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Preservice Special Education Teachers' Perceptions of Field Experience with English-Language Learner Students

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Abstract: In the United States, students are increasingly diverse in their academic and linguistic abilities. The specialization of teaching professionals has been the primary method used in order to respond to this increase. Programs for these professionals have largely been siloed along the dichotomous groupings of students identified in law, namely, disabled/nondisabled or English proficient/nonproficient. However, the reality of students is much more complex and interdisciplinary approaches present an opportunity for meeting the realistic needs of all students. This study used a one-time, open-ended survey to gather the perceptions of four preservice special education teachers who worked collaboratively with students identified as English-Language Learners (ELL) and their teacher. These perceptions were analyzed in light of recent literature calling for increased collaboration among professionals in special and bilingual education.

Keywords: special education; English-Language Learners; teacher collaboration; teacher education; interdisciplinary special education

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1. Introduction

The percentage of students identified as having a disability has steadily increased over time [1]. So, too, has the number of students identified as English-Language Learners (ELL) [2]. However, these statistics reflect only those students who are *identified* within each respective category. For instance, these data do not reflect students who may be culturally diverse, but proficient in English. Nor do they include students who may have difficulties in learning that do not arise from a disability (e.g., interruptions in education). Such students may not meet the classification criteria as defined by law, but nonetheless still require a degree of individualized education. Thus, the reality of the increases in student linguistic and ability diversity may not be wholly captured in these statistics.

In that same vein, the legal categories of "English-Language Learner" and "student with a disability" merely identify students along one dimension, namely, English proficiency or the presence of a disability [3,4]. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and they do not reflect homogenous groups. Dually classified students include those who are English-Language Learners and also have a disability, a group that we would expect to increase as the overall ELL population increases. Moreover, the variety of strengths and needs within each of these groups in all other dimensions would be expected to be like the general population. In other words, the academic, social, behavioral, and other strengths and needs of each group will vary widely. While it could be noted that there is further classification among each grouping, by level of English proficiency or type of disability, these still are only along one dimension and do not capture the heterogeneity of each group.

Even though these populations are heterogenous and overlap, school service programs and teacher preparation programs are often built around these legal, dichotomous definitions [5]. Certainly, there is good reason for this with respect to funding accountability. However, this has led to an increase in specialization and the "siloing off" of personnel. Little attention has been paid to how well specialists collaborate [6].

1.1. Crossing the Specialization Divide

Special educators and teachers of English-Language Learners (ELL) are two highly specialized practitioner sets. However, having a system in which these two specializations can work together, such as for students identified as both ELL and disabled, can be difficult. Lopes-Murphy [7] noted that there is often tension between special education and ELL service delivery. When students are dually identified, special education services often "trump" ELL services, resulting in a haphazard approach. This results from the services being thought of as specialized services that must be delivered individually rather than as a collaborative effort.

This tension between specializations is also identified by Kangas [6], who points out that educators must be wary of the *specialization trap.* For Kangas, this trap consists of educators defining "their work in terms of boundaries corresponding to their own specialization—what they can or cannot do and which students they can or cannot support" ([6], p. 267). To combat this trap, Kangas [8] proposes increased collaboration, through the co-creation of individualized education programs (IEPs) and consultation, between ELL teachers and special educators in order to more appropriately serve students with disabilities who are emergent bilingual.

A collaborative approach may provide more comprehensive educational services for ELL students with disabilities [7]. However, such collaboration is predicated on the ability of all stakeholders to understand the core concepts and approaches of both special education and ELL programs [8], not to mention the overarching legal and policy structures of each. Thus, effective collaboration requires not only specialized knowledge of specific student populations, but general knowledge of a variety of student populations. Yet, training for specialists is highly focused on the specific content knowledge of their specialties.

1.2. Limited Competence

Robb et al. [5] found that few special educator training programs included training in supporting students dually identified as ELL and disabled. Moreover, recent research continues to confirm these findings. Jozwik et al. [9] found that both preservice and in-service teachers self-assessed their competence in educating bilingual students as not proficient. In a program review of one institution's special educator training program, Miranda et al. [10] reported that, while a curriculum pertaining to the education of ELL students with disabilities was included, this curriculum was "scattered and disjointed". This, in turn, led to a limited mastery of the content by the students. Thus, the present state of the competence of special educators with regard to the ELL population appears limited. However, one approach to addressing this is through dual-certified programs in bilingual and special education.

