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Teachers' Perceptions of ELL Students: Do Their Attitudes Shape Their Instruction?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this parallel mixed-methodology study was to examine how the perceptions of early childhood teachers toward their early childhood English Language Learners (ELL) shape their pedagogical practices. The study was conducted in 10 early childhood classrooms, ranging from grades pre-K to third, in one suburban school with a culturally and linguistically diverse student population. Quantitative data was gathered through the administration of Pohan and Aguilar's (2001) Professional beliefs about diversity Likert scale. Additionally, qualitative data w`ere collected. Although some survey responses and interviews indicated that participants were aware of and accepting of all students' funds of knowledge and were eager to draw on their students' cultural backgrounds languages, most were ill-equipped or unwilling to differentiate their instruction for ELL students. Implications for inservice teacher professional development to gain understandings of the theories of second language acquisition and culturally responsive pedagogy are discussed.

Although there is a growing body of literature demonstrating how teacher education programs can support teacher candidates in developing dispositions of social justice, less is understood about the perceptions of practicing teachers toward culturally and linguistically diverse students (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Researchers have only recently begun to explore how practicing teachers' perceptions of English Language Learners (ELLs) impact the literacy instruction ELL students receive (Au, 2011; Garcia; 2015; McWayne, Hahs-Vaughn, Wright, & Cheung, 2012). Of equal importance, the research also delineates the lack of professional development that has been made available for most classroom teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Goldenberg, 2008; Nieto, 2010).

The purpose of this transformative parallel mixed method study was to investigate how the perceptions of mainstream early childhood educators ($N = 10$) toward the ELLs in their classrooms shaped their pedagogical practices in literacy. This study is small; however, it provides timely and relevant data in the area of teacher attitudes and beliefs toward early childhood ELLs. These results are particularly important given the renewed emphasis on providing inservice teachers with meaningful professional development in order to be able to provide effective literacy instruction for ELL students.

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Researchers and educators contend that children's academic futures are established in the school and developmental years between preschool and grade three (Au, 2011; Bredekamp, 2011). This time marks a major transition for young children and has been identified as a critical period for intervention for those considered at-risk for later school difficulties, particularly in terms of children's early literacy development (Garcia, 2015; National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition [NCELA], 2015). In addition, research has shown that the literacy and language attainments children experience between pre–K through third grade set the stage for their short- and long-term reading success (Au, 2011).

This study explored the connections between language, culture, theory, and practice in early childhood teachers' classrooms during their interactions with ELL students. In some cases, teachers' survey responses and interviews indicated that they were aware of and accepting of the ELL students in their classrooms and were eager to draw on their students' cultural backgrounds and native languages. In contrast, the study also illuminated how the lack of professional development inhibited some of the teachers' abilities to provide effective literacy instruction to their ELL students.

This investigation contributes to the body of research on ELL students in mainstream classrooms by focusing specifically on how early childhood teachers' perceptions shape their instructional practices in literacy with ELL students (NCELA, 2015) in order to narrow the gap of research on early childhood ELL students in public schools (McWayne et al., 2012). Further, the study underscores the need to provide inservice teachers with professional development to meet the instructional needs of the growing numbers of early childhood ELLs in their classrooms.

Literature review

Teachers' perceptions about ELLs

As McSwain (2001) points out, "teachers' perceptions of cultural and linguistic competency as they relate to helping children achieve academic and social potential play a very critical role in the type of educational services provided to culturally and linguistically diverse children" (p. 54). Unfortunately, many mainstream teachers hold deficit views toward the ELLs in their classrooms (Garcia, 2015). In addition, researchers have also established that teachers across U.S. public schools have largely developed negative theories about mainstream ELL students' ability to learn (Cummins, 2001; Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005; Garcia, 2015). These unspoken theories, if not properly unpacked, explored, and rectified, will continue to affect and shape how mainstream early childhood teachers instruct their ELL students.

Consequently, these choices are often informed by the perception that ELLs would learn English quickly if "they really wanted to" (Pappamihiel, 2007, p. 44). Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) conducted a study in which they found that mainstream teachers of ELLs often saw immigrants' individual failures as personal faults, something immigrants have brought on themselves, or something that they deserved. These deficit models of thinking are consistent with what Gutierrez and Orellana (2006) refer to as situating the problem within the ELL students themselves.

Gitlin, Buendia, Crosland, and Doumbia (2003) conducted a qualitative study in a western United States middle school to study teacher perceptions toward ELL students. Although

the school expressed an appreciation of diversity in its vision and mission statement, researchers found that ELL students were institutionally marginalized; they sat at one lunch table, were assigned to the lowest literacy groups, and were never highlighted in school assemblies. This type of failure to connect schools' mission statements or espoused theories (Argyris & Schön, 1974) to actual practice is quite common across the literature (e.g., Allington, 2005; Au, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Garcia, 2015; Nieto, 2010). McWayne and colleagues (2012) stated that, "to understand teaching from teachers' perceptions we have to understand the beliefs with which they define their work" (p. 869).

How perceptions shaped literacy instruction

Thompson (1992) stated that, "to understand teaching from teachers' perspectives we have to understand the beliefs with which they define their work" (p. 129). According to Peregoy and Boyle (1997), if teachers have unexamined biases toward ELLs in their classrooms, even teachers who want the best for ELLs might discriminate without realizing it. Conversely, teachers who hold the same expectations for ELLs as other students can positively affect school experiences for this chronically vulnerable sub-set of pupils (Pajares, 1992).

McNab and Payne (2003) pointed out that cultural and philosophical perceptions are significant to the way in which teachers view their roles as educators. Additionally, Richardson (1996) stated that it is necessary to study the perceptions that teachers hold because teacher perceptions are critical elements that drive classroom actions and influence how teachers approach pedagogical practice. Therefore, the consequences of the perceptions that teachers hold toward ELLs are reflected in their instruction.

