Teachers’ Perceptions of Causes of Academic Difficulties Experienced by Students who are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

Courtney D. Miller
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Teachers’ Perceptions of Causes of Academic Difficulties Experienced by Students who are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

Courtney Miller

Dissertation submitted to the College of Education of Education and Human Services at West Virginia University in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Education in Special Education

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ABSTRACT

Teachers’ Perceptions of Causes of Academic Difficulties Experienced by Students who are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

Courtney Miller

The purpose of the study was to identify in-service general and special educators’, counselors’, and English as a Second Language educators’ perceptions of the cause of academic difficulties for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD). A mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was used to initially collect quantitative data though an online survey with more in-depth qualitative data collected through subsequent focus groups. This design allowed the researcher to better interpret and explain the quantitative data by exploring general and special educators’, counselors’, and ESL teachers’ perceptions of the causes of academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD, to understand how their perceptions of the causes of academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD influence their use of evidence-based practices and making special education referrals for students who are CLD. Results of the study identified that limited English proficiency was rated the highest cause, while low intelligence was rated the lowest cause of academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD. Qualitative information obtained through the focus groups identified four themes: Instructional Strategies, Special Education Referral Process, Experience with Students who are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, and Teacher Resources which provided better interpretation of the quantitative data. Implications for decreasing overrepresentation of children who are CLD in special education and reducing inappropriate special education referrals for students who are CLD are discussed.
Acknowledgements

To my co-chairs, Dr. Colleen Wood-Fields and Dr. Kimberly Floyd, and my committee members, Dr. Melissa Sherfinski and Dr. Samuel Stack: Thank you for your constant guidance, support, and feedback. I have the utmost gratitude for your encouragement and patience during this process.

To my colleagues at Fairmont State: Thank you for the inspiration you have provided the last two years. I appreciate the reassurance you provided when I needed it most.

To the research participants: Thank you for your willingness to participate in the study. I hope it provides you with the information you need to meet the needs of your diverse students.

To my parents, Derek and Becky, and sister, Katie: Thank you for humoring me as the “forever student.” Your support of my lifelong learning has helped me get to where I am today.

To my extended family: Thank you for your prayers, encouragement, and love. I appreciate you all.

To my children, Reed and Lucy: I know you are young, but I hope you can one day understand just how much I love you. You two are the brightest spots in my day. The superhero role-playing and giggles provided me with the mental breaks I needed.

To my husband, Seth: You have sacrificed so much in order for me to pursue my dreams. I can’t put into words what your love, support, and encouragement has meant to me during this process. I love you.
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Introduction

Over the past 10 years, there has been a steady increase in the number of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse attending schools in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). According to the Our Nation’s English Learners of the United States Department of Education (n.d.), students are considered culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) when they have limited or non-English proficiency and participate in the public school system. Students who are CLD may experience academic difficulties in the classroom due to limited English proficiency. In order to assist students who are CLD in ameliorating the barriers associated with limited English proficiency, many students participate in CLD programs in their schools to increase their English proficiency. However, there are times when even such programs, students who are CLD still struggle.

Therefore, as the number of students who are CLD grows (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), some students may also be found eligible for special education services given that general educators often do not provide adequate instructional practices needed for students who are CLD (Harry & Fenton, 2016). Students who are CLD also experience unmerited special education referrals due to teachers’ perceptions of academic difficulties which can lead to overrepresentation (Rueda & Stillman, 2012). During the eligibility process, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that students who are CLD should not be found eligible for special education services as a result of their limited English proficiency. Still, there is a concern that teachers’ perceptions of academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD may lead to unmerited special education referrals, due to a lack of awareness of what causes the academic difficulties (Rueda & Stillman, 2012).
Relevant Research

According to researchers, Harry & Fenton, 2016; Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Zimmerman, 2008, there is an overrepresentation of students who are CLD who receive special education services. Further, according to Chu (2011), teacher bias contributes to this overrepresentation in special education. The overrepresentation of students who are CLD receiving special education services could also be due to the lack of awareness and understanding that limited English proficiency is likely the cause of academic difficulties (Cheatham, Jimenez-Silva, Wodrich, & Kasai, 2014). Still, there is a dearth of empirical evidence regarding educators’ perceptions of the causes of the academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD. Therefore, there is a need for more research identifying the variables contributing to unmerited referrals and special education services for students who are CLD.

This study will provide important information in order to reduce the potential for overrepresentation.

According to the most recent data from the Office of English Language Acquisition (2014-2015), 9.6% of students in the United States in K-12 were identified as CLD. The United States has seen a steady increase in students who are CLD over the years in states where the number of individuals speaking diverse languages are more prominent (e.g., California, Texas, New York). Additionally, a rise in the number of students who are CLD in rural areas has become more common (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). According to the United States Department of Agriculture, rural settings are defined by populations of 2,500 to 50,000 (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2019). Over the past six years, three rural states (i.e., Alaska, West Virginia, Wyoming) saw increases in the enrollment of students who are CLD by over 40% (Our Nation’s English Learners, 2017). For example, West Virginia saw the most significant increase of students who are CLD, from 0.6% to 1% from
2009-2015 and 47% of those students did not meet the target of making progress towards English proficiency (ONEL, 2017). Often, educators in rural states do not have as much experience working with students who are CLD as those educators in urban areas, perhaps resulting in the number of special education referrals for students who are CLD being higher in the rural states (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013).