In a review of bilingual special education programs, Wang and Woolf [11] located nine programs in the United States that offered a full program description with an explicit credential in special and bilingual education. The majority of these programs were in California, with others being located in Texas, Virginia, Illinois, and New Mexico. While the presence of a highly specialized bilingual and special educator makes sense in some areas, this approach may leave others, particularly rural areas, out to dry. This is because there may not be a large enough population to warrant a personnel increase. Certainly, dually licensed bilingual special educators can be utilized in more ways, equating to more "bang for the buck". However, such an approach may still fall prey to the specialization trap detailed by Kangas [6].

1.3. Beyond Specialization

More et al. [12] called for incorporating evidence-based practice for ELL students into special educator training programs in order to better prepare special educators for meeting this population's needs. Specifically, More et al. proposed incorporating clinical experiences with ELL students, training in specific, evidence-based strategies, and embedding

sociocultural considerations into coursework in order to build preservice special educators' knowledge and skills in working with this population.

Such training programs may assist in building the collaboration between specializations, as discussed by Kangas [8] and Lopes-Murphy [7]. Similarly, providing explicit training may address the limited competence that Jozwik et al. [9] found in special educators when working with ELL students. However, little research has been conducted on the explicit incorporation of a curriculum and the field experiences of preservice special educators when working with ELL students.

1.4. Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify the experiences of preservice special education teachers who received field experience working with students identified as ELL and ELL staff. Specifically, we sought to identify whether the preservice teachers felt that their prior training assisted them in meeting the needs of students identified as ELL and the benefits and the challenges they saw during their training. The central research question we had asked what the experiences were of preservice teachers who received field experience working with students identified as ELL.

2. Method

A cross-sectional survey design [13] was used to gather data relevant to the research question. A single-point, open-ended survey that was created by the authors was used to gather narrative data from the participants. The selected research site was a suburban high school in the Midwestern United States that had been implementing a preservice teacher tutoring program in collaboration with a local university. This tutoring program had been in place at the high school since 2017 and was informally integrated into the school system. The tutoring program began collaborating with the school's ELL teacher during the 2021–2022 school year. The students identified as ELL in the school spoke a variety of languages, including Spanish, Mandarin, Russian, and Uzbek. The most prevalent first language of the students who participated in the tutoring program was Uzbek. None of the high-school students participating in the tutoring program were dually identified as ELL and as a student with a disability.

2.1. Participants

Prior to the sampling of participants, this study was reviewed and determined that this study is not research involving human subjects by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Cincinnati. The purposive sampling of four, fourth-year undergraduate students who had participated in the tutoring program was used [14]. These students were chosen because they had recently participated in the tutoring program during the entirety of their third college year and had worked with students identified as ELL. Further, these students demonstrated exemplary performance during the tutoring program in both their ability to apply learned pedagogical strategies and their commitment to helping students.

In addition to the four undergraduate students, data were collected from the ELL teacher with whom the students collaborated. Claire, a pseudonym for this teacher, will be used in this report. Claire was a veteran teacher who had worked at the research site for over 6 years. She had begun collaborating with the tutoring program the year that the four undergraduate students had participated in tutoring.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

One-time electronic surveys were emailed to the four undergraduate participants. Due to their varied schedules and current placements, written surveys were a more feasible form of data collection than interviews. Responses were received from all four participants. The survey was created by the authors and consisted of nine total questions; three of these were dichotomous "yes or no" questions, while the remaining seven were open-ended responses. The survey items were as follows:

1. As part of your tutoring experience, did you work with ELL students?
2. As part of your tutoring experience, did you work with ELL teachers/staff?
3. Did you receive training in working with ELL students prior to your tutoring experience?
4. Briefly describe your experience working with ELL students. What was their general level of English proficiency, extent of educational needs, and any highlighted anecdotes that you recall?
5. Was your training in special education applicable to the educational needs of ELL students? If yes, in what ways?
6. What, if any, benefits were there for you as a student in working with ELL students?
7. What, if any, challenges were there in working with ELL students?
8. Please describe your experience in collaborating with ELL teachers and staff, including any benefits or challenges that this presented.
9. Please feel free to add any other information that you feel is pertinent to your experience in working with ELL students as a special education preservice teacher.

In order to provide additional context for the undergraduate student responses, a one-time, audio-recorded interview was conducted with Claire. This interview lasted approximately 30 min and was one-on-one with the first author. The interview used the survey questions above as a general framework. During this interview, Claire described the nature of the program and her perceptions of the benefits of the preservice special education teachers working with students identified as ELL and collaborating with her.

