referred right in the beginning of the year, whereas the students who I [Meredith] referred later in the year, I [Meredith] didn't really see much of a change because it just takes so long to get started and then by the time it does get started it was the end of the year." (Meredith, Interview 4)

ELs' Language Development and Time in the United States

When differentiating between language acquisition and a suspicion of a learning disability, each teacher spoke about the language development of English for ELs who were born in the country or who have been attending school since PreK or Kindergarten and are now in the third or fourth grade. The teachers viewed the amount of time in school, Kindergarten through third or fourth grade, as a substantial amount of time to develop English. For example, Gwen described this time as being in school "forever" (Interview 1). The teacher participants acknowledged that many, if not all, of these students spoke only Spanish in their homes. However, they conveyed that since ELs have been exposed to the English language in school as early as Kindergarten, they should show some level of proficiency in the English language.

All the participants in this study viewed ELs' limited development of English as a concern, but their approach to this concern as it related to language acquisition and a suspicion of a learning disability differed. For Catherine, many of ELs in her classroom were American-born and she questioned why they were "still a grade or two behind" (Interview 2) in the third grade. Catherine's uncertainties produced two varied results. She continued the referral process for the students who were previously referred in the second grade but provided classroom interventions and supports for the other ELs who were also performing below grade level.

Meredith spoke about one of her students, who was born in America and had been attending school since Kindergarten. She expressed that the student's oral language was "very, very low" (Interview 2) and, as a result, she referred the student to the School Instructional Team (SIT). Meredith explained that she referred the student for special

education assessment “not just to see if it’s a learning disability, but also to see if it’s still just the language she is missing or it’s something else” (Interview 2). Like Catherine, Meredith was unsure about her student’s development in light of that student’s exposure to English and mentioned that it was necessary to seek guidance from SIT. Gwen, on the other hand, said this concern was one indication of many, such as academic challenges across languages, which signified a possible suspicion of a learning disability for two of her students.

The results of the cross-case analysis indicated that all three teachers in the study had the expectation that English should develop with time in U.S. schools, as can be seen in Table 3. As Meredith said, “In my opinion, if she has been going to school in the United States since Pre-K, Kindergarten up until third grade, her language skills should be pretty solid by now and so her lack of oral language, written language, it does concern me” (Interview 2). Although the teacher participants approached their concerns about language acquisition and a suspicion of a learning disability differently, each teacher participant evaluated the limited development of English and time in U.S. schools as an indication of academic difficulties.

Collaborating With Colleagues in the Identification Process

The participants in this study each talked about the importance of collaborating with their colleagues to provide appropriate instruction for ELs in their classroom, as can be seen in Table 3. Each participant highlighted that different colleagues offered distinct knowledge and skill sets, which was essential to consider when working with diverse learners and determining what worked best for ELs. Gwen said, “It’s absolutely important to collaborate with them, collaborate with other teachers, with your team [to]

get different ideas, see what works" (Interview 2). Meredith echoed a similar point: "I think it's important to collaborate with others, to hear their perspective and strategies and other things that they use in the classroom that could be beneficial and useful for my students" (Interview 2). The recurring point, which can be seen in Table 3, that kept coming up for each participant when collaborating with colleagues was discovering what worked for their colleagues that could be used to help ELs in their classrooms. As Catherine articulated, "I usually ping off co-workers to come up with strategies on how to help" (Interview 1).

While the participants collaborated with several of their colleagues, all three worked with teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and the Reading Specialist assigned to their grade level. For the ESOL teacher, collaboration included lesson planning, instruction, and evaluating ELs' performance. Meredith captured what the collaboration looked like with the ESOL teacher when she said, "We usually look at data together and we will discuss the students' performance openly, and whole group lessons, and guided reading lessons, we work together a lot" (Interview 2). In the case of the Reading Specialist, collaboration included providing intervention, resource materials, and recommendations on different strategies the teachers might use in their classrooms.

Catherine and Meredith, who were both third grade teachers in different schools, had classes that were departmentalized. Therefore, they each had a team teacher who taught math and science. Both Catherine and Meredith worked with their team teacher on lesson planning as well as discussed academic concerns as they arose. Catherine pointed out that when collaboration with her team teacher did not work for ELs who were

displaying academic challenges, she would also collaborate with her team teacher to determine next steps. She said, "For those who it's not working, then we decided we had to go further, then it was past us at that point" (Interview 4). They would make the decision together to refer the student to the SIT.

The three teachers in this study identified collaboration with colleagues as significant to the planning and instruction of ELs. They each identified the necessity of working with their colleagues to explore different strategies in order to determine and provide the most appropriate instruction for ELs. The teachers were frequently faced with complex instructional decisions working with ELs, and they each stated it was "hard." For example, Catherine explained, "Sometimes it's hard when the [reading] levels are low because you can't figure out if it is special education or the language, [you work with] co-workers to come up with strategies on how to help" (Interview 1). The goal for each teacher was to provide appropriate instruction to ensure student success, which demanded collaboration between colleagues specifically as it related to English language acquisition and learning disability.

The Need to Collaborate With Parents and the Support of the Parent Liaison

Each participant spoke about the need to collaborate with parents and the language barrier that prevented the partnership they would have liked to have with parents. The language barrier that impacted teacher-parent communication resulted in the collaboration between teachers and the parent liaison. The parent liaison was often the bridge between the parents and the teachers, as evident in Table 3. The parent liaison assisted the teachers with daily communication with parents, parent conferences, class

emergencies, SIT meetings, and keeping the parents informed about ongoing school matters.

Although Gwen and Catherine were both in the same school, Gwen spoke more extensively about her collaboration with the parent liaison. She talked about the various ways the parent liaison supported her: "Everything we send home, newsletters, I have a behavior report that I send home on every Friday that tells their effort, their behavior and everything, it's in Spanish and English. Everything we send home is translated, so Ms. Lopez translates that" (Interview 2). The parent liaison would also make "call-outs for the entire grade level if we are having a problem with the whole grade level. She'll call, she's very flexible…you just pick a day…as many conferences as you need" (Interview 2).

Gwen talked about the unique connection the parent liaison shared with the school community, her depth of knowledge about many families in the school, the relationship she had with these families, and how this connection supported teachers and essentially the students. As Gwen said, "She's been here for so long that she has had these parents like forever, they are often very big families, so they know her and they form a relationship" (Interview 2). The knowledge the parent liaison had allowed her to represent parents during SIT meetings and contribute meaningfully to conversations about the students' performance, whether academically or behaviorally. Gwen also utilized the parent liaison as a translator during parent conferences and spoke about her confidence that the parent liaison was sharing the correct information or the correct message with the parents. Gwen said, "I trust her I know what she is saying" (Interview 2).

Catherine explained her collaboration with the parent liaison: "If it's something very long, then I will send an email to the parent coordinator who would then contact the

parent. Sometimes she can handle it via phone; if it's something bigger, then she'll call and see what day they can come and then we will have a conference and she's the translator" (Interview 1). Catherine's collaboration mostly included specific communication needs and translating for conferences. Meredith, who was in a different school, shared a similar collaborative relationship with the parent liaison as Catherine. She stated that the parent liaison was "very helpful with translating and providing other resources for them [the parents]" (Interview 1). She also added that the parent liaison helped a lot with parent outreach. The outreach programs included afterschool activities that assisted the parents with understanding the school curriculum, learning how to help their children with academics, and navigating online tools.

Each teacher in this study relied on the parent liaison to communicate with parents in some form. The teachers shared that they made attempts to communicate with parents, but the uncommon language and sometimes culture posed ongoing challenges. Meredith pointed out "a lot of them [the parents] don't speak English and so they seem somewhat timid to reach out" (Interview 1). The parent liaison afforded a means of communication between teachers and parents. The extent to which each teacher collaborated with the parent liaison varied. The three participants utilized the parent liaison as a translator. Gwen additionally partnered with the parent liaison and, through that partnership, gained a better understanding of her students and developed a relationship with parents built on trust. The participants wanted their students to be successful and suggested that working with parents could make that possible. The collaboration with the parent liaison provided the opportunity to reach parents and give students the prospects of success.

The Barriers Encountered With SIT

SIT is the corner stone of the RtI process, the process that is believed would provide individualized help for students and intervention that would be tailored to students' needs. However, each of the teachers participating in this study identified time as a barrier they encountered when referring ELs to the SIT, as seen in Table 3. The teachers voiced that the length of time it took to schedule a student for a SIT meeting significantly impacted the SIT referral process, and consequently delayed the intervention for students in need of support. Meredith said, "The challenge that I face with the referral process is the time that it takes to refer a student" (Interview 2). She pointed out that it "pretty much takes all year to get two of my students who I referred to the testing stage and I think that if they had been tested earlier this year they might have been identified earlier and they could have gotten the support that they needed" (Interview 2).

Gwen also stated, "The SIT process is so long" (Interview 2) and, like Meredith, one way she attempted to counter the length of time was to "put them up [refer ELs] early, because you have to in order to get anything done" (Interview 3). When students were not referred early, the likelihood was that they would not go through the SIT process for that school year, and for Gwen, that posed a risk that they may "slip through the cracks" (Interview 2) in the next grade or the next school year.

Gwen and Catherine spoke about teachers not receiving adequate support from the SIT team. This was especially true as it related to Tier 1 interventions, even after they were able to have a meeting, which led to many teachers refusing to refer students to the SIT. As Catherine explained:

> The main reason not to refer is because you know not a doggone thing is going to happen. You don't get any feedback, [and] you don't get any strategies. You go in

> and you bring what you have and then when you leave it's like, you're a teacher, you should know what strategy to use, wrong! If I refer a student, it's because I have done all that I feel like I can do and it's more than what's in the classroom. (Interview 2)

Gwen also shared:

> I have heard teachers say, "I'm not going through that because it's too much paperwork and nothing is going to get done" and I understand that concept.… Teachers don't want to do it because it is too much paper work and they know what happens when they try to do it and they don't want to waste their time, which I understand, I very much understand. (Interview 2)

Gwen also expressed that the SIT process was a "waste of time" (Interview 4), but she shared it "wouldn't feel right not fighting for some of these kids" (Interview 4). Meredith shared that she received recommendations for Tier 1 interventions, "things that I would do in the classroom" (Interview 4).

Meredith explicated that the SIT or RtI process "is a good process in my [her] school" (Interview 3). However, for Gwen in her school, she elucidated that the concept of what the process should be might be beneficial for students, "but in actuality I don't think it works" (Interview 4). Gwen conveyed that several components caused the process not to work such as having only one counselor to manage so many kids. She also mentioned that the Bilingual Assessment Team (BAT), which assessed students during the SIT process, impacted the wait time during the SIT. She pointed out:

> They [the county] need to quadruple the size of their BAT team, because I think we wait too long to send anyone to BAT so there hardly [had] been enough interventions, there hasn't been enough interventions. Again, this is a disservice to the kids and the county is always about students come first and blah, blah, blah but with such a high ESOL population you have to have a staff that matches that and you need a BAT team to do it. (Interview 4)

Each of the participants voiced her dissatisfaction with the SIT process. While they expressed that the concept behind the process was a good one, their experiences proved the SIT process to be inefficient, at times ineffective, and, for Gwen and

Catherine, unsupportive. The teachers conveyed that more needed to be done during the SIT process to provide Tier 1 support for students. They acknowledged that without the support and guidance from the SIT to the general education teachers, the students would continue to encounter academic challenges and fall behind.