**Special Education Referral Process**

In keeping with IDEA (2019), several factors contribute to the decision to provide special education services and placements for a student suspected of having a disability; however, not all factors are given equal consideration during the referral and evaluation process. First, Hardin, Roach-Scott, and Peisner-Feinberg (2007) identified that evaluations used during the referral process to determine eligibility varied among students who are CLD. The authors noted there were insufficient language tools such as home language surveys and English proficiency assessments utilized during the pre-referral process to assess English proficiency. Still, the number of more appropriate language assessment tools used increased during the evaluation process. Meanwhile, Raines, Dever, Kamphaus, and Roach (2012) noted that some tools utilized in the evaluation process were biased and contributed to the overrepresentation of students of color, who are often CLD, in special education services (i.e., assessments, teacher observations). Raines et al. (2012) suggested that universal screening processes free from bias would help alleviate the issues of unmerited referrals. Additionally, examining and adapting the current testing protocol to be more culturally appropriate can assist in avoiding bias (Ford, 2012).

**Educator’s Perceptions**

Students suspected of academic difficulties are referred for special education services; however, it is essential for educators to understand a student’s background to make an informed
decision as to the needed services. Typically, general educators are first to begin the special education referral process. Harry and Fenton (2016) found general education teachers’ opinions and their personal views on cultural differences often lead to unmerited special education referrals for students of color. Students of color are more often students who are also CLD. One reason for the increased referrals to the student assistant team may be many educators’ feel inadequately prepared to work with students who are CLD (Chu, 2011). The more classroom time students who are CLD spend with general educators lacking appropriate diversity training to meet specific academic needs, the more likely the student are referred for special education services (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013). Fernandez and Inserra found many teachers did not know how to determine whether a student who was CLD had a disability or if the academic difficulties demonstrated were caused by limited English proficiency. Additionally, the researchers noted that the teachers did not understand their students’ backgrounds and often misidentified their limited English proficiency for learning and behavioral disabilities resulting in special education referrals. Thus, educators’ lack of understanding of students who are CLD contribute to unmerited special education referrals, potentially resulting in overrepresentation of students who are CLD. While it is the responsibility of the student assistance team (i.e., administration, educators, parents) to work collaboratively to determine special education eligibility for each student, often one person, such as the teacher who spends the most time with the student can hold the greatest influence the team’s decisions. This overreliance on the general educators faulty or nonexistent knowledge of how limited English proficiency can negatively impact learning may result in an unmerited placement (Chu, 2011).

**Instructional Practices**
Hoover (2010) discussed that response-to-intervention evidenced-based practices used in the general education classroom as an instructional practice could reduce the number of special education referrals. By implementing interventions that addressed student challenges and monitoring the effectiveness of these interventions on skill development, student engagement and skill acquisition could be increased. Additional assistance from outside services can decrease unmerited special education referrals (e.g. consultative services, targeted professional development). Consultative service teams can collaborate with the general educator by supporting the implementation of evidence-based practices into instruction and adapting instruction based on student achievement data. Gravois and Rosenfield (2006) found that schools incorporating support for general educators through consultative services (e.g., data collection, collaboration, communication) decreased unmerited special education referrals by half versus their counterparts who were not utilizing consultative services. Implementing evidence-based practices into the general education curriculum could provide students who are CLD with effective instructional strategies that foster academic progress while reducing unmerited referrals and the provision of special education services for students who are CLD (Conroy, 2012) and altering educators’ perceptions of academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD.

In March 2020, complications from the COVID-19 pandemic required school districts to shut down and complete the remainder of the school year virtually. This transition could have likely impacted teachers instructing students and meeting their academic needs, including those who are CLD. Additionally, as the 2020-2021 school year began, there were barriers associated with how to continue to service students in both face to face and virtual settings. Because of this, many teachers faced unforeseen challenges.

Rationale and Research Questions
The purpose of the study is to identify the variables that influence in-service general and special educators’, counselors’, and English as a second language (ESL) teachers’ perceptions of the causality of academic difficulties for students who are CLD. For this study, a student who is CLD is defined as a student whose native language is not English and has not scored proficient on the West Virginia English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA21). The researcher is interested in identifying the gaps in knowledge and personal biases that influence the decision making of educators who work with students who are CLD. The information obtained through this research study sought to provide insight on how instructional providers’ perceptions may influence special education referrals as well as recommendations for fostering the use of evidence based instructional strategies with students who are CLD. Furthermore, the study sought to identify potential strategies for decreasing unmerited referrals and overrepresentation in special education determination, while ensuring that all children receive the supports needed to foster educational growth.

Outlining general and special educators’, counselors’, and ESL teachers’ perceptions of academic difficulties in students who are CLD helped identify gaps in service provider knowledge and service provider bias that might influence referrals. Additionally, the findings of this study can assist with identifying needed professional development training areas to support students who are CLD. Such trainings can provide the knowledge to assist educators in providing the correct academic services to students who are CLD in a timely and cohesive manner. Next, the results may assist researchers working in teacher preparation programs in providing appropriate coursework and field experiences that prepare future educators to address academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD. Finally, parents of students who are CLD and other stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, administrators) may benefit from the results as each may
gain a better understanding of the factors that contribute to the overrepresentation of students who are CLD and how to best support students who are CLD academically.

In this study, the researcher responded to the following questions:

A) What are general and special educators’, counselors’, and ESL teachers’ perceptions of the causes of academic difficulties experienced by students who are culturally and linguistically diverse?

B) Do general and special educators’, counselors’, and ESL teachers’ perceptions of the causes of academic difficulties experienced by students who are culturally and linguistically diverse influence their use of evidence-based practices and making special education referrals for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse?

C) In what ways do educators’ perceptions influence their use of evidence-based practices and making special education referrals for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse?