Data analysis was multi-staged to facilitate a systematic review of the responses. The first stage involved reviewing the responses in their entirety. This allowed us to develop an overall understanding of the responses [15]. Next, we isolated specific examples within the responses that were indicative of the students' experiences working with students identified as ELL. Lastly, common themes related to the student experiences were abstracted out across these examples [13]. In the responses, we noted that several examples cited included the use of teaching strategies that the preservice teachers had been taught in their special education coursework, the challenges presented by not speaking a common language with the students, the benefits of being placed in a situation that required resourcefulness and adaptation, and the benefits for the preservice teachers and the students. These authors generated the themes of adapting to student needs, the universality of pedagogical strategies, communication barriers, and mutually beneficial outcomes to capture and organize the commonalities among these responses.

3. Results

The data gathered from the surveys and interviews were synthesized across participants to identify the context and pull-out themes from the experiences. The central themes identified included adapting to student needs, the universality of pedagogical strategies, communication barriers, and mutually beneficial outcomes.

3.1. Environmental Context

The participants were asked to describe the context of their experiences, including their prior training and their perceptions of the students' English proficiency and academic skills.

3.1.1. Prior Training

Two of the participants noted prior training in working with students identified as ELL and two did not. One participant mentioned having explicit training on teaching methods and the identification of barriers for students with limited English proficiency. All participants noted that they had little to no experience working with students identified as ELL prior to this tutoring experience.

3.1.2. English Proficiency

The participants reported that the students they worked with had varying levels of English proficiency. Two participants indicated that the students they worked with had conversational proficiency, but had greater difficulty with academic vocabulary. One participant noted that the students they worked with had limited English proficiency and communicated primarily in their first language. The last participant stated that they worked with individuals with varying levels of proficiency.

3.1.3. Academic Skills

All participants reported that the students had academic skills that would be expected for their grade. They noted that the students demonstrated a strong understanding of mathematical concepts, but did not possess the vocabulary to describe their reasoning in English. The participants noted that the primary academic need of the students was assistance with homework. It was stated that this appeared to arise out of confusion around English vocabulary terms.

3.2. Adapting to Student Needs

Participants described the experience of working with students identified as ELL as offering opportunities to adapt to the students' needs. One participant stated, "I think needing to be able to adapt to the needs of ELLs helped support my ability to adjust and meet the needs of all students". The participant noted that the experience required them to adapt generally, and that this skill in and of itself was supportive of developing their practice. Similarly, another participant stated, "It gave me more experience in actually using what I learned in school. Although it might not have been perfect, I was able to practice what I should be doing and change for future tutoring lessons".

In addition, the participants described adapting in a particular way, namely, by changing the skills and knowledge that they had previously acquired to meet the present situation. This contrasts with developing an entirely new knowledge base. For instance, one participant noted that "the experience provided practice in using the tools we've been taught in a new way which helped me consolidate the skills". Another participant reported the following:

> In the classroom, I believe that there is multiple ways to assist students in their learning such as verbal prompts, offloading working memory, and written prompts. When I would [work] with one student, I was able to break problems into individual pieces and have the student work through them. Even though I wasn't using English at some times in my tutoring, I was able to gesture on their paper what pieces of the problem to solve and what it represents.

Here, the participants detailed their ability to take the strategies they had learned previously, such as verbal prompting and offloading working memory, and retool them to meet the specific needs of the student. Moreover, the above student discussed using specific strategies, such as gesturing, to overcome their inability to communicate verbally to the student.

Claire also reported that the pedagogical strategies that are used for students with learning disabilities may be adapted for use with students identified as ELL:

> ... a lot of the strategies that are used to help ELs understand content are also very helpful for kids with learning disabilities. Like reduce the pacing of instruction, reduce the pacing of speaking, using images, using models, using repetition. All of those things that work well for ELs are also good supports and strategies to use for kids with learning disabilities. So, I mean it's a win-win.

Claire stated that the experience of working with students identified as ELLs affords the preservice teachers a marketable skillset. She stated that "in addition to learning those strategies that work well for both Els and special education students, they're also learning some strategies that might be particular to kids who are ELs". Claire added that many

of her students are immigrants and that the changing of educational systems from their home country to the United States can present "roadblocks". In learning to navigate these roadblocks, the preservice teachers may develop skills that are transferable to students with disabilities.