Academic Progress

Two of the participants in this study, Gwen and Catherine, talked about referring ELs with a suspicion of a learning disability if there was not enough academic progress. Both communicated that making progress meant meeting or approaching the expected grade level/reading level within a specific timeframe. Each spoke about looking at the students' progress in previous grades as well as the performance in the current grade, as seen in Table 4. Catherine revealed, "I usually look at growth from the previous year and over time. If writing skills, and SRI [Scholastic Reading Inventory] and DRA [Developmental Reading Assessment] scores have not increased enough to even approach third grade level, then that's usually a child I would refer" (Interview 1). Gwen also suggested that progress should be evaluated within the context of the students' grade, along with a timeframe to show progress. She stated, "Making progress is one thing, but if you go from a sixteen to an eighteen in three or four months, that's a red flag, you should be more in the mid-high twenties by then, so those are the main things I look at" (Interview 3).

Neither participant looked only at the academic progress of ELs, but they also considered the interventions that were given to support the students. If students had received interventions but did not show progress, they conveyed that at that time the students should be referred. As Catherine explained, "Those would be the kids who have

done those interventions to go ahead and refer" (Interview 1).

Table 4

Themes Across Two Cases

Themes	Quotes
Academic Progress	"Ms. Murphy has [the] spreadsheet that we share. I share with fifth grade teachers, she shares with me so that I know their past couple DRA scores, because making progress is one thing, but if you go from a sixteen to an eighteen in three or four months, that's a red flag you should be more in the mid-high twenties by then, so those are the main things I look at." (Gwen, Interview 3) Jonathan and Melissa, they "did make progress, they went from a three and four to a sixteen, which is obviously a DRA progress but I'm still adamant that they need an IEP…sixteen is a first grade level, a three or four is beginning Kindergarten level…I think you are suppose[d] to leave first grade on a sixteen. So they made a year and half worth of progress, which is good but they are still so insanely below." (Gwen, Interview 3) "When students are referred I usually look at growth from the previous year and over time. If writing skills, and SRI and DRA scores have not increased enough to even approach third grade level, then that's usually a child I would refer." (Catherine, Interview 1) "Those would be the kids who have done those interventions to go ahead and refer." (Catherine, Interview 1)
The Barriers to Collaboration	"The resource teachers are the first to be pulled for meetings." (Gwen, Interview 1) "We are doing WIDA testing so the ESOL teachers haven't been in since the beginning of January 'cause they have been testing so we just haven't had ESOL services at all." (Gwen, Interview 1) "It would help if ESOL teachers weren't pulled for three months of testing." (Gwen, Interview 2) "I wish that we had more support from ESOL teachers, that's not a blame thing, [it's a] testing culture thing, they just have to be taken out because they have to give those test, I do wish we have more support obviously with my having 29 kids in the class, these are things beyond our control." (Gwen, Interview 1) "For reading they were pulled out, it was supposed to be for an hour, which Ms. Green did her humanely best, it's certainly not her fault—often the resource teachers are pulled for meetings or the first ones pulled if there's a problem or anything, which I get." (Gwen, Interview 4)

	"I technically got a paraprofessional in response to all my complaints and he's been in my class for maybe ten times, I don't really have him and when he comes in, he hasn't been in three weeks so I had no idea he was coming so I have nothing prepared. First, I had things planned for him to do with them, but he wasn't here. That is school-wide I guess." (Gwen, Interview 4) "They are always pulled for subs [to substitute] or to help someone else. So when he comes in, I don't have anything prepared so it's like can you make these copies." (Gwen, Interview 4) "She [ESOL Teacher] has been gone for a month and a half from January—testing—they just finished yesterday. I let her know that we are doing three-letter blends and could she come up with activities for ESOL students—getting to know those blends—it's the ending sounds." (Catherine, Interview 1)

The number and types of test(s) that each participant analyzed to determine academic progress varied. Catherine evaluated progress in writing skills, the SRI, and the DRA. Gwen mainly focused on the DRA. The SRI is a criterion-referenced assessment that measures students' reading comprehension and is done independently. The DRA is a standardized reading test used to determine students' instructional reading level, which a teacher administers one-on-one. According to Gwen, the DRA allowed the teacher to observe ELs' performance during the reading assessment, which provided additional data about the students' skills or application of skills.

Although both teachers identified the assessments they employed to measure students' academic growth, they also acknowledged the limitation of these tests. The tests were in English and might not have captured ELs' true content knowledge or abilities. Gwen articulated that the tests were "rarely assessing what they are meant to be assessing, I think they're assessing 'can you read in English?'" (Interview 3). The tests students were given might not have assessed ELs' true knowledge or skills because they were not proficient in the language of the test. As Catherine pointed out, "A lot of them

have not experienced academic or regular English vocabulary…they stumble a lot trying to break them down" (Interview 3). The teachers also relied on their observation of students' classroom performance and alternative ways to assess the students' content knowledge; for example, in a grammar test, Gwen stated "I read to them 'cause…I am not assessing whether you can read the sentence, I'm assessing if you know which one is the noun" (Interview 3).

Gwen and Catherine agreed that ELs who did not demonstrate academic growth over time, despite classroom instruction and intervention, should be considered for referral for special education assessments. They were aware that it was important to utilize effective measures to determine ELs' academic progress. Standardized and criterion-referenced assessments are useful and can provide meaningful information, but informal assessments allow teachers to acquire a better picture of ELs' abilities, skills, and ongoing progress.

Barriers to Collaboration

The teacher participants voiced the importance of collaboration with their colleagues; they also spoke about the barriers they faced with collaboration, as seen in Table 4. In both schools, the ESOL teachers conducted the World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA). This meant that during this testing window, ESOL teachers were not available to support the classroom teachers or their students. Catherine indicated that "she [ESOL teacher] has been gone for a month and a half, from January, testing" (Interview 1). Gwen conveyed that ESOL teachers being pulled to administer assessments spoke to the testing culture and the teachers were not to be blamed as "these are things beyond our control" (Interview 1).

Because specialists, resource teachers, and support staff were not teachers of record and did not have classrooms, they were often pulled for emergencies, unexpected classroom coverage, office coverage, or filling in as needed in other areas. Gwen expressed, “Often the resource teachers are pulled for meetings or the first ones pulled if there’s a problem or anything, which I get” (Interview 1). The absence of resource teachers, specialists, and support staff had an impact on the classroom teachers’ lesson planning, classroom instruction, and provision of ESOL services for ELs.

ELs were frequently provided with additional support—for example, ESOL teachers and reading specialists—to reduce learning challenges and enhance their learning experience. All the teachers who worked with ELs had their specific duties and responsibilities to the students. Therefore, the inability of all the teachers working with ELs to plan together and provide instruction took away the support for academic and linguistic development and any targeted support that ELs needed. This may consequently impact ELs’ performance and their academic success.

Chapter Six: Discussion

This study explored how third and fourth grade general education teachers differentiated between language acquisition (LA) and a suspicion of Learning Disability (LD) when considering referrals. The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to increase the understanding of the decision-making process for third and fourth grade general education teachers when differentiating between the two possibilities. The study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. How do third and fourth grade general education teachers differentiate between English language acquisition challenges and a possible learning disability when considering referral to special education?
2. What is the identification process used by third and fourth grade general education teachers to recommend English learners (ELs) for referral during the special education process?

Differentiating between LA and LD in ELs continues to be a challenge, which has led to inappropriate referrals of ELs to special education (Gersten, 1996; Maxwell & Shah, 2012). One of the reasons for the overrepresentation of ELs in some categories of special education is that general education teachers are not familiar with "the principles of linguistic and cultural diversity and their impact on academic contexts" (Hamayan et al., 2007, p. 38).

Several studies have addressed the serious and pervasive problem of the misidentification of ELs as LD and have related these problems to the methods of differentiating between LA and LD (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016).

However, few studies have explored the methods or the decision-making processes of general education teachers when differentiating between LA and a suspicion of LD in ELs.

This study contributes to an understanding of the decision-making process that third and fourth grade general education teachers engage in when distinguishing between LA and a suspicion of LD in ELs. The teachers who participated in this study shared several aspects of their experiences. This chapter provides a summary of significant findings, along with a consideration of the relevant literature and a discussion of the implications of this research and final conclusions.

Four themes emerged from the cross-case analysis, which were consistent across the three teachers who participated in this study: (a) ELs' oral language development and exposure to English, (b) collaborating with colleagues during the referral process, (c) the support of the parent liaison as a key resource, and (d) barriers during the SIT process. The next theme emerged with only two teachers: academic progress.

Discussion of Major Findings

The first research question explored how third and fourth grade general education teachers differentiated between English LA challenges and a possible LD when considering referral to special education. A major finding from the interviews was that all three teachers used oral language development and exposure to English to differentiate between English LA challenges and a possible LD when considering referral to special education.

ELs' oral language development and exposure to English. All three teachers in this study shared that they believed ELs' oral language proficiency in English should develop with exposure to the English language. When the participating teachers spoke

about the development of English language proficiency, they all spoke about growth in relation to the number of years ELs have been in American schools. They conveyed that ELs' limited proficiency growth, even with what they considered to be sufficient exposure to the English language, was a concern and could be one way to differentiate between ELs with English LA challenges and others with a possible LD when considering referral to special education. The teachers were aware that ELs' growth in English language proficiency and any suspicion of an LD must be evaluated in relationship to the instruction and intervention the students had received. When ELs are provided "appropriate instruction and/or intervention, students without disabilities will demonstrate increased English language proficiency. Students with disabilities will struggle despite the interventions" (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002, p. 3). The teachers communicated that they provided instruction within the general education classroom in the best way they knew how, but they expressed concerns about appropriate instruction and/or interventions ELs received in past grades, as well as what they were currently receiving.

As the participants reflected on their practice during the interviews, they said they provided the core curriculum using various teaching strategies they believed were appropriate instruction for ELs. Several of the instructional practices they mentioned included practices discussed by Gersten (1996) and Klingner (2010) (see Appendices A and B). Gwen, for example, explained that during reading instruction, she provided small group instruction which allowed her to differentiate instruction according to her students' needs. She allowed for guided interaction through accountable talk and talking chips, peer-to-peer interaction during partner work, or small groups, and she frequently slowed

things down during instruction to allow for better pacing and mediation as the students needed. Catherine also shared some of the strategies she used in her classroom for EL instruction. She indicated that she used visuals, example color-coding word parts for easy identification, picture walks before reading for background and comprehension, and multiple means of presenting information, such as interactive journals and online text. Meredith talked about using explicit instruction, guided interaction through small group instruction, and checking for understanding during instruction.

In addition to providing appropriate instruction, the participants repeatedly shared concerns about providing appropriate interventions in a timely manner. There is a distinction between early intervention and pre-referral intervention (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). Early intervention is provided as soon as a student is identified as experiencing academic difficulties, not when concerns have become so serious that the teacher thinks referral to special education is needed. The term *pre-referral intervention* historically referenced interventions that were implemented with the purpose of preventing unnecessary special education referrals and placement (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom, & Stecker, 1990; Garcia & Ortiz, 1988). By the time pre-referral activities are given, it is too late to distinguish effectively between ELs who are failing as a result of deficiencies in the teaching-learning environment, ELs who are experiencing difficulties unrelated to a learning disability, and ELs who have been evaluated and determined to have a disability. For many teachers, pre-referral intervention is viewed as one of the hurdles they must go through to get their students tested for special education (Fuchs et al., 1990; Garcia & Ortiz, 1988). The timing of interventions within the general education

classroom is critical to students who are struggling and can reduce inappropriate special education referrals.