Teacher perceptions, which are formed by the values they hold, play an important role in student performance (Nieto, 2013). Sandvik, van Daal, and Ader (2013, p. 30) cited teachers' "underlying, deep-seated beliefs" resulting in a lack of support for ELLs in mainstream classrooms. Teachers' beliefs influence their instruction and, consequently, their practices influence student outcomes (DeSimone, 2013; Schickendanz, 2003). For example, teachers will emphasize different aspects of the curriculum based on their perceptions about which students deserve and who can master rigor in instruction (Nieto, 2013). In addition, many researchers theorize that disproportionate numbers of ELL students are labeled as poor readers and placed in the lowest reading groups in the classroom (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Nieto, 2009).

Literacy instruction for ELLs

Goldenberg (2008) served as a member on the National Research Council's Committee for the Prevention of Early Reading Difficulties in Young Children and conducted his own research on instructional frameworks and strategies for ELLs. His findings support the fact that many of the best practices for early childhood ELLs are very similar to what research has mandated good literacy instruction should look like for all young learners—a balanced approach that includes shared reading, guided reading, phonemic awareness, and reading fluency (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Teale, 2009). These focal points should be delivered within consistent and well-designed routines, with plenty of opportunities for students to engage in authentic practice in reading and writing.

Culturally responsive teaching

Perhaps the simplest yet most effective way that all mainstream early childhood teachers can engage ELLs in their classrooms is reading culturally relevant stories to stimulate opportunities for students to integrate prior cultural knowledge with their native language literacy skills along with their English language acquisition. Kim (2009) conducted a 15-month case study with two second grade ELL students in an urban elementary school in the U.S. Southwest. Kim's research centered on using culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2002) coupled with sociocultural theories of language acquisition (Valdes, 1996). Kim theorized that if the classroom teacher accessed the students' schematic background or prior knowledge using culturally relevant pedagogy and situated the learning in a sociocultural accepting literacy environment, the ELL students would be highly engaged and therefore be more likely to take *academic risks* (Allington, 2005; Teale, 2009). In classrooms where children are comfortable taking academic risks, they feel emotionally safe in their attempts at new learning, safe in the knowledge that all of their attempts will be supported, even celebrated.

Culturally responsive teaching facilitates and supports the academic achievement of all students. It requires teachers to create a learning environment where all students are welcomed and provided with the best opportunities to learn regardless of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. When teachers approach their instruction from a culturally responsive perspective, they recognize the importance of including all their students' cultural references across the curricula; this is often accomplished when teachers integrate the values and prior experiences of all of their students (Gay, 2002).

One basic component of culturally responsive teaching is treating all students as capable learners; researchers suggest that there may be a link between teacher expectations and student outcomes (Au, 2011; Nieto, 2013; Rist, 1970). Using bilingual peer-readers can also be a tremendous asset in providing literacy instruction to ELLs; by tapping into the talents of bilingual children in classrooms, teachers can provide one-on-one modeling to their students who need more assistance. Using culturally relevant stories during literacy and small group instruction can help culturally and linguistically diverse children in the classroom feel at home and accepted. Gay (2002) has written that teachers who incorporate culturally responsive teaching into their instruction create lessons that are "relevant, rigorous, and revolutionary" (p. 136). In addition, Au (2011) has stated that teachers who follow the tenets of transformative pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms learn from their students and their communities, creating instruction that is powerful, meaningful, and most importantly, effective.

Theoretical framework

The transformative theoretical framework, which guides this study, draws on the tenets of both critical theory (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Madison, 2005; Popkewitz, 1998) and social justice theory (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Mertens, 2005). Transformative theory represents a broad school of thought that critiques the nature of power relationships in a culture, and seeks, through its inquiries, to help emancipate members of the culture from the many forms of oppression that operate within it.

There are several basic assumptions in transformative theory (Carspecken, 1996; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Madison, 2008; Mertens, 2005). The first is that certain groups

in a society are privileged over others. Mertens (2009) emphasizes the educational inequities experienced by individuals who are not members of the dominant race, gender, or class categories of Western societies. The second assumption is that oppression has many faces. For example, in seeking to understand why a teacher views a certain student as academically lagging in class, one must consider not only the student's ethnic identity, but also the student's gender and social class background, as well as other cultural characteristics. The third tenet of the transformative theory is that language is central to the formation of subjectivity. Students whose first language is Spanish, for example, will have a different conscious experience of a classroom lesson or a school athletic event than other pupils whose first language is English.

The employment of transformative theory in this study provided a lens with which to explore the extent that mainstream early childhood teachers' perceptions toward early childhood ELL students resulted in those students developing low levels of literacy achievement. From a transformative theory perspective, the achievement gap between the literacy achievement of mainstream students and ELL students' challenges teachers to consider the ways in which they think about children as literacy learners and to enact practices that respond to this increasing variation in children's early literacy development. According to Britzman (2003), an essential component of teaching requires that all teachers develop "an understanding of the meanings they already hold and the consequences for the positions they inspire" (p. 239).

Methods

The following research questions were designed with a view toward gaining an understanding of the perceptions of the study participants: (a) What are the perceptions of early childhood teachers about working with ELLs? and (b) How do these perceptions shape their pedagogical practices associated with literacy instruction for early childhood ELLs?

A transformative parallel mixed-method design with both qualitative and quantitative data sources was utilized for this study. The transformative worldview asserts that for research to have an impact, it is necessary to have an interactive link between the researcher and the participants in a study. Therefore, it is common to find smaller purposeful sample sizes in mixed-methods transformative research designs (Greene, 2007; Mertens, 2005). Moreover, a transformative-based worldview is often used when research seeks to address issues of social justice (Mertens, 2009). In addition, Greene (2007) posits that transformative theory can assist researchers in interrogating and engaging the political and the value dimensions of social inquiry in research, while working closely with research participants within a complex cultural context, especially if the study's design employs a small sample within the transformative mixed-methods method of inquiry (Christ, 2009; Mertens, 2005).