3.3. Universality of Pedagogical Strategies

In line with the idea that the skills and knowledge that the participants had could be adapted to new situations, the participants also pointed to certain universal ideas in pedagogy. For instance, one participant stated that, "It was a unique experience and I think it helped me to better understand that all students have diverse needs". Further, another participant reported:

> ... the strategies used to teach students with disabilities can be beneficial for all students regardless of ability. Specifically visual supports seemed to align the most between the two student populations. It also helped to chunk assignments into more approachable tasks so students weren't overwhelmed.

These reports indicate that the participants felt the specific teaching strategies they had learned in their special education training could also be applicable to student populations outside of students with disabilities. Further, one participant noted how the experience assisted them in developing confidence in their teaching skills. They stated,

> It was a unique experience and I think it helped me to better understand that all students have diverse needs. I may have an ELL student on my caseload one day and now I have gained some experience and confidence in working with them.

This participant referenced the fact that these categories of students are not mutually exclusive, noting how such experiences may improve their practice overall.

In addition, Claire reported that students who are not proficient in English, but are taught in English, experience a taxing of their cognitive faculties. She stated the following:

> If you speak more than one language, it's physically tiring to have to communicate or to process in your second language for an extended period time and these guys are doing that for six and a half hours at a time. So, they're coming at the content that's new to them but also physically and mentally exhausted because they're putting it through that translation filter.

Claire went on to note that strategies that reduce the cognitive load of a task, which are beneficial for many groups of students, are also beneficial for students who are developing proficiency in another language.

However, one participant did report findings to the contrary regarding the universal applicability of pedagogical strategies:

> In some ways, yes, my special education training was applicable to the educational needs of the ELL students. The things I had learned about modifications/accommodations, using gesturing, and how to access resources was helpful. I would say that the things I learned in my mild/moderate special education courses was helpful but not as much the things I learned in my moderate/intense classes.

This participant had taken courses in providing special education to students with "moderate to intense" disabilities. This includes students with cognitive and communicative impairments. For them, this training was not as applicable or adaptable to the students identified as ELL.

3.4. Communication Barriers

All of the participants reported barriers to communication. Participants noted that they typically relied on verbal reasoning to explain concepts to the students. For instance, one participant reported the following:

> A challenge when working with ELL students is communicating your reasoning to the student. I tend to talk through problems when working with a student, but if what I am describing is challenging for the student to understand, it makes it hard for the teacher to think of different ways to get the question across.

Another participant, citing similar challenges regarding verbal explanation, stated, "I wanted to be sure I was explaining things in an age-appropriate way and assuming the highest level of competency but I feel I sometimes struggled with this as I was trying to explain things in very simple terms." Here, both participants referenced a particular kind of communication barrier: lacking age-appropriate metaphors or references to explain a concept.

In addition to the pedagogical impacts that the participants identified, one participant also identified that the communication barriers also impacted student performance. This participant reported, "I think one student in particular got frustrated with me while trying to communicate ... So I think the language barrier on top of the demanding tasks of learning can be challenging for students". Thus, this participant is noting that there is an additional level of frustration that is placed on students when the teacher or instructor cannot communicate to them in their native language.

Lastly, one participant also noted that it was challenging working with students that spoke a language with which they had no familiarity. As mentioned, there was a large cohort of students whose first language was Uzbek. None of the participants had prior experience with either spoken or written Uzbek and, as such, they did not possess simple, conversational vocabulary. One participant reported,

> It was challenging to work with this particular group of ELL students as the majority of them spoke a language I was not familiar with, I don't even think I had heard of the language prior to working with these students. It was difficult to try to find ways to communicate specific academic vocabulary or explain concepts with the language barrier.

Here, the participant states that the specific experience of working with a completely unfamiliar language presented a greater challenge.

3.5. Mutually Beneficial Outcomes

Both the participants and Claire reported that preservice special education teachers having field experience with students identified as ELL was beneficial for all parties. As noted in the adaptability section, all participants reported that this experience helped them learn to use their previous training in new and practical ways. Further, the participants also reported that having field experience with this population of students allowed them to learn more about the students and the teaching staff. One participant stated, "This was my first time working with ELL students. I thought it was very beneficial to work with this population firsthand to see exactly how the language barrier impacted their academics".