Many of the students discussed in this study received interventions in the past, and many were also receiving interventions at the time of this study. It is difficult to say if these students received timely interventions; several received interventions as early as kindergarten or first grade. The participants in this study were familiar with the Response to Intervention (RtI) process in their schools. Tier 1 of the RtI process included early interventions, as described by Artiles and Ortiz (2002). The teachers talked about the need for Tier 1 interventions within the general education classroom. However, for all the participants, finding effective research-based interventions or resources for their students was a challenge. They each explained that if their school or the school district provided an intervention to their particular grade level, their students would have access; otherwise, the teachers often had to find interventions on their own.

When interventions were available, the teachers conveyed that the students were often forced to wait for intervention supports due to the lengthy process required to receive intervention. The participants understood that identifying and intervening when students were initially showing signs of academic struggles is critical in preventing further academic challenges. However, the decisions on intervention supports for their students were not always theirs to make.

To discuss ELs' English language development and their exposure to the English language as a way of distinguishing between LA and LD, we must also look at the role ELs' native language plays in the development of their English language proficiency growth and essentially their academic development in the general education classroom.

DelliCarpini (2008) drew upon Cummins' (1980) notion of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) to distinguish between the different languages ELs must master to achieve educational progress. BICS refers to everyday conversational or social language, which is used to communicate in one's environment, whereas CALP refers to the language skills needed to master English and be successful academically. The timeframe to acquire BICS is approximately 2 years while CALP can take up to 12 years (DelliCarpini, 2008).

A number of factors can influence ELs' cognitive academic language proficiency in English, namely: previous schooling, exposure to English, age, motivation to learn English, ability level, language(s) instruction, cultural experiences, and amount of exposure to native language, including types of educational and literacy experiences (Cummins, 1980; DelliCarpini, 2008; North Carolina School Psychology Association, 2010). Researchers (Garcia, 2000; Reese, Garnier, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 2000; Slavin & Cheung, 2005) have suggested there is significant "evidence that children's reading proficiency in their native language is a strong predictor of their ultimate English reading performance" (p. 249). On the other hand, "students who are introduced to a second language prior to developing competence in the native language will generally take longer to obtain proficiency in English" (North Carolina School Psychology Association, 2010, p. 8).

Another important factor that must be considered when placing a time limit on ELs to acquire English is Long-term English Learners (LTELs). These are students who have been in U.S. schools for 7 or more years and received ESOL or bilingual classes, but the support was inconsistent. Many of these students may have also missed school for

an extended period of time; they never developed literacy in their native language and English literacy is also significantly below grade level (Freeman & Freeman, 2003). Although LTELs' academic performance may be below grade level, their lack of appropriate instruction should not make them eligible for special education services. Schools must consider another alternative for ELs who are identified as LTELs.

The use of oral language proficiency to differentiate between ELs who are having academic difficulties as a result of LA and ELs with a possible LD cannot be utilized as an isolated criterion. The classroom teachers' decision to use oral language growth or proficiency to differentiate between LA and LD must be made within the context of other factors, such as providing appropriate instruction for ELs in a positive school climate (see Figure 3). While ELs need explicit instruction in English, which may be different from their native languages such as phonology, morphology, and syntax of English, oral language instruction is critical as well (Echevarria et al., 2009). ELs with the least amount of language support are often the ones likely to be referred to special education (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). Teachers need to ensure that ELs are receiving appropriate language supports, which seemed to be frequently overlooked in instruction (August & Shanahan, Executive Summary 2006). Meaningful opportunity for oral interaction for ELs is important to develop familiarity with and comprehension of oral speech (Lenters, 2004). Lenters (2004) offered several suggestions to promote oral language for ELs' reading development:

- scaffold vocabulary development through pre-reading activity where children take turns with proficient English speakers discussing the illustrations of story (picture walk) to predict its content prior to reading it;

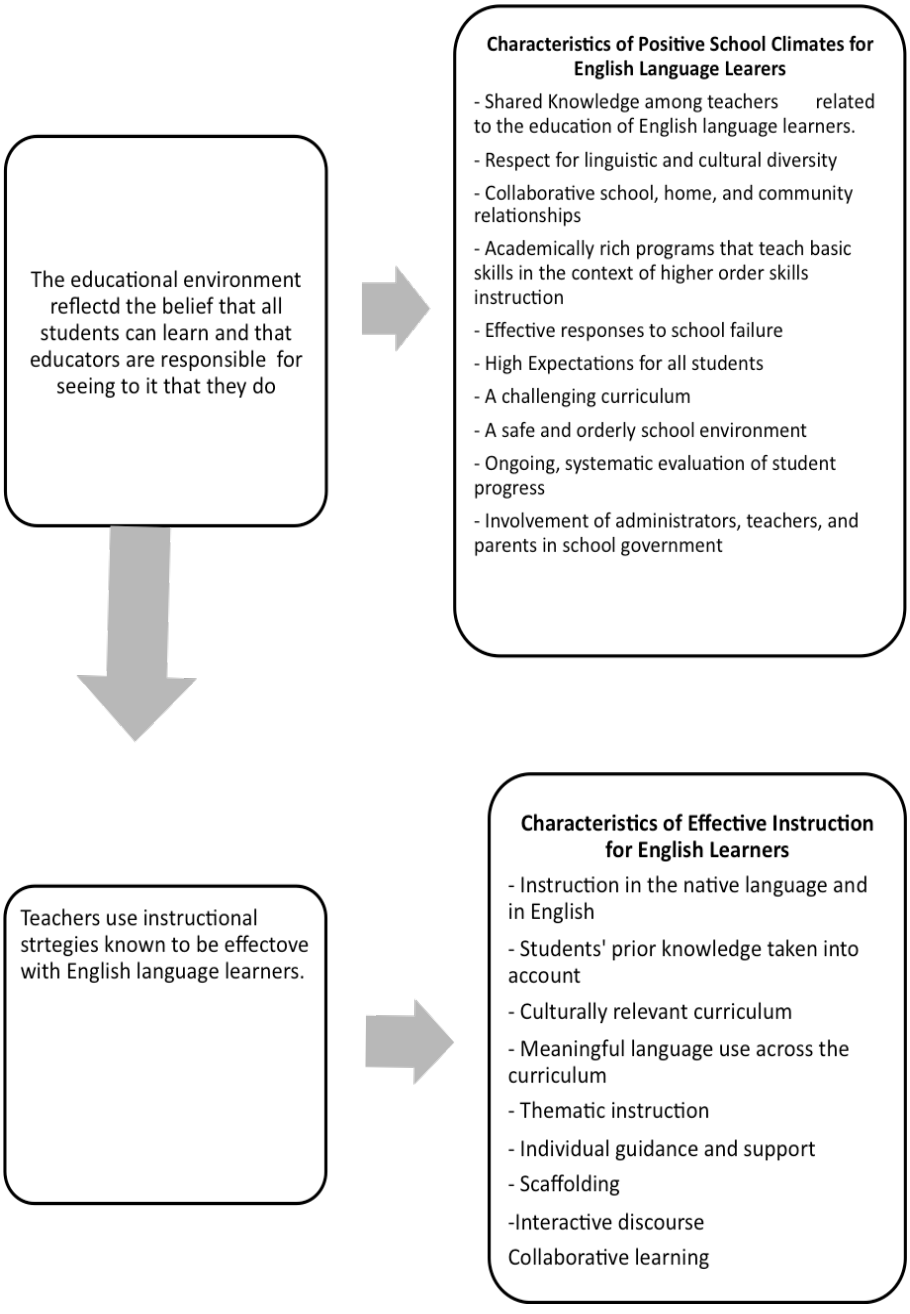

Figure 3. Characteristics of positive school climate and effective instruction for ELs

- engage in repeated readings of simple predictable text such as Red Is Best (Stinson, 1982); new vocabulary may be internalized through this method;
- tape recordings of simple stories and graded readers will allow ELs to engage independently in shared and repeated reading;
- highlight the vocabulary and story structure of favorite simple stories the children are learning to read and have them reconstruct the stories in bookmaking activities; the activity will provide ELs with a growing library of personal texts they may read and reread for oral vocabulary and sight word development.

It is also crucial that ELs receive instruction in a positive learning environment. Specifically, that means all teachers share a common philosophy and knowledge base of the education of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This common philosophy includes the following characteristics: there is an acceptance of linguistic and cultural diversity; there is a clear understanding that native language provides the foundation for achieving high levels of English proficiency; and language development is a shared responsibility among the teachers. Parents are viewed as effective advocates for their children and valuable resources in school improvement efforts. The schools must provide academically rich programs that incorporate instruction of basic skills in the context of higher-order thinking and problem solving. Effective instruction and a positive school climate for ELs are two elements that will promote ELs' learning, which must be considered before using oral language to differentiate between LA and LD.

Previous research (Gersten, 1996; Maxwell & Shah, 2012) highlighted that the inappropriate referrals of ELs is the result of teachers having difficulties with distinguishing between the characteristics of second LA and LS. This study focused on third and fourth grade general education teachers who are referring ELs for special education assessments and their decision-making process involved in distinguishing between the characteristics of second LA and LD. The teachers' decision-making process revealed that their decisions to refer ELs were based on a limited knowledge of the LA process and best practices for teaching ELs. The findings indicated that teachers need a deeper understanding of best practices for teaching ELs to provide appropriate instruction. It also implied that even with training, as was the case for Gwen, or if teachers possess some knowledge, they may need guidance connecting theory and practice to meet the needs of ELs more effectively (Godley et al., 2006).

The decision of whether a student received the most appropriate intervention may not have been entirely up to the classroom teacher. Very often, the school administration, the school district, or certain offices within the school district made the decisions about interventions. The teachers depended on their school administration to identify research-based intervention and were not knowledgeable of the Tier 1 interventions they could provide in the general education classroom. This implies that classroom teachers need to be informed of research-based Tier 1 interventions that are available to them, and school administrations need to understand the importance of supporting their teachers in providing early intervention for ELs. The following section highlights issues related to Research Question 2, which examined the identification process used by third and fourth

grade general education teachers as they consider ELs for referral during the special education process.

Collaborating with colleagues during the pre-referral process. In Middletown and Harriston Elementary Schools, as in other schools in the school district where this study was conducted, when general education teachers recognize that a student is experiencing academic challenges, they must first intervene by providing supports and/or interventions within the general education classroom. Teachers cannot refer a student to the SIT until they have implemented and documented research-based instructional practices and strategies in the general education classroom. The teachers must demonstrate that ELs' challenges are not a result of a lack of appropriate instruction. All three teachers shared that they worked with various colleagues to provide instructional supports to ELs who were identified as experiencing academic challenges. They all emphasized the importance of collaborating with their colleagues to support instruction for ELs in their classroom. "When teachers collaborate on their planning and teaching, they are better able to meet the needs of diverse students and fulfill their legal responsibilities" (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2006, p. 239). The teacher participants explained that collaborating with their colleagues allowed them to tap into each one's expertise to find new ways to provide support for ELs.