Methods

Participants

Participants were solicited using convenience sampling due to the geographical location in which the study was conducted. Participants included current kindergarten through fifth grade 39 general educators, 17 special education, 1 counselor, and 1 ESL educator teaching in West Virginia. Recruitment of participants began by the researcher identifying 578 qualified in-service teachers from 14 counties in West Virginia. The researcher contacted each of the 578 potential participants via an email which contained the study consent form and online survey link and received 51 “failure to deliver” messages. From the initial email, the researcher received 58 responses to the online survey for a response rate of 11.01%. In an attempt to increase the
response rate, the researcher allowed three weeks for response to the email. The researcher sent out two email reminders to participants one week and two weeks after the survey was deployed. No other participants were obtained from the email reminders. Table 1 outlines the online survey participants’ demographics.

Table 1

*Online Survey Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants with CLD Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Educator</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years of Experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As seen in Table 1 the majority of survey participants were general educators while counselors and ESL teachers had 1 participant each. Over half of participants had 0-15 years of classroom and most were located in the North Central geographic region of West Virginia.

While participating in the online survey, participants had the opportunity to select if they would like to participate in a focus group. Of the 58 responses, 17 participants indicated a willingness to participate in the focus groups, representing three of the 14 participating school districts; however, six participants failed to complete the DoodlePoll. The remaining 11 participants chose to participate in the focus groups. The 11 participants were randomly assigned into three focus groups based on availability (i.e., date, time). If participants had the same availability, a number was assigned to each participant and a random number generator was utilized to assign the focus group members. The first focus group consisted of two general educators and one special educator. The second focus group consisted of two general educators, one special educator, and one counselor. The third focus group consisted of four general educators. The demographics of the focus group members is provided in Table 2.
### Table 2

**Focus Group Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group #1</td>
<td>• general educator (35 years of experience and experience with CLD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• general educator (14 years of experience and no experience with CLD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• special educator (11 years of experience and no experience with CLD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group #2</td>
<td>• general educator (22 years of experience and no experience with CLD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• general educator (17 years of experience and experience with CLD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• special educator (1 year of experience and no experience with CLD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• counselor (17 years of experience and experience with CLD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group #3</td>
<td>• general educator (20 years of experience and no experience with CLD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• general educator (10 years of experience and no experience with CLD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• general educator (7 years of experience and no experience with CLD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• general educator (13 years of experience and experience with CLD)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 11.*
Setting

The participants completed the online survey through Survey Planet with their personal devices. Participants in the online survey included 40 educators from the North Central geographic region, 14 from the Mid-Ohio Valley region, three from the Eastern Panhandle region, and one from the Southeastern region. The focus groups were conducted in an online meeting format via WebEx; participants engaged in the focus groups using their personal devices. All focus group participants were employed by one rural school district in the North Central West Virginia geographic region. The school district where the focus group participants are employed had an enrollment of 7,658 students during the 2020-2021 school year. According to the NCES, 99.8% of students enrolled in the district use English as their primary language.

Materials

Materials for the research study included an online survey consisting of nine Likert-type questions and statements pertaining to academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD. The 5-point Likert questions and statements were rated from 1-5 with the following headings: 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neutral, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree. The Likert-type survey questions asked respondents to rate their agreement with nine potential causes of the academic difficulties identified by students with CLD, based on their experiences. The potential causes for the academic difficulties experienced included limited English Proficiency, low motivation, low intelligence, a disability, behavior problems, anxiety, and unknown familial problems. A copy of the study survey is provided in Appendix A.

The Likert-type survey questions were designed based on the results of a previous study conducted by Cheatham, Jimenez-Silva, Wodrich, and Kasai, (2014) to provide support for the reliability and validity of the survey questions. Nine demographic questions were included in the
survey to gather information pertaining to the participant’s age, years of experience, job title, school demographics, and student caseload demographics. Finally, two open-ended questions were asked pertaining to the participants’s experience in providing instruction for students with disabilities and the use of evidence-based instruction for students who are CLD.

The focus group members participated in an online meeting format via WebEx using their personal devices. The focus groups were allotted one hour of time, but many utilized between 20-25 minutes of discussion. The participants could see each other during the focus groups, but their names were not visible. The researcher opened the focus groups by asking guided questions derived from the data obtained through participants’ responses to the survey questions followed by additional questions to expand upon participants’ answers. Examples of the focus group questions included *What instructional strategies do you implement in the classroom to work with diverse learners* and *What difficulties do your students who are CLD demonstrate in the classroom?* A table of the focus group guiding questions and follow up questions can be found in Appendix B.

**Experimental Design**

To answer the research questions the research study utilized a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2015; Creswell, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was used to collect and analyze quantitative data and then collect and analyze qualitative data to better interpret and explain the quantitative data results. The mixed method design’s initial focus is on quantitative data collection and analysis and provides the data needed to answer the first research question.