In addition, all participants reported that collaborating with Claire was beneficial. One participant reported that they "enjoyed learning about how she goes about teaching this population". Another participant noted how Claire "explained each student's needs and how to most effectively work with them". Lastly, a participant stated, "It was beneficial to work with the ELL teacher because it showed me that teachers are all just trying their best to support their students". Thus, this field experience appeared to leave the students with a feeling of mutual respect and collaboration between the disciplines of bilingual and special education.

Claire reported that the "EL program is often isolated and doesn't have the resources or attention" relative to other school programs. She noted that resource constraints, particularly personnel, are problematic and cited that there are no limitations on the number of students she may have on her caseload. She went on to say, "having the tutors has been huge because it gives us a layer of support". Claire added that the tutoring program presents social benefits for the students as well as academic benefits. She stated, "when

they discover that they can work with someone other than me who doesn't necessarily speak their language but can still get support and access to the content and ask questions . . . it builds their confidence".

4. Discussion

In order to provide an inclusive educational system that meets the needs of all students, specialists will need to develop skillsets that include other disciplines [5,8,12]. In so doing, these specialists will be more effective in collaborating with other professionals to devise plans to meet student needs [8]. The findings in this study suggests that preservice special educators found that field experience with ELL students supported their abilities to meet the needs of a diverse range of students and collaborate with professionals outside of special education.

The participants reported that the field experience required them to adapt their prior training to meet the present needs of the students they were working with. This suggests that the experience allowed them to combat the specialization trap identified by Kangas [6]. While the participants acknowledged lacking specialization (e.g., fluency in the student's first language), they reported that this did not prevent them from assisting the students identified as ELL whole-cloth. Rather, the participants described adapting their skills along with acquiring new skills, both through collaboration and their own experimentation, in order to meet student needs. As one participant put it, "It was a unique experience and I think it helped me understand that all students have diverse needs". Such a statement implies that this participant is thinking beyond classification or specialization and is truly focused on individual student need. This is particularly relevant given the limitations of a classification system that is based on dichotomous groupings. Further, these reports suggest that the experience fostered the understanding that these groupings are heterogenous.

Similarly, the identification by the participants that certain pedagogical strategies may have a degree of universality to them appeared to boost their confidence in working with the ELL population. Consistent with the findings of Robb et al. [5], only two out of the four participants reported having any prior training in working with ELL students. Like Jozwik et al. [9] found, the participants' responses suggested a limited confidence in their abilities to work with students in the ELL population prior to the experience. Participants reported that they gained both experience and confidence in working with this population, with one noting that it is likely that they may have a student who is dually identified on their caseload. This is an encouraging as the participants also reported challenges in working with students who spoke a language that was unfamiliar to them. Thus, the participants appeared to view this as an experience for growth and confidence building rather than as a hassle or hindrance that detracted from their work in special education.

The participants and Claire noted that the field experience was mutually beneficial for all. The tension between special education and ELL services described by Lopes-Murphy [7] was reiterated by Claire in her statements, saying that her program is "often isolated". Having access to preservice teachers to support students was noted to be a significant resource for Claire. Further, the participants noted that the experience was beneficial for them in terms of skill development. Most importantly, all participants reported that the field experience was beneficial for the students.

Further, in support of the collaboration described by Kangas [8] and Lopes-Murphy [7], the participants reported positive experiences in collaborating with Claire. These positive experiences included gaining a better understanding of the work of ELL teachers and seeing parallels in the work of specialized teaching staff. Such experiences may support these students in valuing the work of ELL teachers and may serve to reduce the tension between the two specialties. Further, it may "demystify" the other profession to enable more effective communication.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was focused on the experiences of preservice special education teachers who had field experience working with ELL students. While the data collected here provides an intriguing glimpse into the results of such an experience, it does not quantify the impacts in terms of learning for the preservice teachers or the outcomes of the students. Future research may utilize quantitative methods to gain an understanding of increased skills among either of these groups. Further, this study reported the participants' experiences in working with ELL students who were not dually identified. The participants reported gaining increased confidence in working with ELL students, but future research may look specifically at a similar field experience with dually identified students.

In addition, this study was limited in both its number of participants and settings. Given that ELL students are not evenly distributed throughout the United States, the transferability of these results to other settings is limited. In addition, purposive sampling was used to gather data from participants who participated in the tutoring program throughout the academic year. As such, these participants were exemplary in both their skill and commitment to assisting students. Future research may gather data from a larger sample size to determine whether these findings are generalizable.

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