The teacher participants in this study collaborated with other teachers on their grade level as well as with teachers the students might have had in prior grades, Reading Specialists, and teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The teachers, particularly Gwen and Meredith, expressed that they worked closely with the ESOL teacher who was assigned to their grade levels, especially in the area of reading.

The collaboration between the general education and ESOL teachers is especially important in reading tasks. In a reading task, three variables interact: linguistic variables, knowledge variables, and literacy variables (Kang, 1994). During reading, specifically cognitively demanding activities, ELs may encounter difficulty related to these variables, which may lead to reading frustration. To eliminate the chances of such frustrations, the ESOL teacher and the general education teacher can work together to provide instruction, support, and guidance for such ELs. Both teachers would be able to combine their knowledge and expertise to plan and implement the instruction needed for student achievement more effectively.

Catherine conveyed that she collaborated more closely with her team teacher. Although the two teachers were departmentalized, they collaborated to teach content across different curricular areas. ELs do benefit when they are able to see the interconnectedness between material and skills presented across different classes (DelliCarpini & Gulla, 2009). One of the ways that Catherine and her team teacher connected their lessons was through content vocabulary. They each purposely planned and incorporated the vocabulary from each content area to increase the students' vocabulary knowledge and understanding.

The teachers were very vocal about the importance of collaboration with other teachers and specialists. However, with the collaboration came some challenges. Catherine expressed that while she collaborated with the ESOL teacher who was assigned to her grade level, she did not work very closely with her because of ongoing differences. Meredith and Gwen also encountered challenges in collaborating with other teachers of ELs, but it was mostly with the teachers' schedules and inconsistencies. Unfortunately,

all collaborative planning and teaching teams face issues of concern while working together; instruction and communication are among those concerns (Thousand et al., 2006). Catherine, like Gwen and Meredith, voiced that more training and support were needed to facilitate successful teacher collaboration. Collaboration is not a natural process (DelliCarpini & Gulla, 2009); having successful collaboration requires effort, diligence, and training.

To have effective student outcomes, there needs to be effective collaboration (Thousand et al., 2006) between classroom teachers and other specialists such as ESOL teachers and special education teachers. Effective or successful collaboration "is not simply working together, liking each other, or spending time engaged in a joint activity" (Robinson & Buly, 2007, p. 84). Instead, collaboration is "an interactive process that enables people with diverse expertise to generate creative solutions to mutually defined problems" (p. 84). Friend and Cook (1996) identified several specific requirements needed for successful collaboration, including parity, mutual goals, shared responsibility in decision making, shared resources and accountability, and valuing of personal interactions. The teacher participants echoed these requirements and other areas in which they felt they needed individual or school support. For Gwen, successful collaboration involves problem solving that is student-focused. Meredith mentioned that prior to making a decision about referral for ELs, teachers should be able to work together to look at student data, consider each other's perspectives, and make the best decision for students. Catherine's view of effective collaboration included all teachers having a common knowledge of the school district's acceptable instructional practices or strategies that can be utilized to meet the needs of ELs.

The teachers saw collaboration as essential to ensure appropriate instruction and/or intervention for ELs, especially if the teacher is considering referral for special education assessments because students must be given adequate instruction before referrals to special education (Rinaldi & Samson, 2008). Consistent with previous research, the teachers identified differentiated instructional practice as one of the main areas that require ongoing training and support to attain effective collaboration (Thousand et al., 2006). It is important for teachers to learn how to collaborate prior to entering the classroom because collaboration does not readily occur once they are in the field. Teachers would more readily learn the skills for effective collaboration through modeling, and the most powerful and influential opportunity for that to occur is during initial teacher preparation programs (Robinson & Buly, 2007).

The teachers' collaboration with other specialists such as the ESOL teacher and Reading Specialist when they needed support with instruction or interventions for ELs denoted that collaboration is important when making instructional decisions for ELs' academic success, which may in turn reduce inappropriate referrals of ELs. This is also an indication that the academic achievement of ELs should not be the sole responsibility of any one teacher, but a school-wide responsibility if ELs are to be successful.

The teachers spoke about the ongoing barriers they faced collaborating with other staff members responsible for teaching ELs, which consequently impacted effective instruction for ELs. This signifies that school administrations need to be knowledgeable about effective pedagogy for ELs and act on that knowledge (Dantas, 2007) to provide the necessary ongoing professional development, resources, and support for ELs to be successful in the general education classroom and reduce inappropriate referrals of ELs to

special education. “Building principals are the primary gatekeepers for educational change” (Brooks, Adams, & Morita-Mullaney, 2010; Fullan, 2001) and can ensure that all teachers are trained in effective instructional techniques for ELs and accountable for their implementation (Brooks et al., 2010).

The support of the parent liaison as a key resource to collaborate with parents. From the perspective of many educators, parent involvement, regardless of ethnicity, is crucial for students’ academic achievement (Smith et al., 2008). It is the expectation that teachers conference with parents, especially when students are experiencing challenges in the school setting or teachers are going through the identification process to determine if the students need to be referred for special education assessments. The Individualized Educational Process (IEP) Guide for Tulloch School District, where the teachers in this study were employed, indicates that teachers must be able to show documented dates of parent conferences or attempts to hold such conferences.

All the participants expressed how they valued parent involvement, although they each conveyed that a large percentage of their students’ parents were not involved. The main reason noted by teachers for the parents’ limited involvement was not having a common language between teacher and parent. Most teachers “speak little or no Spanish, making communication about grades, behavior, or homework difficult” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 9). A study by Smith et al. (2008) found that “the inability of the parents to speak and understand English was a major obstacle to effective communications between the school and the Hispanic parents” (p. 11).

The efforts of teachers to engage parents, amid language and cultural differences, can be challenging and, in many cases, can incur additional demands on the teacher during the regular school day. Catherine made a profound statement in her first interview as we talked about how she felt communicating with parents: "I felt that you weren't just teaching the child, you're also teaching the parent; now it's hard to do that" (Interview 1). Breiseth, Robertson, and Laford (2011) wrote that "engaging EL families can only work if all members of the community are committed to the broader mission" (p. 3). In both schools, the parent liaison was one of the key members on whom all three participants relied to support their collaboration with parents. The shared language between the parent liaison and the parents opened up communication and allowed for the development of relationships between the parents and the school.

The parent liaisons took on several roles and responsibilities. The teachers utilized the parent liaison as an interpreter. Catherine and Gwen both spoke about using student volunteers from a neighboring school as interpreters, which posed a concern for them because they often discussed confidential information and felt using students disempowered the parents. The use of students, friends, or relatives to translate confidential or detailed information does not work (Breiseth et al., 2011); rather, it is important to have a translation process that is "formal, steady, and reliable" (Houk, 2005, p. 64). Gwen shared that the parent liaison at Middletown Elementary School had been there for several years, and had developed relationships with the parents, their families, and the community, thus creating an environment of trust for both teachers and parents. The parent liaison made the time to know the EL families, which not only helped to build an important relationship between the school and the parents based on trust, but it also

provided the opportunity to access resources and pave the way to student success (Breiseth et al., 2011).

The parent liaison also translated many of the written communications as well as phone calls that went home. All formal written communications from the schools were in both Spanish and English. The parent liaison was tasked with the responsibility of translating written information that was not already translated from the district level. Each teacher participant shared that she understood how sending notes home in English did not work. In cases where they needed to send notes home, some have tried to translate simple messages using online resources but kept it very simple to ensure accuracy. In other instances where longer or more detailed information needed to go home, whether for an individual student or a grade level, the parent liaisons were asked to translate. In the case of phone calls, the teachers made attempts to call home when they knew only basic English or basic Spanish was required. Otherwise, the parent liaison was asked to call to relay more detailed information to individual parents or call-outs to all parents on that grade level. If a meeting was required, the teacher would request the parent liaison to arrange the meeting with the parent, at which time the parent liaison would fill the role of interpreter.

In Harriston Elementary School, the parent liaison's role also included parent outreach. This outreach included workshops or information sessions for the parents based on various ways to support their children's academic growth. These workshops or information sessions were usually very well attended. "Many cultures outside the U.S. are oriented more towards the group (the family, the class, the society, etc.) than the individual" (Breiseth et al., 2011, p. 23) and, therefore, the contribution to the group is

highly valued. Rothstein-Fisch and Trumbull (2008) in their book *Managing Diverse Classrooms: How to Build on Students' Cultural Strengths* stated that there are two broad cultural value systems, individualism and collectivism, which "shape people's thoughts, actions and virtually all aspects of life" (p. 8). While great variations exist within a culture, "it can be very useful for teachers to understand the dominant tendencies of a cultural group as a starting place for exploration and further learning" (Breiseth et al., 2011, p. 10).

Several specific groups have been described as highly collectivist. Mexico is one example of a highly collectivist country, where "the dominant values are interdependence, cooperation, family unity, modesty, respect, and social development.… When it comes to completing a task, it is far more important to engage social relationship first, and then the task will get done" (Breiseth et al., 2011, p. 10). Rothstein-Fisch and Trumbull (2008) shared the experience of a teacher and her Latino parents. The teacher redesigned her parent-teacher conferences into group conferences with parents of students with similar ability levels at the same time. All the parents attended and the parents were noted to be more confident when speaking in a setting that they perceived as a less threatening environment.

Gwen shared a similar experience with a parent-teacher conference that she held at Middletown Elementary. She conveyed that one of the most important documents, students' report cards, were not in Spanish. Therefore, at the first report card period, she held a parent-teacher conference with all the parents and the parent liaison, at which time they collaborated to explain the information on the report card and the grading system to the parents. Gwen's purpose for the group parent-teacher conference was to ensure that

parents understood the report card that was going home. While she shared that the conference was well attended, Gwen did not suggest any difference in focusing on the group versus individual, and the benefits it might have related to cultural tendencies or preferences. Harriston Elementary School's decision to focus on the group with the support of the parent liaison also did not seem to be related to cultural tendencies, but rather to reaching a large number of parents at one time to relay needed information. The emphasis was not the families' collectivist value system; nonetheless, with the collaboration of the parent liaison, they were able to connect with parents and hopefully started a practice that will continue and expand.

Consistent with previous literature, Hispanic parents have demonstrated low levels of involvement in the schools and are reluctant to be involved in their children's school activities, such as parent meetings (Smith et al., 2008), primarily due to language barriers. The findings of this study indicated that parents were frequently not actively involved in the pre-referral process when ELs with a suspicion of LD were referred to the SIT. As Gwen stated, "I don't think any of my parents have ever been at SIT" (Interview 2). A similar finding was made of Hispanic parents not being involved in the planning of educational programs for special education students. Although there is a legal obligation for educators to involve parents, they may choose not to attend (Stein, 1983). Therefore, Hispanic parents are "not a part of the assessment process, active in the IEP development, or able to work on some of the goals or objectives at home; nor do they participate in the IEP by offering suggestions" (Stein, 1983, p. 437). This suggests that Hispanic parents are often not involved in any parts of the decision-making process, from the pre-referral

to the IEP development of their child, if the student is determined eligible for special education services.