Questionnaires and interviews are often used together in mixed method studies investigating educational practices (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). While questionnaires can provide evidence of patterns among the participants, qualitative interview data often gathers more in-depth insights on participant attitudes, thoughts, and actions (Collins, Onwuegbuize, & Jiao, 2009; Patton, 2002). Additionally, Pajares (1992) wrote that, although quantitative methods typically have been used in studying teacher beliefs and perceptions, qualitative methods, such as interviews and observations, are also needed to gain additional insights.

Moreover, factors such as prejudice are problematic to quantify and best captured through observed actions (e.g., in what teachers say and do; Greene, 2007). Therefore, qualitative data tools such as semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and classroom artifacts were collected during this study to understand these factors. A psychometrically validated (Cronbach's alpha = .87) quantitative survey instrument was utilized to measure mainstream early childhood teachers' perceptions about diversity, as well as to determine the effect size of the teachers' perceptions toward ELL pupils in their classrooms.

Data sources

The primary sources for the qualitative analysis included semi-structured interviews and eight observations of each participant's literacy instructional blocks. The semi-structured interviews were conducted at the school over the span of 8 weeks. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was recorded with informed consent by the participant, which included permission to record the interview. Each interview was conducted in a private room and an interview protocol was followed, which included basic biographical questions and prompts (e.g., What are the learning expectations for the ELLs in your classroom?; What preservice courses did you receive in differentiating instruction for diverse learners?; What kind of professional development have you received in teaching ELL learners?) (see Appendix A).

Interviews were used because as Van Manen (1990, p. 45) wrote, they help us "understand fully the complexities of many situations and help researchers to observe the participants directly as they engage in their phenomenon of interest." Understanding the nuances of each teacher's perceptions regarding their ELL students was critical to this study in order to try to understand the origins of their perceptions.

In addition, each of the 10 participants was observed eight times during literacy instruction in order to focus on interactions between teacher and students. In order to ensure consistency, all of the participants were observed during whole-group (Shared Reading) literacy instruction for 30 minutes. The goal of the observations was to gain insight into the interactions between teachers and students, paying careful attention to how the teachers posed questions regarding students' backgrounds, whether they incorporated all children's cultures into accessing prior knowledge before, during, and after reading, and whether they used stories and texts that reflected the cultures of all the children in their classrooms in order to engage all of the children in literacy tasks.

In addition, observations were conducted to look for literacy activities to tie back to the research questions: teachers encouraging any of the ELL pupils to use their native language to facilitate their comprehension, allowing bilingual students (fluent in both Spanish and English) to translate during instruction, and the books or other curricula materials that included any Spanish words or phrases. Material artifacts such as teachers' letters home to families and any other types of home–school communications were also gathered from each classroom. These artifacts were gathered to determine if any of the materials were translated into the children's home languages.

For the quantitative strand of the study, Pohan and Aguilar's (2001) *Professional beliefs about diversity scale* was used to ascertain information about the participants' perceptions on working with culturally and linguistically diverse children (see Appendix B). The survey can also serve as a means of guiding the formation of professional development plans in

schools to address specific areas of resistance, bias, or "closedness to diversity" [the inability to differentiate or accommodate instruction for culturally or linguistically diverse students] (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001, p. 177). Several prompts were negatively worded in order to avoid creating a response set (the tendency for participants to answer the same regardless of the prompt), and the participant responses for these were reverse coded. This 25-item scale is comprised of items measuring diversity with respect to race, ethnicity, and linguistic diversity. The scale, which uses a 5-point Likert format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), was distributed to all teachers in the study ($N = 10$). Permission was granted to use this instrument. The survey was distributed at a faculty meeting at the onset of the study.

Context for the study

All interviews, observations, and artifact collection took place at a K–8 school located in the Northeast. The school serves a mixed community of English-speaking (47%) and Spanish-speaking families (53%), with 81% of the families receiving free and/or reduced lunch (New Jersey Department of Education, 2014), a metric used for determining poverty levels in public schools in the Northeast. For the past several years, approximately 550 White residents have been leaving the community on a yearly basis and 428 Latino residents have been moving in (New Jersey Census, 2014). There is no shared planning time for the classroom teachers to meet with the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher.

Participants

For the qualitative strand of this study, 10 female participants ($N = 10$) agreed to be interviewed twice over the 8-week period. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine ($n = 9$) early childhood teachers of ELLs in their classrooms and one ($n = 1$) Spanish teacher who worked with all the early childhood teachers and their students. The number of years of teaching experience of the participants ranged from 30 years to 3 years. It is important to note that none of the participants in the study reported that they had received any professional development in accommodating literacy instruction for ELL students

Two of the participants self-identified as Latina as well as bilingual, and the rest self-identified as White. The participants taught in grades ranging from pre-kindergarten through second grade. One teacher taught Spanish as a World Language and she serviced all the early childhood grades.

Data analysis

To conduct a parallel track mixed methods analysis, the following three conditions should hold: (a) both sets of data analyses (e.g., qualitative and quantitative data analyses) should occur separately; (b) neither type of analysis builds on the other during the data analysis stage; and (c) the results from each type of analysis are neither compared nor consolidated until both sets of data analyses have been completed (Greene, 2007). In this study, the qualitative data were analyzed first in the following order: interviews, observations, and finally the artifacts. Then the quantitative survey data was analyzed. Finally, both sets of data were compared to attempt to answer both research questions.

Table 1. Example of the coding process.