The subsequent qualitative step in the mixed methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2015; Creswell, 2003, Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) is guided by the quantitative
data analysis and enabled the researcher to better identify and interpret the results. The mixed-methods sequential explanatory design process used in this study is outlined in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*The Mixed Methods Sequential Explanatory Design Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Data Collection</td>
<td>• Likert Scale Online Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 58 Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Data Analysis</td>
<td>• Descriptive Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Frequency Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Data Collection</td>
<td>• 3 Focus Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 11 Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Data Analysis</td>
<td>• Thematic Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>• Explanation of Quantitative and Qualitative Results</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

The mixed-methods explanatory design allowed the researcher to collect quantitative data to obtain statistical information regarding service providers’ perceptions of the causes of academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD and determine if these perceptions influence their use of evidence-based practices and making special education referrals for students who are CLD. The quantitative data allowed the researcher to determine if there are shared perceptions or use of similar instructional strategies among certain groups of people, geographical locations, years of classroom experience. Quantitative descriptive analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 27 to determine the frequency of each answer to the causes
of academic difficulties across ratings on the Likert Scale survey for all 58 participants. Once the frequency data was analyzed for all participants, response percentages were obtained. Next, the Likert Scale data was recoded into the categories of disagree by combining strongly disagree/disagree responses, and agree by combining strongly agree/agree responses in order to compare ratings of disagreement, neutral, and agreement. Cross tabulations were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27 to determine the frequency and percentages of ratings of disagreement, neutrality, and agreement for the Likert Scale questions based on teacher position (i.e., general educator, special educator, counselor, ESL teacher). The researcher then recoded the information for years of classroom experience and performed cross tabulations to compare years of classroom experience to the participant rating.

Qualitative data was used to expand upon the information obtained through the quantitative analysis to identify in what ways general and special educators, counselors, and ESL educators’ perceptions influence their use of evidence-based practices and making special education referrals for students who are CLD. The qualitative data collection and analysis allowed the researcher to identify common themes among the participants’ perceptions and provide additional insight on the quantitative data obtained. The open-ended questions from the online survey were used to develop themes that would provide guiding questions that could be expanded upon during the focus group discussions to obtain more in-depth insight into the participants’ perceptions on variables that may influence their teaching, use of instructional strategies, or determination of special education eligibility for a student who is CLD.

Open coding was used to analyze the qualitative data obtained through the survey open-ended questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open ended questions from the survey were organized using Microsoft Excel. The researcher copied verbatim all open ended answers from
the Survey Planet data and response categories were then identified in order to group answers into the same category and develop themes. A co-coder reviewed the open-ended questions from the online survey and categorized the responses based on the themes developed by the researcher. Inter-rater reliability was established at 100%.

Upon completion of each focus group the researcher transcribed the recorded sessions verbatim. Then the focus group transcriptions were provided to the focus group members for member checking to ensure the transcripts accurately reflected the information discussed by each participant. Next, the researcher read through each transcript to review the information obtained during the group discussions. The researcher subsequently reread the transcripts to identify and develop common themes. Open coding, with the use of inductive coding, allowed the researcher to utilize the information from the focus group transcripts to identify the data, rather than preconceived notions.

Finally, the researcher compared and contrasted the quantitative and qualitative data in order to better interpret the quantitative statistical data results. The integration of the quantitative and qualitative data enabled the researcher to better understand why the study participants responded as they did on the survey questions.

**Validity and Reliability**

Prior to dissemination, Cronbach’s alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the Likert Scale questions. After tabulation, Cronbach’s alpha was .978 which results in a high level of internal consistency of the Likert Scale questions. The researcher used methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978) to ensure the validity of the Likert type, demographics, and open-ended questions and focus group question results. Member checking was utilized to check for participant accuracy and enhance validity. The researcher shared the verbatim transcripts to
implement member checking. A co-coder was utilized to ensure coding fidelity. The co-coder coded the three transcripts from the focus groups and simple agreement reliability was .92 (i.e., 11 of 12 agreements).

Results

The quantitative data obtained from participant responses on the Likert-type survey were analyzed using a frequency distribution to determine the frequency \( n = 58 \) of each rating by possible cause of academic difficulty for students with CLD for all questions in the Likert Scale. Table 3 provides the number and percentage of responses to the Likert Scale online survey questions.

Table 3

*Frequency and Percent of Responses by Cause of Academic Difficulty of Online Survey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause of Academic Difficulty</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited English Proficiency</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
<td>17 (30%)</td>
<td>31 (53%)</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Motivation</td>
<td>7 (12%)</td>
<td>34 (58%)</td>
<td>9 (16%)</td>
<td>8 (14%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Intelligence</td>
<td>18 (31%)</td>
<td>29 (50%)</td>
<td>9 (16%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>9 (16%)</td>
<td>24 (41%)</td>
<td>14 (24%)</td>
<td>11 (19%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Problems</td>
<td>9 (16%)</td>
<td>32 (54%)</td>
<td>11 (19%)</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
<td>11 (19%)</td>
<td>21 (36%)</td>
<td>23 (40%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown Familial Problem</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>9 (16%)</td>
<td>23 (40%)</td>
<td>23 (40%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that limited English proficiency is the cause of academic difficulties in students who are CLD. Participants also agreed or strongly agreed that unknown familial problems and anxiety contributed to the academic difficulties demonstrated. Most participants indicated disagreement that low intelligence, low motivation, behavior problems, peer interactions, and disability contributed to the academic difficulties of students who were CLD. Approximately half of the participants felt neutral about unlisted problems causing academic difficulties in students who are CLD, however, no further information was provided as to what those problems were. Other areas receiving a high number of neutral responses pertaining to the academic difficulties included unknown familial problems and anxiety.

To obtain more information pertaining to participants’ responses, data was recoded as disagree by combining strongly disagree/disagree responses, neutral and agree by combining strongly agree/agree responses and cross tabulated by teacher position (i.e., general educator, special educator, counselor, ESL teacher). Tables 4 and 5 present the frequency distributions of the answers to the Likert Scale survey questions based on teacher position.
Table 4

Frequency of Responses of Online Survey-General Educators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause of Academic Difficulty</th>
<th>General Educators’ Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited English Proficiency</td>
<td>4 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Motivation</td>
<td>29 (74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Intelligence</td>
<td>32 (82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>22 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Problems</td>
<td>30 (77%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>11 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown Familial Problem</td>
<td>7 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Interactions</td>
<td>24 (61%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlisted Problem</td>
<td>28 (72%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 39

As seen in Table 4, most general educators agreed that limited English proficiency was the cause of academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD. general
educators also felt that anxiety and unknown familial problems contributed to the academic difficulties experienced. The majority of general educators felt that low intelligence, behavior problems, low motivation, and unlisted problems were not a cause of academic difficulties in students who are CLD. Most general educators provided neutral responses on unknown familial problems causing academic difficulties.