Research has shown the connection between parent involvement and student achievement (Smith et al., 2008). This makes parent involvement critical, even more so for students who are experiencing challenges. When parents are not involved, they are less aware of the services and supports that are available to them and their children. It is important that parents be involved to advocate for the educational rights of their children, ensuring that schools identify the learning concerns and develop and implement an intervention plan. Schools must attempt to get parents involved (Stein, 1983). The parent liaison can work with parents to facilitate communication between the parent and the school, ensuring that parents are aware of what is taking place with their children, know how they can help at home, and make certain that their children's rights are met and are not inappropriately referred to special education.

Based on the findings of this study and previous studies, schools need to do more to ensure that all children are provided with an appropriate education, regardless of race or linguistic background. This means schools need to respond to the needs of families. Schools and/or school districts are encouraged to "train bilingual facilitators [parent liaisons] to assist parents in becoming partners [with schools]" (Stein, 1983, p. 438). They also need to work with the parent liaison or other staff members to help teach parents how to participate in the referral process by explaining clearly and accurately all parental rights, students' rights, and the available educational processes and services.

Barriers during the SIT process. An important part of identifying whether an EL has difficulties learning due to LA challenges or there is a suspicion of a specific LS

is the consultation with the SIT. The identification process involves several factors such as personnel, instruction, intervention, and systematic integration, which, if not working together effectively, can significantly impact the process. At Middletown and Harriston Elementary schools, one of the purposes of the SIT was to problem solve and provide guidance to the classroom teacher to ensure that each student receives the most appropriate education. The teams were tasked with helping to analyze student data and recommend supports and/or interventions for students, which largely involved the RtI process.

RtI has been hypothesized to reduce the "disproportionate numbers in special education, specifically the SLD category" (Scott, Hauerwas, & Brown, 2014, pp. 172-173). According to Scott et al. (2014), if RtI is implemented accurately with a focus on effective Tier 1 core instruction, it can improve the outcomes for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students and reduce the number of students needing special education.

The implementation of the RtI process by the SIT, especially as related to ELs, did not appear to be a very successful process for the teachers who participated in this study. As they sought to determine whether an EL's academic difficulties were a result of LA challenges or a suspicion of LD, the guidelines or support from the SIT were often very limited or nonexistent. Each teacher felt it could be a good process if done correctly and in a timely manner. Gwen and Catherine explained that they did not feel the SIT at Middletown Elementary School provided enough guidance during the RtI process as teachers attempted to determine the most appropriate instruction or interventions for ELs, to ascertain if ELs' challenges were due to LA or a suspicion of LD. They explained that

meaningful recommendations were not often given to teachers on how they could provide supports or interventions to ELs within the general education classroom. They also posited that teachers often left the meetings feeling helpless. Meredith, who was at Harriston Elementary School, also shared concerns about accessing interventions in the general education classroom prior to meeting with the SIT, but had a more positive experience once she was able to meet with the SIT at Harriston. She felt the team was supportive and provided meaningful recommendations when she attended SIT meetings.

Another barrier that the teacher participants experienced as they navigated the identification process to determine whether ELs need additional support or consideration for special education services was the length of time the process may take. The teachers conveyed that once a student was referred to the SIT, it might take weeks to schedule a meeting. During the time spent waiting to meet with the SIT, the teachers shared that they are responsible for providing Tier 1 interventions, even though at this point they usually had exhausted all their ideas. All three teachers communicated their frustration with the length of time and pointed out that they needed suggestions for possible interventions to use within the general education classroom. Meredith said that she observed improvements for her students who received an intervention after attending a SIT meeting. Moreover, the intervention came close to the end of the school year and she felt so much more could have been accomplished if students had been given the intervention earlier in the school year. Other important notes that the teachers discussed were providing the time ELs need to develop language proficiency, determining when to refer, and knowing that a delayed referral may increase the length of time to meet with the SIT.

The SIT process is critical to ensure appropriate referral of ELs for special education assessments. This is the process by which general education teachers refer students to receive assistance for students inside the general education classroom. The barriers the participants encountered impacted the intervention ELs received as well as their adequate opportunity to learn. This speaks to the research finding that indicated that few or no interventions were tried with ELs prior to special education referral (Carrasquillo & Rodriquez, 1995). Consistent with previous research (Carrasquillo & Rodriquez, 1995; Haager, 2007; Rock & Zigmond, 2001), findings from this study also indicated that pre-referral plans or strategies were implemented sporadically, and there was an issue with fidelity of implementation as resource teachers were often pulled from the classroom, frequently without follow-up SIT meetings to monitor students' progress. The teacher participants referred their students to the SIT with the expectation that the team would work with them to resolve ELs' academic challenges and provide an opportunity for students to receive the best instruction, but frequently this did not occur. During the time of this study, two SIT meetings were held for two of the students Gwen referred. She was told she would be informed of when the next meeting would be, but it did not happen that school year. This suggested the team may not be efficient in solving ELs' academic challenges and determining appropriate referrals for special education. Furthermore, fewer ELs would be referred to special education if school teams effectively responded to their learning needs inside the general education classroom (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006; Ortiz, 2002).

This finding brings to question the SIT participants and implies that more attention needs to be given to the expertise of the team members. The Tullocha district

procedure indicated that the SIT usually consists of the principal and/or a designee, referring teacher, and one or more building specialists, such as professional counselor and Reading Specialist. The teacher participants shared in their interviews that one of the key specialists who attends meetings is a representative from the district's Bilingual Assessment Team (BAT). The attendance of a BAT representative varied between both schools. Gwen and Catherine shared that a representative from BAT was usually invited to attend SIT meetings at Middletown Elementary. The two teachers conveyed that BAT assisted in the decision-making process of whether ELs' academic challenges were impacted by LA or a possible LD. Gwen expressed that for the students she referred, the BAT was invited to attend meetings, but they never occurred during that school year. On the other hand, Meredith shared that the BAT only attended SIT meetings for some ELs but not all, and she was unsure of what was determined when the team was invited.

In my review of the school district's documents and their procedures for the BAT to attend meetings, they specified that the BAT assist school staff with the referral and assessment of CLD/LEP students who may be suspected of having a disability. The documents further stated that if the SIT suspected a CLD student may have a disability, it is their responsibility to contact BAT to assist them in "determining whether the academic, behavioral, and/or attention difficulties are due to the second language acquisition process or if it appears that the difficulties are due to a special education related disability and need to be brought to the attention of the IEP Team" (p. 70). It is therefore the school's responsibility to follow the procedures outlined in the district's process guide.

These findings imply that school teams may need to utilize the expertise of both the BAT as well as the ESOL teacher during the decision-making process at the time of the SIT. It would be meaningful to have an expert or a specialist who is familiar with CLD issues and educating CLD students (Scott et al., 2014). This is especially significant because this should be the time when recommendations are made about instructional supports and appropriate interventions. This also suggests that the school district may need to increase the number of district BAT representatives, as Gwen stated:

> I think they [the school district] need to quadruple the size of their BAT team, because I think we wait too long to send anyone to BAT.… There are clearly not enough in the county because I have been waiting since either February or March and they are not coming this year and who knows if they are even going to come next year…with such a high ESOL population you have to have a staff that matches that and you need a BAT team to do it. (Interview 4)

Schools also need to establish clear procedures for SIT participants when holding meetings for ELs.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study indicated that the teachers were not prepared to adapt their instruction effectively to provide the most appropriate instructions for ELs or to determine when ELs' academic challenges are a result of LA or a suspicion of LD. The participants in this study entered teaching through various pathways. Gwen graduated from a university that required ESOL endorsement; Catherine graduated from a traditional college at a time when not much emphasis was placed on completing diversity courses; and Meredith graduated from an alternative teaching program, Teach for America. Catherine did not complete any linguistic course and Meredith was required to complete one linguistic course. Nonetheless, all three teachers explained they did not feel prepared to teach ELs. The demographics of U.S. schools are continuing to change;

therefore, everyone must support the education of ELs, beginning with schools of education. They must better prepare all teachers to work more effectively with ELs. Professional development is also crucial; all the teachers in the study pointed out that good professional development is in high demand.

Education programs need to find ways to prepare preservice and in-service teachers to meet the demands of all children. While many colleges and universities are already preparing preservice teachers to teach ELs, there is a call for states to consider requiring an endorsement in Structured English Immersion for all certified teachers and principals (Lo, 2013). However, the courses as well as the teaching practicum that teachers are required to complete need to be carefully examined and purposefully structured to prepare teachers to teach ELs.

The prospects of and barriers to ELs' academic success are well documented: "simply put, children with poor English skills are less likely to succeed in school and beyond" (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016, p. 159). As new strategies and instructional practices change, school districts should provide professional development for their school staff. It is essential that every "school or district accept the success of all ELL population as a schoolwide responsibility" (Lewis-Moreno, 2007, p. 773). Providing professional development should not be limited to classroom teachers, but districts should provide professional development for "everyone involved in the referral and decision-making process" of ELs (Klingner & Harry, 2006, p. 2277). School staff should be knowledgeable about the second LA process, cognitive development, and including parents in the process. "Parents often know their child best and can educate the team about their family's cultural and linguistic practices" (Scott et al., 2014, p. 180).

School districts are equipped with experts in various fields, some of whom include ESOL teachers who are "trained in the constructs of second language acquisition (SLA) and related instructional methodology" (Brooks et al., 2010, p. 148), members of the dual language assessment team, the Reading Specialist trained in the area of reading, and the general education teachers who are "well-versed in the curricula of their content area(s)" (p. 148). It is important that "RTI, referral, and identification teams have expertise related to CLD issues" (Scott et al., 2014, p. 180). The school district needs to learn to draw on these various experts who are available to support teachers as they make decisions about the referral process.

The complexity of meeting the educational needs of ELs requires effective communication and collaboration between general education teachers and other staff responsible for teaching ELs. The collaboration between the ESOL teacher and the general education teacher is one example. This collaboration is crucial.

> The ESL teacher should be an onsite resource for content-area teachers, able to share and model a wide repertoire of reading, writing, vocabulary, and note-taking strategies to scaffold instruction.… Content and ESL teachers need to take time to plan together and look at grade-level standards to determine the depth and type of understanding expected before developing a unit plan. (Lewis-Moreno, 2007, p. 774)

To provide appropriate instruction and reduce inappropriate referrals, teachers need to learn how to find the time to work collaboratively and make instruction coherent and consistent across disciplines, teachers, and settings (Garcia & Tyler, 2010, p. 118). The findings from this study indicated that more attention should be given to the collaborative work of school experts and their involvement in supporting instruction, facilitating decisions about early interventions, and forming decisions on whether ELs' academic difficulties are primarily due to LA or a suspicion of LD.

Implications for Future Research

This study contributes to the existing research on differentiating between LA and an LD, as well as the decision-making process that considers the referral of students for special education services. It demonstrated that third and fourth grade general education teachers largely use oral language proficiency in relation to time and exposure to the English language in American schools when differentiating between LA and LD. The findings also revealed that the teachers usually relied on collaborating with their colleagues and other experts in their district during the identification process of recommending ELs for referrals to the special education team. Several of the findings and concerns presented warrant further research. For example, one question concerns the availability of Tier 1 interventions to the general education teachers. General education teachers are responsible for providing appropriate instruction in the general education classroom, especially during Tier 1 of the RtI process. The teacher participants shared that they provided whatever interventions were available to them or that they could find online. This suggests, however, that the appropriateness of the interventions might not be considered or made a priority.