Data from interview	I don't know how to teach them. They need more time with the ESL teacher.
Theme	Abandonment of responsibility for teaching ELL children.
Code	A perception or an attitude is the way we think and feel about oneself, another person, idea, or thing.
Finding	Many of the participants ($n = 7$) did not perceive that they were able to use the same pedagogical practices with their ELL pupils as the native English speaking students in their classrooms.

Qualitative analysis

Data from interviews, observations, and artifacts were read through multiple times using inductive analysis (Patton, 2002). The process began with open coding utilizing inductive analysis, which involved inventorying transcripts, classroom observations, and classroom artifacts to define key words and phrases that appear in the data. In addition, the use of inductive analysis allows for the process of themes and codes to emerge from the repetitive reading of the raw data. Data from the transcribed interviews and classroom observations were analyzed to draw out statements or vignettes that best illuminated the participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs (Anfara et al., 2002).

The data were coded using the values process strategy. Most of the data were ascribed to three domains of codes: values (V), attitudes (A), and beliefs (B) (Saldaña, 2009). The three codes comprise an individual's perceptions; "Values coding is the application of codes onto qualitative data that represent his or her perceptions" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 89).

Further, a value is the importance we attribute to oneself, another person, or idea (e.g., I have high expectations for every child is my classroom). An attitude is the way we think and feel about oneself, another person, idea, or thing. An example from the coding was (I think it is hard to teach ELLs). A belief is part of a system that includes our values and attitudes, plus our personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals, and other interpretive perceptions of the social world. An example from the data was (Children can only speak English in my room. It is how they will learn to speak English, by speaking English) (see Table 1).

Coding of the data stopped once the researcher realized data saturation had been achieved (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In addition, interrater reliability was used; differences were discussed and resolved, and the process of dual coding continued until 80% or higher agreement was reached on at least four consecutive transcripts.

Quantitative analysis

The survey was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 19.0 (SPSS). The completed diversity scale surveys were read through to conduct descriptive analysis, which summarized the sample of participants to check for the trends and distributions of openness or intolerance to diversity in their classrooms. Descriptive statistics were calculated for each individual survey prompt (median/mode). The median is the middle value in an ordered list of values, and the mode is the value occurring most frequently in a list of values (see Table 2). Individual survey prompts were grouped with other prompts that answered each research question which formed combined item responses (see Table 3). Using these combined item responses, descriptive statistics were then calculated for each

Table 2. Research questions and correlation with survey instrument: Professional beliefs about diversity scale (portions reprinted with permission from Pohan & Aguilar, 2001).

Research question	Correlating survey prompt
RQ 1. What are the perceptions of mainstream early childhood teachers about working with English language learners (ELLs)?	SP 1—Teachers should not be expected to adjust their preferred mode of instruction to accommodate the needs of all students.
	SP 2—The traditional classroom has been set up to support the middle-class lifestyle.
	SP 6—All students should be encouraged to become fluent in a second language.
	SP 15—Historically, education has been mono-cultural, reflecting only one reality and has been biased toward the dominant group.
	SP 16—Whenever possible, second language learners should receive instruction in their first language until they are proficient enough to learn via English instruction.
	SP 17—Teachers often expect less from students from lower socioeconomic class.
	SP 18—Multicultural education is most beneficial for students of color.
	SP 22—Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds typically have fewer educational opportunities than their middle-class peers.
	SP 23—Students should not be allowed to speak a language other than English while at school.
RQ 2. How do the perceptions of early childhood teachers govern their pedagogical practices with ELL pupils?	SP 1—Teachers should not be expected to adjust their preferred mode of instruction to accommodate the needs of all students.
	SP 2—The traditional classroom has been set up to support the middle-class lifestyle.
	SP 13—Generally, teachers should group students by ability levels.
	SP 17—Teachers often expect less from students from lower socioeconomic class.
	SP 20—Large numbers of students of color are improperly placed in special education classes by school personnel
	SP 23—Students should not be allowed to speak a language other than English while at school.

research question for the sample of 10 participants combined, to align the survey results with the framework of the study. Research Question 1 had a minimum value of 1, maximum value of 5, mean of 3.77, standard deviation of 1.3, median of 4, and a range of 4. Research Question 2 had a minimum of 1, maximum of 5, mean of 3.6, standard deviation of 1.37, median of 4, and a range of 4. No inferential statistics were conducted due to the small sample size of any subgroups of the total sample of 10 (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Qualitative findings

The qualitative data collected about research question one showed that most teachers in this study ($n = 7$) held negative perceptions regarding ELL students, specifically concerning the use of their native language in their classrooms, and lacked an understanding of second language acquisition.

For example, in Ms. A's kindergarten classroom, Ms. A spoke about how she found it difficult to teach the ELL children. Ms. A stated:

Table 3. Professional beliefs about diversity scale (portions reprinted with permission from Pohan & Aguilar, 2001).