Table 5

Frequency of Special Educators’ Responses to Survey Cause of Academic Difficulty Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause of Academic Difficulty</th>
<th>Special Educators’ Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited English Proficiency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Motivation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Intelligence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14 (82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Problems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown Familial Problem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Interactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlisted Problem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11 (65%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note. \( N = 17 \)

As displayed in Table 5, 41% of special education teachers agreed that limited English proficiency contributed to academic difficulties experienced by students who were CLD. There was a 26% difference between general educators and special educators who believed that limited English proficiency was a cause of academic difficulties. Over half of the special education teachers indicated that low intelligence, unlisted problems, low motivation, disability, behavior problems, and peer interactions did not contribute to academic difficulties in students who are CLD. Although 35% of special educators agreed that anxiety contributed to the academic difficulties experience by students who were CLD, just under half of special educators provided a neutral response to anxiety as a cause of academic difficulties. Just under half of special education teachers agreed that unknown familial problems caused these academic difficulties.

Only one counselor and one ESL teacher completed the online survey, the only category the counselor and ESL teacher felt caused academic difficulties in students who are CLD was limited English proficiency. The counselor and ESL teacher both disagreed that low motivation, low intelligence, and an unlisted problem were causes, while they both remained neutral that anxiety and unknown familial problems were the causes of academic difficulties in students who are CLD.

To identify if participants’ responses were influenced by years of classroom experience, data was recoded as disagree, neutral, agree and cross tabulated by years of experience (ranging from 0-40 years). Figures 2-4 present bar graphs comparing the causes to the Likert Scale survey questions based on years of classroom experience (0-10, 11-20, 21-30, 31-40). Figure 2 displays the percentages of agreed causes, Figure 3 displays the percentages of neutrality, and Figure 4 displays the percentages of disagreed causes based on years of classroom experience.
Figure 2

Percentages of Agreement of Causes of Academic Difficulties in Students who are CLD

![Bar chart showing percentages of agreement for different causes of academic difficulties in CLD students, categorized by age groups.

Figure 3

Percentages of Neutrality of Causes of Academic Difficulties in Students who are CLD

![Bar chart showing percentages of neutrality for different causes of academic difficulties in CLD students, categorized by age groups.]
The majority of teachers with 0-10 years of experience felt that limited English proficiency was the cause of academic difficulties in students who are CLD. They also agreed that anxiety and unknown familial problems caused these academic difficulties. Most teachers with 0-10 years of experience disagreed that low intelligence was a cause of academic difficulties. They also disagreed that low motivation, peer interactions, unlisted problems, disability and behavior problems contributed to academic difficulties demonstrated by students who are CLD. Almost a similar number of teachers with 0-10 years of experience either agreed or were neutral that anxiety could be a cause of academic difficulties.

The majority of teachers with 11-20 years of experience did not feel as if any of the identified variables caused academic difficulties in students who are CLD. Teachers in this group disagreed that low intelligence, low motivation and behavior problems caused academic difficulties. Most teachers with 11-20 years of experience provided neutral responses regarding
limited English proficiency as contributing to academic difficulties and over half remained neutral about unknown familial problems causing academic difficulties in students who are CLD.

The majority of teachers with 21-30 years of experience felt that limited English proficiency was the cause of academic difficulties in students who are CLD. Over half also agreed that an unknown familial problem could be a potential cause as well. Both low intelligence and unlisted problems were not believed to be as causes of academic difficulty by most teachers with 21-30 years of experience. Teachers with 21 years of experience also disagreed that behavior problems, peer interactions, and disability were causes of academic difficulties in students who are CLD. Participants within this demographic ranked anxiety, unknown familial problems, and peer interactions as neutral causes of academic difficulties.

All teachers with 21-30 years of experience disagreed that low intelligence, behavior problems, and unlisted problems were causes of academic difficulties in students who are CLD and most disagreed that low motivation and peer interactions were causes. A majority of the participants with 21-30 years of experience felt that unknown familial problems could be a potential cause for academic difficulties, while half agreed that disability and anxiety could be causes. The majority of teachers with 21-30 years of experience remained neutral when identifying whether limited English proficiency was a cause of academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD.

**Qualitative Data Results**

The themes identified from the open coding included *Instructional Strategies* and *Experience with Diverse Populations*. Only 47 of the 58 participants (81%) answered the open ended questions in the online survey. Open coded responses and themes were then analyzed to develop the guiding questions for the focus groups.
**Survey Results.** Responses from the open ended questions on the online survey included information on how participants’ experience with providing instruction for students with disabilities. Participants discussed the disability categories that students qualified under and how often they provided instruction to those students receiving special education services. Additionally, participants who had experience in working with students who are CLD identified the number of diverse backgrounds they have taught throughout their career. While some of the participants did not have experience with students who are CLD, others ranged from instructing 1-12 students who are CLD throughout their career. Finally, participants discussed the instructional strategies that they have implemented in the classroom while working with students who are CLD. Many mentioned best practices which included reteaching, visual/verbal prompts, direct instruction, small group instruction, guided reading, peer mediated instruction, and collaboration with ESL teachers.