The findings also revealed that these teachers entered the teaching profession from different pathways, raising the question of which education program or pathway is more effective in preparing general education teachers to teach ELs. It would also be interesting to find out how principals are using professional development to prepare their school staff to work with ELs to ensure students are receiving appropriate instruction in the general education setting.

This current study is one of the few to investigate how general education teachers differentiate between LA and a suspicion of LD with ELs and how teachers carry out their decision-making process when considering referrals of these ELs for special education services. More research with a larger sample size to include other grade levels or other diverse groups could contribute to the knowledge base about the decision-making process of general education teachers when differentiating between LA and LD for referral to special education. Research could also focus on other experts or participants who are involved in the identification process of ELs in need of special education services, such as ESOL teachers and parent liaisons.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, obtaining access to participants who were interested in the study, willing to participate, and available to give their time was a limitation. After receiving approval from the school district, I contacted several principals who shared their interest and willingness to extend an invitation for me to come to their schools and speak to their teachers about participating in the study. However, after several follow-ups to visit a few of the schools, the principals shared they were unable to participate because of how much was taking place at their schools.

Of the schools I was able to visit, I met with the principals and the third and fourth grade teachers. Several teachers shared an interest but felt overwhelmed with the demands of their teaching responsibilities, so much so that they did not believe they could participate. One of the participants who agreed experienced several setbacks because of personal emergencies and work demands, which affected the scheduled time

for interviews and classroom observations. As a result, I was not able to gather meaningful data from that participant and did not include her in the study.

Interviews were scheduled at an agreed-upon place and time, usually during afterschool hours at the participants' school, and this leads to the second limitation. During the interviews at the participants' school, other staff members or administration often interrupted us. As a result, we were sometimes unable to complete interviews and needed to reschedule, thereby increasing the time scheduled to conduct interviews and meet the study deadline. One way to resolve this challenge was to complete interviews at another location away from the school or via phone.

Finally, a potential limitation relates to the researcher as the instrument for data collection. I utilized open-ended surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and documents to gather data and draw conclusions. As a result, my experiences, both as a graduate student and as a special education teacher, may have influenced the data collection and analysis processes. I used strategies to ensure this did not occur—member checks and guided questions during interviews.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings from this study highlighted the complexities of language acquisition and the challenges general education teachers may encounter as they attempt to differentiate between LA and a suspicion of LD in ELs when considering referrals for special education services. It contributes to the literature base by focusing on general education teachers and their decision-making process. It provides researchers, teacher educators, and district personnel alike with a better understanding of how general

education teachers do not feel well equipped to make decisions about the differentiation of LA and LD during the decision-making process for EL referral to special education.

It is crucial to provide trainings for preservice and in-service professional development for teachers to "develop new perceptions and practices that will produce greater student achievement and ultimately reduce the number of inappropriate referrals to special education" (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006, p. 44). Although a number of texts, articles, and online resources are available for teachers to learn about working with ELs, "extracting strategies from books without an understanding of ELLs' unique language and learning needs is like building a house without understanding the basic principles of construction" (Carrier, 2005, p. 5). Teachers need to be trained and knowledgeable about ELs' language and learning. It is also important that support be provided to teachers when ELs are not responding to instruction in the form of resources and evidence-based interventions that can be used with ELs. Early intervention and pre-referral intervention can reduce the number of inappropriate referrals to special education (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006). Therefore, teachers need ongoing support in the area of intervention.

The decision-making process of differentiating between LA and LD is multifaceted and requires multidimensional and systematic consideration and teamwork between different experts. The findings from this study also indicated the importance of general educators collaborating with other educational experts when considering making appropriate referrals of ELs for special education services.

With the increasingly diverse student population in U.S. classrooms, the number of ELs with disability continues to grow. Differences in cultural experiences between teachers and students impact the disproportionality of referral and placement of minority

students. Racial discrimination and bias do occur in instruction and the eligibility process for special education. ELs' experiences and the experience of teachers and mainstream society are considerably different and are "evident in their academic performance as well as their behavior, including ways in which they process information, use logic, interact with others, communicate and learn" (Garcia & Tyler, 2010, p. 116). The ways subjects are taught frequently reflect mainstream society's representation. It is important for teachers to "realize that their instruction is as much influenced by culture as student learning, and that the principles of good teaching cannot be assumed to be universalistic" (p. 116). Teachers need to know their learners, understand instructional practices, and adapt their instruction to provide appropriate instruction for all students. In addition to instructional practice, there needs to be clear standards of practice established to include a staff with expertise who works with CLD during all steps of the referral process for ELs. This is especially important to reduce inappropriate referrals and bias in the eligibility process for special education services.

There is no one way to determine whether ELs' academic difficulties are a result of LA or LD. The general education teacher and those supporting general education must look at individual students and do an in-depth evaluation of each student's academic history in the context of language acquisition and culture. Such a task requires collaboration and shared responsibility. Many studies that investigated the decision-making process about an EL's academic difficulty being the result of LA or a suspicion of LD did not focus on the general education teacher in the classroom. More attention needs to be given to the classroom teachers' decision-making process and their delivery of instruction for ELs inside the general education classroom, "thereby reducing the need

to identify students for evaluation or placement in remedial services" (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006, p. 48). All the teacher participants in this study shared that this is one key area requiring attention to support ELs' learning and address inappropriate referrals.

Appendix A

Constructs for Promoting Learning and Language Acquisition

1. Structures, frameworks, scaffolds, and strategies

    A. Provide support to students by "thinking aloud," building on and clarifying input of students"

    B. Use visual organizers, story maps, or other aids to help students organize and relate information

2. Relevant background knowledge and key vocabulary concepts

    A. Provide adequate background knowledge to students and informally assess whether students have background knowledge

    B. Focus on key vocabulary words

    C. Use consistent language

    D. Incorporate students' primary language meaningfully

3. Mediation/feedback

    A. Feedback that focuses on meaning, not grammar, syntax, or pronunciation

    B. Frequency

    C. Comprehensibility

    D. Extent to which teacher provides students with prompts or strategies

    E. Questions that press students to clarify or expand on initial statements

    F. Providing activities and tasks that students can complete

    G. Indicating to students when they are successful

    H. Assigning activities that are reasonable, avoiding undue frustration

I. Allowing use of native language responses (when context is appropriate)

J. Sensitivity to common problems in second language acquisition

4. Involvement

A. Amount of active involvement

B. Involvement of all students, including low-performing students

C. Extent to which extended discourse is fostered

5. Challenge

A. Implicit (cognitive challenge, use of higher-order questions)

B. Explicit (high but reasonable expectations)

6. Respect for-and responsiveness to cultural and personal diversity

A. The extent to which teachers show respect for students as individuals, respond to things students say, show respect for culture and family, and possess knowledge of cultural diversity

B. Incorporation of students' experiences into writing and language arts activities

C. Attempts to link content to students' lives and experiences to enhance understanding

D. View of diversity as an asset, rejection of cultural deficit notion

Appendix B

Six Key Strategies for Teachers of English Learners

#1 **Vocabulary & Language Development**	**Strategy #2** **Guided Interaction**	**Strategy #3** **Metacognition & Authentic Assessment**
Content knowledge: • Introduce new concepts via essential academic vocabulary. • Connect student-accessible synonyms or concepts to these essential vocabulary. • Support students to distinguish word meanings, & their uses for subject-specific tasks& prerequisite language skills. **Academic language:** • Engage beginning-level students in using basic social & school vocabulary, phrases, & sentence structures. • As students progress, continue to contextualize instruction of more complex language forms & uses: subject-specific academic vocabulary, grammatical forms, & sentence structures used in listening, speaking, reading & writing. • Respectfully distinguish differences between primary language use & standard academic English. **Sample activities/assessments:** - Word analysis: e.g., dissecting words into their parts (prefix, root, suffix). - Vocabulary journals, A-B-C books, word webs, word walls. - Interactive editing, Cloze paragraphs, dictations, subject-specific journals.	**Content knowledge:** • Structure multiple opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions as they learn content & develop their use of academic language in speaking/listening, reading & writing. • Clarify expectations, outcomes, & procedures related to tasks for flexible group activities. • Allow for primary language interactions to clarify concepts. **Academic language**: • Structure multiple opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions to increase speaking, listening, reading comprehension & writing skills. • Support language interactions with review/preview of language forms, use of graphic organizers or other types of modeling. **Sample activities/assessments:** - Partner interviews, Class surveys, Tea Party, Think-Pair-Share, Numbered Heads Together, Four Corners. - Poster projects, group presentations. - Perspective line-ups. - Readers' Theatre. (See *Metacognition & Authentic Assessment* activities.)	**Content knowledge:** • Teach students processes for metacognition: i.e., pre-reading & pre-writing skills, word analysis, & methods to monitor their reading comprehension. • Teach & model ways for students to describe their thinking processes verbally& in writing. • Use a variety of activities & tasks to check for understanding. **Academic language:** • In addition to components listed above, ensure that assessment tasks are appropriate to students' assessed language development level. • Provide enough time to complete tasks, appropriate feedback, rubrics, & models to guide students' self-assessment. **Sample activities/assessments:** - Guided reading, completing chapter pre-reading guides, reciprocal teaching, Directed.
Activities I use for this strategy:	***Activities I use for this strategy:***	***Activities I use for this strategy:***

Strategy #4 **Explicit Instruction**	Strategy #5 **Meaning-Based Context & Universal Themes**	Strategy #6 **Modeling, Graphic Organizers, & Visuals**
Content knowledge: • Teach essential grade-level concepts & build students' background knowledge as needed. • Connect overarching ideas (whole), then examine components or processes (part), culminating with students' own applications or synthesis of ideas (new whole). • Explicitly teach academic language & cognitive reading skills needed to complete subject-specific tasks, e.g., analyze, interpret, classify, compare, synthesize, persuade, solve. **Academic language:** • Teach essential language forms & uses per students' assessed language development level: listening/speaking, reading & writing. • Follow contextualized introduction & explicit modeling of language use with repeated practice. **Sample activities/assessments:** - Teach/explain prerequisite language applications: reading directions, idioms, sentence starters, essay formats, pattern drills, or completing a story map; check for understanding. - Teach specific reading comprehension skills for completing: task procedures, answering questions, word problems, understanding text & graphics.	**Content knowledge:** • Introduce new concepts through familiar resources, prompts, visuals, or themes. • Use associated types of "realia" meaningful or familiar to students to affirm the appropriate context for using new language. • Sustain motivation to learn challenging concepts by linking ideas to resources or contexts that reflect student interests & sociocultural or linguistic backgrounds. **Academic language:** • Use methods listed above for introducing academic vocabulary, sentence structures, & language uses. • Link ongoing language practice or tasks to both school-based & community-based uses. • Respectfully compare & analyze language use, & meanings to other cultures or context, to promote metacognition. **Sample activities/assessments:** - Quick-write responses or recording student responses to visuals, current event stories, real-life models, video clips, teacher read-alouds, thematic prompts, role-play, comparing language uses for similar contexts. - Identifying & analyzing different perspectives & language references re: essential concepts.	**Content knowledge:** • Model how to complete tasks. • Provide graphic organizers & meaningful visuals to support students' recognition of essential information. • Use graphic organizers to support understanding of specific tasks, & specific uses of academic language. • Use advanced organizers to support metacognition, & overall comprehension. **Academic language:** • Use methods listed above with the addition of word banks, word walls, & modeling the use of graphic organizers appropriate to ELD level. • Appropriately modulate language delivery, i.e., speed & enunciation, when modeling language forms or presenting content; repetition helps. **Sample activities/resources:** - Venn diagrams, story maps, main idea supporting detail schematics, double-entry journals, semantic attribute matrices. - Jazz chants, read-alouds.
Activities I use for this strategy:	***Activities I use for this strategy:***	***Activities I use for this strategy:***

Appendix C

Initial Electronic-mail

My name is Nordia Henry-Gordon and I am a special education teacher in Prince George's County. Prior to teaching in Prince George's County I taught in a New York City Public School for four years and I have been in this county for approximately seven years. During my years of teaching I have observed many English language learners experiencing difficulties in schools and many teachers trying several ways to assist these students. I have also seen many teachers experiencing challenges in differentiating between language acquisition and learning disability.