Survey prompt	Valid n	Median	Mode
1 Teachers should not be expected to adjust their preferred mode of instruction to accommodate the needs of all students.	10	5	5
2 The traditional classroom has been set up to support the middle-class lifestyle.	10	3.5	2,4
3 Gays and lesbians should not be allowed to teach in public schools.	10	5	5
4 Students and teachers would benefit from having a basic understanding of different religions.	10	4	5,4
5 Money spent to educate the severely disabled would be better spent on gifted programs for gifted students.	10	4.5	5
6 All students should be encouraged to become fluent in a second language.	10	5	5
7 Only schools serving students of color need a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse staff and faculty.	10	5	5
8 The attention girls receive in school is comparable to the attention boys receive.	10	3	3,4
9 Tests, particularly standardized tests, have frequently been used as a basis for segregating students.	10	3.5	2,5
10 People of color are adequately represented in most textbooks today.	10	2.5	1
11 Students with physical limitations should be placed in the regular classroom whenever possible.	10	5	5
12 Males are given more opportunities in math and science than females.	10	3	3
13 Generally, teachers should group students by ability levels.	10	2.5	2,3
14 Students living in racially isolated neighborhoods can benefit socially from participating in racially integrated classrooms.	10	4	5
15 Historically, education has been mono-cultural, reflecting only one reality and has been biased toward the dominant group.	10	3	3
16 Whenever possible, second language learners should receive instruction in their first language until they are proficient enough to learn via English instruction.	10	5	5
17 Teachers often expect less from students from lower socioeconomic classes.	10	2.5	1,5
18 Multicultural education is most beneficial for students of color.	10	5	5
19 More women are needed in administrative positions in schools.	10	3	3
20 Large numbers of students of color are improperly placed in special education classes by school personnel.	10	2.5	1
21 In order to be effective with all students, teachers should have experience working with students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.	10	4	4,5
22 Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds typically have fewer educational opportunities than their middle-class peers.	10	4	4
23 Students should not be allowed to speak a language other than English while in school.	10	4	3,4,5
24 It is important to consider religious diversity in setting public school policy.	10	3.5	4
25 Multicultural education is less important than reading, writing, arithmetic, and computer literacy.	10	4	3,5

Note. 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree. When multiple modes are present, they are each listed with a comma-delimiter.

I see a divide between the kids who are bilingual or the students who don't understand the language. I think it's so hard to teach them and I think it's hard for the other kids to play with them too. I think the other kids, the ones who speak English, aren't used to having kids who don't know the rules, who can't understand the English language. The ELLs play so rough. I guess it's because they just don't understand or maybe it's what they learn at home. (Ms. A, interview transcription)

In Ms. D's first grade classroom, Ms. D described how she "sometimes brings her children's home language into her lessons at times" (Ms. D, interview transcription). Yet, during classroom observations, Ms. D was never observed encouraging any of the ELL pupils to use their native language to facilitate their comprehension during literacy activities or any other instructional activity. In fact, Ms. D. had an English-only rule that she enforced in her classroom, and she did not allow bilingual students (fluent in both Spanish and English) to translate during instruction or during any other classroom time(s). Ms. D never used any curricula materials that included any Spanish words or phrases (observation notes).

In addition, many of the teacher participants did not have any training in second language acquisition (SLA). Typically, when teachers do not understand SLA, they tend to keep their ELL pupils as an intact group for all their instruction (Au, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010). However, this misperception can be damaging to early childhood ELL pupils academically and affectively (Gándara et al., 2005).

Overall, the non–Spanish speaking teachers ($n = 8$) expressed that their ability to speak Spanish or have a Spanish-speaking instructional aide would strengthen their ability to meet the ELL students' needs. Further, many of the participants ($n = 7$) did not believe that they might benefit from professional development aimed at assisting them with their instruction for their ELL pupils. Most of that group ($n = 6$) teachers cited the idea that their years spent teaching in the classroom precluded any need for sustained professional development. For example, Ms. D posited, "I have been teaching for decades—it is not me, it's the kids and their parents and their lack of literacy—good teaching is good teaching, I don't need to change how I teach for these kids. I don't need any more professional development" (interview transcription).

Six of the eight ($n = 6$) non–Spanish speaking teachers in the study reflected perceptions like those teachers in the study by Gándara et al. (2005) who were ambivalent about receiving professional development and were more interested in their students receiving additional services from the ESL teacher. In this study, teachers primarily identified ELL students' low literacy levels as a problem outside of their control. Seven ($n = 7$) of the teacher participants requested additional pull-out programs and more time with the ESL teacher.

Moreover, the language that the participants spoke appeared to influence the teacher participants' perceptions about working with ELLs. For example, Ms. E, a first-grade Spanish-speaking teacher, was interested in improving her instructional skills while she also identified the need for her colleagues to engage in professional development for their work with ELL learners; Ms. E, a Spanish-speaking *Teach for America* first grade teacher, noted she was planning on attending, "more graduate studies in bilingual education and reading instruction this summer to improve my teaching" (interview transcription).

Ms. J, the Spanish world language teacher, the only other Latina teacher in the school, said that she would like to have someone come into the school and explain the importance of encouraging the children to speak in their native language:

> I think for a lot of children in this school, where they're not allowed to speak in their native language that is hurting them. Many of these teachers express to me this is an English-only zone and that is counterintuitive to how children learn language. These teachers need the professional development. I see it with my Spanish—listen how I see it. I have a girl from Dubai. She is learning Spanish like it was a sponge. Her first language is Arabic, then she speaks English, and she's speaking Spanish—it's been proven if you have a language, you'll acquire a second one much easier. (interview transcription)

There were some teachers in this study ($n = 3$) who, despite any lack of preservice coursework or inservice coursework, included ELL students in their lessons and accepted and encouraged bilingualism in their classrooms. Ms. B, another kindergarten teacher and a monolingual English speaker, permitted and encouraged her ELL pupils to speak Spanish in her classroom. Ms. B lacked specific training in working with ELL pupils; however, she expressed positive viewpoints about ELL students. Moreover, Ms. B expressed high expectations for all students in her classroom, native English speakers and ELL children alike. Moreover, not only did Ms. B allow her students to speak Spanish, she encouraged the bilingual

students in her class to translate for the others who were still learning English as emergent bilinguals, which research has pointed out is a best practice in providing support for bilingual students' learning (Cummins, 2001; Garcia, 2015; Lesaux & Geva, 2006). She stated:

> I have high expectations for every child in my classroom, because if there is nothing wrong with them, they can grasp it. I think once they get a grasp of it, like, I have one little girl who didn't speak a word of English and now she is writing in English and she is speaking in English. She's translating for her friends. (Ms. B, interview transcription)

Classroom observations confirm that Ms. B routinely set up peer-readers with her entire class. Although she frequently had children who did not speak much English paired up with fully bilingual children, she was often observed pairing ELLs with native English speakers. Ms. B stated, "I don't want anyone or any group of children in my classroom to feel isolated. I hear so many teachers refer to their ELL students as the ELLs as if they are all the same [children in one group]. I want everyone to help each other" (Ms. B, interview transcription).