**Focus Group Results.** The researcher initially used open coding to analyze the focus group data. The researcher coded the participants’ WebEx focus group transcripts line by line until no new concepts emerged. After open coding, the researcher used thematic analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thematic analysis of the data included identifying themes to gain further insight into the variables that influence general and special educators, counselors, and ESL educators’ perceptions of academic difficulties in students who are CLD and to obtain more information about the use of evidence-based instructional strategies and referrals for consideration for special education services.

**Themes Aligned to the Research Question**

Qualitative analysis of the information obtained through the open-ended research questions and focus group discussions sought to identify if educator’s perceptions influenced
their use of evidence-based practices and making special education referrals for students who are CLD. Open and inductive coding of the qualitative data determined that the four identified themes related to the participants’ perception of the causes of students who are CLD and how it influences their use of evidence-based practices and making special education referrals. Those four themes were identified as Instructional Strategies, Special Education Referral Process, Experience with Students who are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, and Teacher Resources.

**Instructional Strategies.** The instructional strategies theme includes interventions that the focus group members implemented in their classrooms for all students, regardless of background of need. All 11 participants discussed what influenced their teaching and what instructional strategies they found to be the most helpful for students who were CLD. Nine of the participants discussed how state standards impact and guide their curriculum, while choosing instructional strategies based on student capabilities, interests, and data. The participants continued to discuss that policy mandates developed by federal and state law influence the curriculum they teach, and the instructional strategies implemented in the classroom to meet the needs of all students. As one general educator stated, “Once I build relationships with my students, then I just try to make it whatever is relevant to them and then try to find the rigor to go with it.” Six participants discussed the utilization of evidence-based strategies in the classroom to meet the needs of all students including guided reading, peer-mediated instruction, and direct instruction as well as assessing students to make data-based instructional decisions. One general educator stated “For 2nd grade I know it's a lot of hands on because it's how they learn and we want to do a lot of small groups. Just because you really need that 1 on 1 or that 3 on 1 interaction because whole group, it's never easy so we always try to do as much small group as possible.” Four of the general educators discussed how they implemented the same instructional
strategies for students with CLD as students they viewed as at-risk or students with disabilities, while the other seven participants did not explicitly provide information regarding instructing students who are CLD.

Special Education Referral Process. The special education referral process theme includes participants’ views and perceptions on how they follow the process to determine eligibility for special education services. Five of the participants discussed the special education referral process and how they identify students at-risk or suspected of having a disability. The participants discussed how they follow the state guidelines for referral and eligibility. Progress monitoring, tracking, and collecting benchmark scores were included in ways students’ data was collected to make instructional and referral decisions. Collaboration with stakeholders in the students’ education including former teachers, administrators, and families allowed teachers to gain a better understanding of the student and identify their strengths and challenges. One general educator discussed the special education referral process during the beginning of her career, “…20-30 years ago if I made up my mind that a child needed special education, that was it. The SAT and the whole process was just a formality to me. I wrote out the paperwork.” However, the participant later shared that the changes the referral process had undergone and how it differs today, “For example, we have a child in 4th grade who was tested, and we disagreed with the testing, and we said that we would like to have him retested. So, of course, we’re gathering more data. We are actually seeing growth…he just needed some one on one, good intervention, and he’s picking up a little bit. But we now have my point that we now have data to back us up because it gives us some progress monitoring.” Two general educators also discussed that the IDEA principles including appropriate evaluation and free and appropriate public education (FAPE) are utilized during the special education referral process and are
designed specifically to eliminate other factors that may contribute to academic difficulties including limited English proficiency or poor instruction.

**Experience with Students who are CLD.** Due to the geographical location of the participants, the majority of focus group participants did not have much experience with students who are CLD. On average, most of the participants had little to no experience, while three participants had instructed 1-3 students who were CLD at least once during their career. One counselor discussed their experience with seven students who spoke five different languages and what helped them meet the needs of their students, “*One thing that the other counselor and I did is, we went around the common areas, so like the cafeteria and the restroom and the water fountain and we actually put words up in every single language that we had in the building...they recognized that and it helped with that transition.*” While some resources for supporting teachers who are instructing students who are CLD are scarce, including translated materials or additional ESL support, three general educators, who varied in experience with students who are CLD, explained that understanding different cultures and building relationships with the families allowed them to better meet the needs of their students who are CLD. One general educator discussed the importance of getting to know their students who are CLD not only academically, but socially as well. She went on to state, “*The boys I had been talking about how they had to go to the restaurant, their family owned after and work, so they were not discussing their video games and one day the one looked at me and said I got a new bike so I made sure I went to the restaurant that night and go see that because, you know that he got a brand new bike because that was something he could be proud of socially that the other kids, you know, were like, impressed by that.*” The participants did not elaborate on what resources they needed, they just felt that they were unprepared to work with students who are CLD.
**Teacher Resources.** The final theme was teacher resources needed to meet the needs of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. While most of the participants did not have what they would consider “adequate” experience with students who are CLD, many identified what resources would be needed to better instruct students who are CLD. Five participants, including four general educators and one special educator, discussed the need for translated materials, including textbooks, visual schedules or labels as well as collaboration with ESL teachers, and training on other relevant strategies in core content areas (i.e., English language arts, math, writing) that can be implemented to assist with students who are CLD. Additionally, three general educators discussed how their attitudes towards the students may impact how they build relationships with students who are CLD. As one general educator stated, “I would never want them to come in and feel like they couldn’t do something, and I don’t want to think there’s a kid out there who I can’t teach. So, I will make sure I get all the resources.” The participant then went on to discuss how they would contact district administrators in order to receive appropriate resources or collaborate with teachers who have more experience with students who are CLD by stating, “So I would utilize that information and maybe reach out to other schools and see how the teachers handle those situations in their classrooms.” Many participants discussed that while they may lack experience in instructing students who are CLD, they would do what is necessary to meet the needs of their students.
Table 6

Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Data Integration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantitative Results</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Focus Group Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| LEP as cause of academic difficulties 60% agree | • Instructional Strategies  
• Teacher Resources | “I find myself having to kind of approach things in different angles and verbalize things in different ways to get them to understand.”  
“Doing some brain breaks and getting them moved in around the room”  
“Well, you start working on, like, coming up with some interventions and figuring out a different way to try and reach that child by getting into smaller groups, or 1 on 1.”  
“But as to what I did, it was kindergarten we just kept going and integrating English and labeled everything.”  
“I would say, just from a personal point of view. I mean, the student. But, you know, it’s very different, um, in their culture, beliefs, and practices then than you know how I’ve grown up, you know, I, I would benefit from having it this started the year like, even a little information sheet, um, you know, because I don’t ever want to do anything that’s going to offend the parent or the student, because of their cultural beliefs and so, just having that background information of, you know.” |

| Low Intelligence as cause of academic difficulties: 3% agree | • Special Education  
• Referral Process  
• Experience with Students who are CLD | “We now have data to back us up because it gives us some progress monitoring.”  
“Especially this year, it’s kind of that seems to be prolonged because they’re saying, well, potentially just be a lack of instruction because they were not in school that much during the past couple of years so that’s kind of push things back for that, perhaps we need to have a little bit more data before we were able to get the ball rolling and compared to previous years”  
“So, nationality is, his parents are first generation from India. So, his home speaks primarily their native language, and dad has expressed me that they’re trying to see more English in the home. But it does, and he does, he does very well, but there are some disconnects with directions and things that I find myself” |
having to kind of approach things that different in different angles and um, verbalize things to him in different ways to get them to understand.”

“Learned so much my home visits were very educational for me; it was so nice to see in different cultures. How they treat teachers and how esteemed they treat us. I mean, I remember a family, everything stopped when we walked in, they treated us with tea and cakes and everybody sat down and they sat on the floor where we sit on the couch and it was amazing, the difference of the cultures.”

“You know, and if you have a student that is academically challenged on top of having to learn a new language I mean, that's going to be incredibly difficult for them to acquire that there's new skills. Just even be able to do the basic function of communication, much less learning the different academic concepts.”

Note. Quantitative and qualitative data were integrated to provide a more complete analysis and interpretation of educators’ perceptions of academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD.
Discussion of Results

This study sought to answer three research questions including what are general and special educators’, counselors’, and ESL teachers’ perceptions of the causes of academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD and do these stakeholders perceptions of the causes of academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD influence their use of evidence-based practices and making special education referrals for students who are CLD. As this survey was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it may have affected the response rate and contributed to ratings as students who are CLD were not interacting with their teachers in a face to face setting.

The findings indicated that overall participants believed that limited English proficiency, unknown familial problems at home, and anxiety contributed to the academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD. Results suggest that participants are aware that limited English proficiency is likely the cause of academic difficulties in students who are CLD as indicated in earlier research conducted by Fernandez and Inserra (2013). However, participants also noted that unknown familial problems, including transient situations, family dynamics, and other challenges could be a cause of academic difficulties. These responses suggest that teachers may not have a strong understanding of students’ diverse backgrounds or that stereotypes associated with students and families who are CLD may influence teachers’ perceptions of potential causes of academic difficulty. Previous research does not delve into the topic of anxiety, but one could speculate that students who experience anxiety with instruction in the K-12 setting may have difficulties making adequate progress in the classroom due to their struggles with language, bullying, or lack of culturally-representative materials. In general, study results
suggest that participants understand the special education referral process and the importance of implementing evidence-based strategies and progress monitoring to ensure student achievement.

Comparison of general and special educators’ responses suggests that most are familiar with policy regarding the steps to be taken to assist a student who experiences academic difficulties, possibly due to the emphasis placed on collaboration within multidisciplinary teams in the K-12 settings. When a student is suspected of having a disability, a multidisciplinary team consisting of general educators, special educators, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders in the student’s education collaborate to determine the eligibility of the student for receiving special education services and if necessary, the services that will be provided. Because this process is mandated by IDEA, general and special educators have become more aware of how to determine if there is a disability and if the student would benefit from special education, rather than one person determining eligibility alone. Focus group participants discussed that when appropriately following the special education referral process, educators are able to dismiss outside factors that might contribute to academic difficulties in students including limited English proficiency and poor instruction. The more student-assistance teams follow the special education referral process appropriately with multiple evaluations, data to support decisions, and eligibility criteria, unmerited special education referrals and inappropriate special education services can be drastically reduced (Ford, 2012).

Results from special educators suggest that there may be a lack of knowledge or experience in working with students who are CLD due to lack of diverse areas in West Virginia. General educators, however, were more in favor of limited English proficiency causing academic difficulties in students who are CLD. The differences between the general and special educators’ responses could be due in part to the fact that the term diversity is interpreted differently between
the two positions. Additionally, higher education institutes may emphasize more coursework and field experience regarding working with students who are CLD for preservice teachers entering the general education field, as opposed to those specializing in special education. Educator Preparation Programs need to provide more direct experience with students who are CLD for their preservice teachers through field experiences. If diversity is not abundant in an area, online resources or tools should be utilized to allow the preservice teacher to increase their knowledge on working with students who are CLD.