In my studies at the University of Maryland, I found that differentiating between a suspected learning disability and language acquisition can be very complex. More information and professional development may be needed to guide teachers in the general education classroom, prior to referring English language learners to special education.

I would like to invite you and your staff to participate in a research study that seeks to understand the factors that influence general education teachers' decisions when referring English language learners to special education. The ultimate goal is to identify best practices for general education teachers to utilize when working with English language learners or as they consider referring students to special education.

Teachers who participate in this study could benefit a great deal from this study, as they would be a part of the process; identifying the best practices and so have a deeper understanding of how it works. Additionally, understanding the factors that influence the decisions teachers make could serve to sharpen the teachers' awareness of their own practices and better position them to help English language learners.

Participation in this study will involve two phases during the Fall semester of 2015. I am seeking to have a maximum of 5 teachers in grades three and four in this study. They will be surveyed, interviewed and observed during classroom instruction, grade level meetings, school instructional team (SIT) meetings and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. In addition to in-depth case studies I will review existing documents, such as students' limited access folders (LAF), student reports, teachers' data forms, referral forms, and special education process guide, policy and procedures. This project will be completed under the supervision of Professor David Imig and Assistant Professor Megan Peercy for my dissertation.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Nordia Henry-Gordon

Appendix D

Telephone Correspondence

Hello_____,
My name is Nordia Henry-Gordon, and I would like to invite you to participate in a research study regarding English language learners. I will conduct this project for my dissertation under the supervision of Professor David Imig and Assistant Professor Megan Peercy. Did you receive my letter/email regarding this study? May I take this opportunity to explain this further?

This study will run from September – December 2015. It will be done in two phases. I am seeking to have a maximum of 5 teachers in this study. They will be surveyed, interviewed and observed. With the permission of Prince George's County Public Schools I will also review documents pertaining to teacher referrals.

Please be assured that information obtained during the research project will be kept strictly confidential. Any sharing or publication of the research results will not identify any of the participants or the school.

If you have further questions about this project, please contact me at (917) 754-8183 or email me at nordia.henry@pgcps.org. My advisor, Dr. Imig, may be contacted via telephone at 301- 910-5306 or via email at dimig@gmail.com. Dr. Peercy may be contacted via 301-405-0067 or via email at mpeercy@umd.edu. For questions concerning your rights as a participant, please feel free to contact the University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office, 301-405-0678, or via email at irb@umd.edu. May we set up a time to meet at your earliest convenience? I look forward to working with you.

Thank you.

Appendix E

Participant Consent Letters

September 2015

Dear Participant:
You are invited to participate in a research project that seeks to gain an understanding of the factors that influence elementary general education teachers' decisions when referring English Language Learners to Special Education: distinguishing between language difference and learning disability. My name is Nordia Gordon and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Teaching and Learning, Policy and Leadership at the University of Maryland. I will conduct this project for my dissertation under the supervision of Professor David Imig and Assistant Professor Megan Peercy.

This project involves two phases. I am seeking to have a maximum of 5 teachers in this study. They will be surveyed and then interviewed to garner knowledge of their experience working with ELLs. Completion of the survey will take approximately 30 minutes. Phase 2 of the study, September 2015 – December 2015, I will conduct 2 in-depth interviews with the participants. Each interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. The final interview will also last 45-60 minutes.

Prior to the interviews, I will ask your permission to audio tape the conversation. You will be asked to discuss your experience as a classroom teacher working with English language learners, the factors that are considered when referring English language learners, your students, the school in general, the referral process in their school, and the support you receive in working with English language learners. The audio recordings will be transcribed and coded to remove individual names.

I will observe classroom teacher during instruction twice per week at each school between September and December, grade level meetings, school instructional team (SIT) meetings and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. The frequency of grade level meetings will occur approximately once per week, and I anticipate having 5-7 observations per teacher in my data set. The frequency of SIT meetings will occur approximately once per week, and I anticipate having 5-7 observations per teacher in my data set. The frequency of IEP meetings ranges from once per week to once per month, and I anticipate having 2-3 observations per teacher in my data set.

Data will be kept confidential and locked in a filing cabinet. If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project. Additionally, there are no direct benefits to participants, however possible benefits include an increased understanding of the factors that influence general education teachers' decision to refer English language learners, differentiating between language difference and learning disability. We hope that this study will also provide data that can be used to identify best practices for general education teachers to utilize when referring English language learners.

The University of Maryland does not provide any medical, hospitalization or other insurance for participants in this research study, nor will the University of Maryland provide any medical treatment or compensation for any injury sustained as a result of participation in this research study, except as required by law.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the principal investigator: David Imig at 301-910-5306 or dimig@gmail.com or Megan Peercy at 301-405-0065 or via email at mpeercy@umd.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:

University of Maryland College Park
Institutional Review Board Office
1204 Marie Mount Hall
College Park, Maryland, 20742
E-mail: irb@umd.edu
Telephone: 301-405-0678

This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects

Sincerely,

Prof. David Imig (Principal Investigator)
Telephone: 301-910-5306
Email: dimig@gmail.com

Ass. Prof. Megan Peercy (Principal Investigator)
Telephone: 301-405-0067
Email: mpeercy@umd.edu

Nordia Henry-Gordon (Student Investigator)
Telephone: 917-754-8183
Email: nordia.henry@pgcps.org

****

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.

If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.

_____	_____	_____
(Print) Participant's name	Signature	Date

I do agree to have the interview audio taped for the purposes of transcription.

_____Yes	_____ No
Signature	Signature

Appendix F

Teacher Demographic Form

Name_____

Address_____

School_____

Grade Level_____

Email_____

Highest degree obtained_____

Number of Linguistic courses / PDs completed - college courses _____ PD _____

How many years of teaching experience? _____

How many years of teaching at this school? _____

Age category __ 21 – 29, __ 30 – 39, __40 – 49, __50 – 59, __ 60 or older

Race __ white, __ black or African American, __ American Indian or Alaskin Native, __ Asian, ___ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, __ from multiple races

What language(s) do you speak? _____
Are you fluent in any other language, other than your native language? _____

Appendix G

Survey Questions for Teachers at the Beginning of the Study (Initial Interview Protocol)

Phase 1

1. Have you taught English language learners (ELLs) in the past? During what school year(s)?
2. Do you currently teach ELLs?
3. How would you characterize your current classroom demographics? (Asian, African American, Latino, White)
4. Do you believe it is necessary to differentiate your instruction to accommodate ELLs? Why?
5. Are you familiar with the language acquisition process? Please share.
6. How do you assess students' language proficiency?
7. Do you believe there is a difference between academic language inside the classroom and the language English students use with friends and family on a daily basis? Please explain.
8. How would you describe your preparedness to teach ELLs?
9. What would you say contributed to your preparation/your lack of preparation to work with ELLs? (College courses, professional development).
10. Do you participate in response to interventions (RTI)? How is this demonstrated in your classroom?
11. How do you include cultural responsive teaching within the RTI framework?

Appendix H

Teacher Interview Protocol #1

Phase 2

1. Greet participants

2. Ask permission to record interview

Interview Questions:

1. Describe the ELLs in your classroom.
2. What instructional practices do you use with your ELL students?
3. Talk about how you adapt instructions for English language acquisition students?
4. How are teachers using resources to aid students' achievement?
5. Are their instructional choices and students' responses factors that influence referral decisions?
6. What and how do you determine whether students' difficulties are a result of language acquisition or learning disability?
7. What is your knowledge of language acquisition and learning disability?
8. Do you have a referral criterion?
9. How did you arrive at this criterion?
10. Do you feel prepared to teach ELLs?
12. What are your views of ELLs?
13. Do your views influence decisions to refer ELLs to special education?

Appendix I

In-Depth Interview Protocol #2

Phase 2

1. Do you believe it is necessary to collaborate with others when working with ELLs? Do you collaborate with others? (ESOL teacher, special education teachers, parent, someone that speaks the student's language)
2. How do you involve parents/family when students begin to display difficulties?
3. How do you differentiate for ELLs who are demonstrating difficulties?
4. How do you differentiate between interventions for ELLs and students you suspect of having a LD during the RTI process?

Prompting Questions

- Are there interventions specifically for ELLs or do you modify interventions that were originally meant for students who speak English as their first language?
- Can you share any challenges you have faced during the intervention and referral process of an ELL.

5. Have you ever referred an ELL for special education services? What were the factors that led up to your decision?

Prompting Questions

- How do you distinguish whether your concerns are related to ELA or a LD during the referral process?
- To what extent did: student achievement, participation, written language, attention, and motivation play a part in your decision?
- Can you identify any similarities between ELLs and students you suspect of having a LD/LD student?
- Explain whether there are/were any challenges in distinguishing between ELLs and students you suspect of having a LD/LD student?

6. What are your views on ELLs using first language in class to assist with their comprehension?

7. Do you believe ELLs whose skills in English are less developed than their peers need to be considered for referral to special education? (Vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar).
8. Do you think professional development (PD) is needed for teachers who are working with ELLs? If there were PDs, would you be willing to attend?

Appendix J

In-Depth Interview Protocol #2

Phase 2

1. Is the intervention time line for ELLs and non-ELLs the same?

Prompting Question

- Is there a determined amount of time that you give for ELLs to begin to show progress? How do you determine that timeframe?

2. Do you believe ELLs using their first language/dominant language influences their academic progress? How?
3. Do you believe assessments in English demonstrate ELLs true skills/abilities or can discriminate between ELA and LD?
4. How do you determine if an ELL has received appropriate instruction? (Immigration, mobility)
5. Can you describe an instance when you had concerns for an ELL's academic progress but made the decision not to refer?
6. What data do you look at when you begin to suspect a disability for ELLs?

Prompting Question

- How is this data different from that of a non-ELLs you may suspect of having a LD?

7. For a student who might be demonstrating struggles with comprehension, how do you decide if it is comprehension or limited English language?
8. Please share your thoughts on the RTI process for ELLs in your school.

Appendix K

Final Interview Protocol

Phase 2

1. Reflecting on your experiences in working with ELLs, how would you describe your experiences?

Prompting questions

(a) Can you talk about changes you have made, regarding the approaches, methods, and strategies you used in instruction and the referral process of ELLs in your teaching experience?

(b) Would you do anything differently?

2. Do you find the RtI process beneficial for ELLs? How?
3. Think about the support you have received/or did not receive from the school district, principal, and parents; what suggestions would you make to administrators to assist teachers in the referral process of ELLs?
4. Can you talk about any referrals/non-referrals that you would have approached differently today?
5. Are there any key factors that you believe is necessary in the preparation for teachers in the referral process of ELLs?
7. Do you believe that your expectations of ELLs influence your decision to refer or not to refer?