The qualitative data findings for research question number two revealed that many of the participants ($n = 7$) did not perceive that they could use the same pedagogical practices with their ELL pupils as the native English speaking students in their classrooms. Second, they viewed ELL students as lacking in experiences to access to make new learning connections in their literacy instruction. Third, some of the teachers ($n = 7$) situated the blame for their lack of ability to instruct students in literacy within the ELL students and their families. Therefore, teachers either delegated the teaching of literacy to ELL students to the ESL teacher or delivered a superficial curriculum to the ELL students.

For example, except for Ms. B, the kindergarten teacher who built experiences for ELLs, Ms. E, a first-grade teacher, who was a bilingual Spanish speaker, and Ms. J, the Spanish world language teacher, who is also a bilingual Spanish speaker, the remaining classroom teachers failed to capitalize on the opportunities to incorporate quality early literacy instruction to their ELL students or provided them a diluted curriculum. Instances of this diluted curriculum included teachers' extensive use of workbook pages with little connected text, and teachers who formed isolated groups of ELL pupils (observation notes).

Classroom observations revealed more examples of the weaker curriculum that many of ELL students received. For example, Ms. F., a second-grade teacher, put all nine of her ELL students into one homogenous group. During six of the eight scheduled classroom observations, Ms. F. gave all of the students the same two books to read during the small group instruction of the hour block of reading instruction; a basic book about shapes, colors, and the other about upper and lower case letter. She instructed the children to write their names in upper and lower case letters, and use their favorite colors to draw shapes if they finished earlier than the appointed time. During the last two observations, the children were given a book with farm animals and matching names.

However, other teachers, ($n = 3$) despite their lack of any formal training, made use of the programs and literacy series manual that the school distributed to each teacher. The teacher's manual provided some basic information regarding literacy instruction for ELL students and literacy lessons. For example, Ms. E, a bilingual first grade teacher, utilized the component of the reading series that was expressly designed for ELL students (*Storytown Elementary Reading Series*, Harcourt-Brace, 2011). While describing her literacy practices, Ms. E expressed the need to tap into prior knowledge or create it for her pupils when a certain lesson called for specific prior knowledge:

> I really think that the ELL component of our reading series has a lot of great things in it for the kids who didn't speak English or were just learning English. There was a lot of phonemic awareness, a lot of oral language, but you still have to build up the background knowledge, in all parts of the curriculum, especially reading and help them understand the concept of the story. There is no way to go by the textbook and expect kids to turn out the way we want them to—if I know that they don't have the experiences, say for a butterfly or whatever, we just go outside, go for a walk, do a lot of talking, that's what all of the kids need. (interview transcription)

Ms. E recognized that some of her students may not have had all the prior experiences that they might have needed to help them access higher order comprehension and critical thinking for a specific story or book. Therefore, she actively built those pre-reading strategies with her students by creating experiences through nature walks or by building their vocabulary by having conversations with them, using expressive language, using picture cars, or using peer-readers, depending on each ELL learners' instructional needs.

In summation, many of the teachers ($n = 7$) had negative beliefs about their ELL students and these beliefs adversely affected their abilities when instructing their ELL children during literacy instruction. Observation notes revealed that what seemed to be missing from their lessons were special supports and accommodations for culturally and linguistically diverse children. Culturally responsive teaching would have enabled all students to access the literacy experiences and successfully learn the lesson objectives.

Quantitative findings

Analysis of the quantitative data revealed several findings pertaining to the participants' professional beliefs about diversity, particularly regarding research question one: *What are the perceptions of early childhood teachers about working with (ELLs)*? (see Table 2). The data revealed that all of the teacher participants strongly agreed with survey prompts one (Teachers should not be expected to adjust their preferred mode of instruction to accommodate the needs of all students), six (All students should be encouraged to become fluent in a second language), 16 (Whenever possible, second language learners should receive instruction in their first language until they are proficient enough to learn via English language), and 18 (Multicultural education is most beneficial for students of color). The results for survey prompt 16 (Whenever possible, second language learners should receive instruction in their first language until they are proficient enough to learn via English instruction) generated a mean and mode of 5, which indicated that the teacher participants agreed with the ideals of bilingual education. In addition, the results of survey prompt 23 (Students should not be allowed to speak a language other than English while in school.) were tri modal with modes of 3, 4, and 5 occurring most frequently, which indicated that there was no clear consensus among the participants regarding this survey prompt. Overall, the responses to the survey prompts for research question one fell into the category of strongly agree, which indicated that most of the participants were open to diversity within their classrooms.

However, when mixed, the qualitative and quantitative data generated contradictory information. Although the qualitative data demonstrated that most of the participants ($n = 7$) did not allow their ELL students to speak their home languages in class, their survey responses indicated a high level of agreement with the prompts that measured openness to bilingual education and allowing students to use their first language in school. Nonetheless,

both the qualitative ($n = 7$) and quantitative data ($n = 10$) revealed that the participants did not feel that teachers should have to differentiate their instruction.

The means and standard deviations were all relatively similar and clustered around the neutral response for research question two: *How do teachers' perceptions govern their pedagogical practices associated with literacy instruction for early childhood ELLs*? The survey prompts that measured how the teacher participants' perceptions governed their pedagogical practices generated contradictory findings. The median and mode of survey prompt one (Teachers should not be expected to adjust preferred mode of instruction to accommodate the needs of all students) were both 5, which indicated that all of the participants ($N = 10$) agreed with this prompt. The median of survey prompt two (The traditional classroom has been set up to support the middle-class lifestyle) was 3.5, indicating a neutral consensus among the teacher participants to that prompt. However, survey prompt 13 (Generally, teachers should group students by ability levels) generated a median of 2.5 and was bimodal, with the modes of 2 and 3 occurring most frequently. This indicated that the participants were tending toward disagreement to neutrality regarding grouping students by ability level (homogenous grouping). Most of the participants felt that they should not have to adjust their preferred mode of instruction to accommodate the needs of all students, which has relevance to the literacy learning needs of early childhood ELLs. Finally, survey prompt 17 (Teachers often expect less from students from students from lower socioeconomic classes) generated a mean of 2.5, and was bimodal, with the most frequently occurring responses of 1 and 5. This indicated that most participants either strongly agreed or disagreed with the attitude represented in this prompt.

In summation, the quantitative data collected about research question one generated findings which illuminated that 70% teacher participants held negative perceptions regarding ELL students. The results of research question number two generated findings that indicated that most teacher participants ($n = 7$) felt that they were not pedagogically equipped to appropriately instruct their ELL pupils in literacy instruction, so that if they did teach literacy to the ELL students, they presented students with a diluted curriculum.

Discussion

Researchers (Au, 2011; Cummins, 2001; Nieto, 2009) agree that educators must begin to view language diversity through a transformative lens (Mertens, 2005, 2009) and as such, view bilingualism as a resource rather than as a deficit and redefine the benefits of linguistic diversity for all students. An important implication of this understanding is that language diversity needs to be viewed using the lens of educational equity. However, the issue is not simply a question of language difference, but rather of a power difference (Au, 2011; Freire, 2000; Nieto, 2009). As such, cultural and linguistic diversity is a key part of a multicultural framework.

It is important that researchers and educators critically consider the perceptions that mainstream early childhood teachers may hold about the early childhood ELL students in their classrooms. As the U.S. school systems grow each year, educators are concerned with the changing faces of public school children. A growing number are ELLs who enter schools with many rich traditions and cultures, but also the daunting task of doing double the work of learning grade level content while also learning English (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

Prior studies (e.g., Au, 2011; Garcia, 2015; Lesaux & Geva, 2006) have demonstrated that the ever-increasing number of ELL students in our public schools presents a challenge for many educators who may not know how to close the linguistic and cultural gaps between themselves and their students. This problem becomes even more complex when the instructional practices of early childhood teachers are not in alignment with culturally responsive teaching or the best practices in literacy instruction for ELL students (Au, 2011; Cummins, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gándara, et al., 2005; Garcia, 2015; Nieto, 2013). To achieve that goal, it is necessary for educators to know students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds and to have critical insights into pedagogical and curricular discourses that can affirm and sustain students' linguistic and cultural senses of self (Nieto, 2013).

Second language acquisition

A perception that some teachers hold is that use of a first language at home interferes with the acquisition of English. This belief can be partly attributed to the fact that teacher education has not supported bilingual language acquisition or English learners (Garcia, 2015). Linguists have discovered that when students can use both languages simultaneously they can make significant linguistic and academic progress in both languages (Garcia; 2015; Bartolome, 2008). However, misguided notions regarding SLA can cause teachers to deliver a watered-down curriculum to ELLs or even misdiagnose ELL students as learning disabled and refer them for special education services.

Therefore, to best understand how to instruct ELL students, it is important that educators learn how languages, specifically additional languages, are acquired. Most teachers have not been exposed to linguistic information through their preservice coursework nor through any inservice professional development programs (Garcia, 2015; Salazar, 2013). This lack of knowledge of how individuals acquire a new language is troubling because it directly contradicts how ELL students learn and retain language(s) best in mainstream classrooms (Au, 2011; Cummins, 2001; Garcia, 2015).

It is critical to understand teachers' attitudes and perceptions as well as deficits in their knowledge regarding early childhood ELLs as literacy learners. However, the preponderance of research on teachers' perceptions toward ELL students has focused almost exclusively on middle and secondary level children. There is a gap in the research and literature where early childhood teachers and early childhood ELL children should be represented. To address the gap, this study focused on early childhood teachers and the ELL children in their mainstream classrooms and how some of the teachers' knowledge gaps due to the lack of professional development affected their instruction.

Professional development

According to Fullan (2005) and Guskey (2000), effective professional development for inservice teachers should build on the participants' foundation of skills, knowledge, and expertise as well as engage the participants as learners. Teachers often conceptualize professional development as a series of pre-ordained topics and dates chosen by the school administration, which has little relevance to the teachers' day-to-day needs. Or, teachers receive the typical *one-shot* professional development day, which is virtually doomed to fail before it even starts due to the lack of support or resources.

If professional development is to be effective for classroom teachers, they must have a voice in choosing the topic(s) and become actively engaged in the process. In many ways, building effective professional development for teachers is similar to creating meaningful instruction for students in a classroom. A constructivist approach stresses that teachers be provided time to practice, receive feedback, and meet with a mentor or coach. If educators want to enact meaningful change for both teachers and ELL students, they must measure changes in teacher knowledge and skills and provide teachers time to self-assess and reflect (Fullan, 2005).

Most significantly, the goal of providing professional development is to maximize and increase student achievement. Studies have found that sustained and supported professional development has a large effect on teacher learning, and therefore, student achievement. Professional development can affect teachers' classroom instruction considerably and maximize student achievement when it focuses on: how to craft instruction that is based on demonstrated student need(s), instructional practices that are specifically related to the content and how students understand it, and improving teachers' knowledge of specific subject-matter content (Wepner & Strickland, 2014).