Appendix L

Parent Letter

Dear Parent,

My name is Nordia Henry-Gordon and I am currently studying at the University of Maryland College Park. I am conducting a study with my professor, Dr. David Imig and Assistant Professor, Dr. Megan Peercy entitled: *Elementary General Education Teachers' Decisions When Referring English Language Learners to Special Education: Differentiating between English Language Acquisition and Learning Disability.* We are asking your permission to allow us to review and possibly use your child's information for this study as he/she has been identified as a student who is an English language learner, is in the class or was in the class of a teacher who is participating in this research project, and went through the response to intervention (RtI) process at his/her school. In this study, we are exploring the factors that influence general education teachers' decision to refer English language learners to special education. We will examine the identification and classification practices by classroom teachers in the referral process to special education. The goal is to understand how classroom teachers distinguish between the developmental processes involved in English language acquisition and evidence of a learning disability for referral to special education. What are the factors that influence their decision to refer or not to refer? This is an area of significant challenge for many teachers, which directly impacts their instructional practice, inappropriate referrals, and an overrepresentation of English language learners in special education. This will take about three months. I encourage you to ask me any questions you may have throughout the duration of the study.

In this study, with your consent, I plan to review public and private documents as we seek to understand the general education teachers' decisions to refer English language learners to special education. Documents could include students' limited access folders (LAF), student reports, teachers' data forms, referral forms, special education process guide, policy and procedures. In reviewing documents I will be looking at information such as student academic history, attendance, teachers' observations, current and or previous interventions.

We are hoping that you grant us your permission allowing us to review and possibly use your child's information for this study. Please, note that participating in the study is totally voluntary and you may withdraw your permission from this study at any time without penalty.

Thank you,
Nordia Henry-Gordon
Ph.D. candidate
Department of Teaching and Learning, Policy and Leadership
University of Maryland, College Park

(Spanish version of letter to parents)

Querido padre,

Mi nombre es Henry Nordia-Gordon y actualmente estoy estudiando en la Universidad de Maryland, College Park. Estoy llevando a cabo un estudio con mi profesor, el Dr. David Imig y Profesor Adjunto, Dr. Megan Peercy titulado: Primarias Generales Maestros de Educación 'Las decisiones cuando se refiere inglés como segunda lengua a la Educación Especial: La diferenciación entre Adquisición del Idioma Inglés y problemas de aprendizaje. Estamos pidiendo su permiso para que nosotros revisar y posiblemente usar la información de su hijo para este estudio ya que él / ella ha sido identificado como un estudiante que es un estudiante del idioma Inglés, está en la clase o estaba en la clase de un profesor que es participar en este proyecto de investigación, y se fue a través de la respuesta a un proceso de intervención (RTI) en su / su escuela. En este estudio, estamos explorando los factores que influyen en la decisión de los maestros de educación general 'para referirse a los estudiantes de inglés de educación especial. Vamos a examinar las prácticas de identificación y clasificación de los maestros en el proceso de referencia a la educación especial. El objetivo es entender cómo distinguir entre los maestros que participan en los procesos de desarrollo adquisición del lenguaje Inglés y la evidencia de un problema de aprendizaje para su remisión a la educación especial. ¿Cuáles son los factores que influyen en su decisión de proceder o no a la remisión? Esta es un área de gran desafío para muchos profesores, que afecta directamente a su práctica de enseñanza, las referencias inapropiadas, y una sobrerrepresentación de los estudiantes del idioma inglés en la educación especial. Esto tomará alrededor de tres meses. Os animo a hacer cualquier pregunta que pueda tener durante toda la duración del estudio.
En este estudio, con su consentimiento, planeo para revisar los documentos públicos y privados a medida que tratamos de entender las decisiones de los maestros de educación general "para referirse a los estudiantes de inglés de educación especial. Documentos podrían incluir ' carpetas de acceso limitado (LAF), los informes de los estudiantes, de los profesores de los estudiantes formularios de datos, formularios de referencia, guía especial proceso de la educación, la política y los procedimientos. En la revisión de documentos voy a buscar a información como el historial académico del estudiante, la asistencia, las observaciones de los maestros, o actual y las intervenciones anteriores.

Estamos esperando que nos acuerda su permiso que nos permitan revisar y posiblemente usar la información de su hijo para este estudio. Por favor, tenga en cuenta que la participación en el estudio es totalmente voluntaria y usted puede retirar su permiso de este estudio en cualquier momento sin penalización.

Gracias,
Nordia Henry - Gordon
Doctor en Filosofía. candidato
Departamento de Enseñanza y Aprendizaje, Política y Liderazgo
Universidad de Maryland, College Park

Appendix M

Parent Permission Form

Project Title	Elementary General Education Teachers' Decisions When Referring English Language Learners to Special Education: Differentiating between English Language Acquisition and Learning Disability.
Purpose of the Study	This research is being conducted by Dr. David Imig (Principal Investigator), Dr. Megan Peercy (Principal Investigator) and Nordia Henry-Gordon (Student Investigator) at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to give consent to use your child's information for this study because he/she has been identified as a student who is an English language learner, is in the class or was in the class of a teacher participating in this research project, and went through the response to intervention (RtI) process at his/her school. The purpose of this research project is to explore the factors that influence general education teachers' decision to refer English language learner to special education. The researchers will examine the identification and classification practices by classroom teachers in the referral process to special education. The goal is to understand how classroom teachers distinguish between the developmental processes involved in English language acquisition and evidence of a learning disability for referral to special education. What are the factors that influence their decision to refer or not to refer? This is an area of significant challenge for many teachers, which directly impacts their instructional practice, inappropriate referrals, and an overrepresentation of English language learners in special education.
Procedures	The procedures involve two phases. We are seeking to have a maximum of 5 teachers, in grades 3 – 4, for this study. In phase 1, teachers will be provided with written informed consent to complete. After receiving the completed consent from teachers, a hard copy survey will be provided to teachers for their completion. Completion of the survey will take approximately 30 minutes. Phase 2 of the study, September 2015 – December 2015, the Student Investigator, Nordia Henry-Gordon, will conduct 3 in-depth interviews with teachers to garner knowledge of their experience working with English language learners. Each interview with teachers will last for approximately 45-60 minutes. Interviews will take place at the school. There will also be two follow-up contacts with teachers, which may take place at the school or by phone. During interviews with teachers, any student whose information is needed for the purpose of this study will be given a written parental informed consent form to be given to parent(s) or legal guardian. Parent(s) or legal guardian will receive a copy of the consent for their records.

	Prior to the interviews, Mrs. Henry-Gordon will ask the teachers' permission to audio tape their conversation. They will be asked to discuss their experience as a classroom teacher working with English language learners, the factors that are considered when referring English language learners, their students, the school in general, the referral process in their school, and the support they receive in working with English language learners. The audio recordings will be transcribed and coded to remove individual names. Data will be kept confidential and locked in a filing cabinet. Sample survey questions for teachers at the beginning of the study (Initial Interview Protocol) 12. Have you taught English language learners in the past? During what school year(s)? 13. Do you participate in response to interventions (RTI)? How is this demonstrated in your classroom? Sample of In-Depth Interview for teachers Protocol #1 9. 1. Do you believe it is necessary to collaborate with others when working with ELLs? Do you collaborate with others? (ESOL teacher, special education teachers, parent, someone that speaks the student's language) 10. What data do you look at when you begin to suspect a disability for English language learners? Also during phase 2, with the permission of Prince George's County Public Schools and parental consent, Mrs. Henry-Gordon plans to review public and private documents as we seek to understand the factors that influence general education teachers' decisions to refer English language learners to special education. Documents could include students' limited access folders (LAF), student reports, teachers' data forms, referral forms, special education process guide, policy and procedures.
Potential Risks and Discomforts	There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project. Some parents whose child's information will be used may be somewhat anxious about giving permission to review and use information in this research project. To address this anxiety, we ensure you that your child's name will not be used in the study. A code and or pseudonyms will be used to protect their identity when discussing and reporting the results of the study. Also, all data obtained as a result of this study will be maintained in the student investigator's password-protected computers and hard-copy versions will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the student researcher's office. We encourage you to ask us (the researchers) questions throughout the duration of the study. Also, you may withdraw your consent from the study at any time without penalty.

Potential Benefits	This research is not designed to help you or your child personally, but the results may help us learn more about how classroom teachers distinguish between the developmental processes involved in English language acquisition and evidence of a learning disability for referral to special education. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of the factors that influence teachers' decisions to refer English language learners to special education, bridging the gap in the knowledge base of distinguish between the developmental processes involved in English language acquisition and evidence of a learning disability when referring ELLs to special education. The study will also help to provide best practices for general education teachers to utilize when working with English language learners.
Confidentiality	All personal information will be kept confidential. Procedures to maintain confidentiality will include anonymity of participants' names or any other form of identification with their data. Students' names will not be included in information taken from their LAFs, reports or any other documents. Any identifying information will be replaced with pseudonyms (made-up names). Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing all data electronically in password-protected folders in the student investigator's personal computer, with electronic versions to be erased 10 years after the end of the study; and hard copies in a locked file cabinet in the student investigator's office, for at least ten years. Then it will be destroyed. The investigators will ensure that the data are accessible to only those authorized to access it, i.e., the investigators themselves. If we write a report or article about this research project, students' identities will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your child's information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if your child or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law. We encourage you to ask us (the researchers) questions throughout the duration of the study. Also, you may withdraw your consent from the study at any time without penalty.
Right to Withdraw and Questions	*Your consent in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.* *If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:*

<table>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2">David Imig,
301- 910-5306 or via email at dimig@gmail.com,
Megan Peercy,
301-405-0067 or via email at mpeercy@umd.edu
Nordia Henry-Gordon,
917-754-8183 or via email at nordiahenry1@yahoo.com</td></tr>
<tr><td>Participant Rights</td><td colspan="2">If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:

University of Maryland College Park
Institutional Review Board Office
1204 Marie Mount Hall
College Park, Maryland, 20742
E-mail: irb@umd.edu
Telephone: 301-405-0678

This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Statement of Consent</td><td colspan="2">Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to permit your child to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.

If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">Signature and Date</td><td>NAME OF PARENT
[Please Print]</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>NAME OF CHILD
[Please Print Child’s Name]</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>SIGNATURE OF PARENT</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>DATE</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

Appendix N

Classroom Observation Protocol

Name: Date:
Class: Time:

Before and during lesson:

- Number of students in the class
- Number of ELLs in the class
- Where each ELL sits
- Who sits next to whom
- What materials they each have
- Class physical arrangement

During the lesson:

- Who is talking the most?
- What is the teacher saying?
- Class structure (reviews previous lesson, gives overview of current, objectives clearly developed throughout, summarizes at the end)
- Teaching methods (Do students get to participate in discussions, materials used, technology used, differentiated materials used, multicultural materials used, ELLs' native languages facilitated, students' lived experiences used?)
- Which students talk least, most, or not at all?
- Do ELLs talk specifically to other students or teacher?
- Are ELLs able to follow classroom activities?
- General classroom atmosphere and rapport between teacher and students specifically ELLs and among students and ELLs

After the lesson:

- How class transitions to the next activity

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