Further, the National Association of Educational Progress (NCES, 2014a) has documented that teachers' qualifications link directly to student reading achievement; students of fully certified teachers and of teachers with higher levels of education do better. Furthermore, these teachers are more likely to have had professional development that enables them to use the methods that best practices have held result in higher achievement for all students in their classes (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Teachers who spend more time studying teaching are more effective overall, and strikingly so in developing higher-order thinking skills, especially in meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Moreover, Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Ophanos (2009) conducted a study of several common methods that school districts use to deliver professional development. Their study found that the programs that were less than 14 hours in duration had no effect on student achievement, nor did they change teaching practices. In addition, the study found that teachers of mainstream ELL students are not receiving appropriate training in teaching special education or ELL students. More than two thirds of teachers nationally had not had even one day of training in supporting the learning of ELL or special education students during the previous 3 years. Teacher education and ongoing professional development does matter, particularly for teachers of ELL learners (Au, 2011; Darling-Hammond & Ball, 1998; Nieto, 2009).

There is a need to continue to research the perceptions of early childhood mainstream classroom teachers toward early childhood ELLs and how those perceptions shape their literacy instruction. Further, for the early childhood ELL learners, enduring issues of poverty and limited preschool experiences are considered as important to contributing to their early literacy success as their early school experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Additionally, as Harklau (2000) states, the "actions of teachers of ELLs not only serve to teach language but also serve to shape students' attitudes toward schooling and their very sense of self" (p. 64).

While this study attempted to contribute to an unexplored area, there is a great deal of future work to be done in this capacity, particularly in the areas of early childhood teachers' perceptions about the ELL students in their classrooms and how those perceptions shape their literacy instructional practices. Understanding students is essential for making

connections, particularly between mainstream teachers and ELL children (Au, 2011; Goldenberg, 2008). However, knowing how to link students' learning and instructional goals depends on insight into learners; what interests them, what they bring to learning, and how they learn (Nieto, 2013).

Conclusion

There are over 5 million ELLs in our nation's public schools. With most ELLs (40%) in the early childhood grades (NCES, 2014b), and given that nationally only 6% were proficient in reading at the beginning of fourth grade (NCES, 2014b), many educators, administrators, and schools of education may consider paying attention to the effects of mainstream early childhood teachers' perceptions and their impact on the literacy instruction of mainstream early childhood ELL pupils.

Most importantly, if schools are to provide transformative learning experiences for children, we should start with what they know. As Nieto (2013) wrote, teachers should use their students' background knowledge for understanding the world and then moving beyond those experiences into embracing and understanding other ways of knowing. Children need to know that their experiences do matter. Their lives and realities, their culture, and the language that they speak are important and that these can be a good foundation for education.

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Appendix A: Interview protocol

IQ 1—How many years have you been teaching?

IQ 2—How many years at each grade level?

IQ 3—How long have you been teaching in this school?

IQ 4—How many ELL students do you have in your classroom?

IQ 5—What do you think about students speaking their home language in school?

IQ 6—What do you think are the most pressing issues regarding cultural and linguistic diversity in our school?

IQ 7—What are your learning expectations for the ELL students in your classroom?

IQ 8—How much of your assistance and/or instructional time do the ELL students in your classroom require in your classroom?

IQ 9—How much assistance do you provide the families of ELLs?

IQ 10—What instructional needs arise most when you work with ELL students in your class?

IQ 11—How do the language backgrounds of your ELL students contribute to the culture of your classroom?

IQ 12—What areas of expertise do you wish you had to best meet the literacy instructional needs of your ELL students?

Appendix B: Pohan and Aguilar's (2001) Professional Beliefs About Diversity Survey (reprinted with permission)

Select one response for each of the 25 statements below.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Teachers should not be expected to adjust their preferred mode of instruction to accommodate the needs of all students.	1	2	3	4	5
The traditional classroom has been set up to support the middle-class lifestyle.	1	2	3	4	5
Gays and lesbians should not be allowed to teach in public schools.	1	2	3	4	5
Students and teachers would benefit from having a basic understanding of different religions.	1	2	3	4	5
Money spent to educate the severely disabled would be better spent on gifted programs for gifted students.	1	2	3	4	5
All students should be encouraged to become fluent in a second language.	1	2	3	4	5
Only schools serving students of color need a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse staff and faculty.	1	2	3	4	5
The attention girls receive in school is comparable to the attention boys receive.	1	2	3	4	5
Tests, particularly standardized tests, have frequently been used as a basis for segregating students.	1	2	3	4	5
Students with physical limitations should be placed in the regular classroom whenever possible.	1	2	3	4	5
Males are given more opportunities in math and science than females.	1	2	3	4	5
Generally, teachers should group students by ability levels.	1	2	3	4	5
Students living in racially isolated neighborhoods can benefit socially from participating in racially integrated classrooms.	1	2	3	4	5

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Historically, education has been monocultural, reflecting only one reality and has been biased toward the dominant group.	❶	❷	❸	❹	❺
Whenever, possible, second language learners should receive instruction in their first language until they are proficient enough to learn via English instruction.	❶	❷	❸	❹	❺
Teachers often expect less from students from lower socioeconomic class.	❶	❷	❸	❹	❺
Multicultural education is most beneficial for students of color.	❶	❷	❸	❹	❺
More women are needed in administrative positions in schools.	❶	❷	❸	❹	❺
Large numbers of students of color are improperly placed in special education classes by school personnel.	❶	❷	❸	❹	❺
People of color are adequately represented in most textbooks today.	❶	❷	❸	❹	❺
In order to be effective with all students, teachers should have experience working with students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.	❶	❷	❸	❹	❺
Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds typically have fewer educational opportunities than their middle-class peers.	❶	❷	❸	❹	❺
Multicultural education is less important than reading, writing, arithmetic, and computer literacy.	❶	❷	❸	❹	❺
Students should not be allowed to speak a language other than English while in school.	❶	❷	❸	❹	❺
It is important to consider religious diversity in setting public school policy.	❶	❷	❸	❹	❺