When interpreting the results based on years of experience, the majority of teachers with less years of experience felt as if limited English proficiency is the cause of academic difficulties in students who are CLD. Most teachers with less than 20 years of classroom experience disagreed that low intelligence is a cause of academic difficulties. Results suggest that limited English proficiency was the most cited cause of academic difficulties in students who are CLD. This could be due to Educator Preparation Programs and Higher Education standards placing more emphasis on diversity standards, coursework, and field experiences and teachers with less years of experience likely receiving more of that instruction.

The majority of teachers with more than 20 years of classroom experience felt that limited English proficiency was the cause of academic difficulties in students who are CLD. It appears that teachers with more experience understand that low intelligence may not be a cause for academic difficulties in students who are CLD; however, many did not necessarily have a strong opinion on what could be a cause. Teachers with the most experience may lack the knowledge and experience of working with students who are CLD and were not provided with explicit instruction or coursework related to diversity during their time as a pre-service teacher, due to a lack of diversity standards developed by accreditation systems. Additionally,
professional development attended by the participants may not focus on working with students who are CLD if there are few to no students who are CLD in the school district. While teachers with more experience have spent the most time in the classroom, it does not mean that they necessarily have the most experience with students who are CLD and likely did not receive coursework or field experiences directed at working with students who are CLD. Professional development should focus on understanding different cultures and backgrounds and how to best build relationships with diverse families. Furthermore, professional development should provide educators with real world examples of how to meet the needs of their students who are CLD by implementing specific evidence-based practices.

Focus group discussion provides insight to the number of neutrality responses based on their lack of direct experience in working with students who are CLD. Participants discussed the utilization of specific evidence-based strategies in the classroom including guided reading, peer-mediated instruction, and direct instruction as well as assessing students to make data based instructional decisions as well as how they implemented the same strategies for students with CLD as students they viewed as at-risk or students with disabilities. Additionally, progress monitoring, tracking, and collecting benchmark scores were included in ways students collect data to make instructional decisions. Participants discussed how collaboration with stakeholders in the student’s education including former teachers, administrators, and families allowed them to gain a better understanding of the student and identify their strengths and challenges. Unfortunately, resources for supporting teachers who are instructing students who are CLD are scarce, but participants felt that understanding different cultures and building relationships with the families allowed them to better meet the needs of their students. Furthermore, how the educators’ attitudes towards the students who are CLD may impact how they build relationships.
Previous research has shown that when educators collaborate with families and better understand a student’s background, it helps to eliminate bias when working with the student (Hardin, Roach-Scott, and Peisner-Feinberg, 2007).

While participants may observe academic difficulties in students who are CLD, they are aware that if they implement appropriate interventions, such as best practices, based on the student’s individual strengths and challenges and progress monitor the effectiveness of the intervention, they are more likely to see success as outlined by research (Chu, 2011). If the student does not make adequate progress, then additional evaluations and assessments may need to be conducted. Information obtained from the study reflects prior research that many educators feel unprepared to instruct students who are CLD (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013). When a teacher feels unprepared, they may not know what steps should be to meet the needs of their students (Chu, 2011). Teachers who understand the special education referral process utilize the tools during the process to eliminate additional factors including poor instruction and limited English proficiency that could be perceived as academic difficulties. By implementing appropriate evidence-based practices, teachers can determine the effectiveness of an intervention and progress monitor their student’s success. However, teachers who lack the background knowledge and misinterpret limited English proficiency as a disability, may make an unmerited special education referral that contributes to overrepresentation of a population receiving special education services.

Teacher resources for working with students who are CLD should include someone who facilitates and provides support for teachers and students in terms of interventions, visual supports, and collaboration which aligns to previous research (Gravois and Rosenfield, 2006). Professional development should focus on direct training and experience with students who are
CLD in addition to understanding cultural backgrounds to better meet the needs of the student (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013). Although school districts may lack diversity, it is important to continue to provide the appropriate professional development to teachers, as rural states have continued to see substantial increases of students who are CLD. Teachers should collaborate with individuals who are more experienced in working with students who are CLD including ESL teachers (Gravois and Rosenfield, 2006). Moreover, teachers should continue to build relationships with students and their families to ensure that they understand any cultural nuances.

Educator Preparation Programs should emphasize diversity as it relates to culture in their coursework and assignments. Specific courses should be designed and implemented regarding interventions and strategies when working with students who are CLD. Meaningful assignments that allow preservice teachers to experience working with different cultures should be implemented. Where diversity is scarce, online resources should be utilized to better understand how to meet the needs of students who are CLD.

**Limitations**

There were limitations found within the research study that may influenced the generalization of results of the perceptions of identified academic difficulties of students who are CLD. The study sought to obtain information throughout the rural state of West Virginia, however, participation was limited to specific geographic regions. A significant limitation is the limited survey response rate 578 surveys were disseminated with 51 “failure to deliver” messages for a total of 527 potential participants and 58 responses for a response rate of 11.01%. The low response rate may be related to the fact that in March 2020, COVID-19 outbreaks required many school systems to participate in virtual learning throughout the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year and into the 2020-2021 school year. Many superintendents in West
Virginia did not respond to the researcher’s request for permission to recruit educators and a few did not want to inconvenience their teachers to participation in the voluntary study. Where superintendent permission to contact district teachers was granted, the researcher sought to locate the names and email addresses of potential participants through the West Virginia or county Board of Education websites. Many websites were outdated with faculty and staff information including current emails. Because the researcher contacted the participants via their West Virginia K-12 email accounts, 51 emails were returned due to “failure to deliver.”

The geographical location of West Virginia limits the generalization of the results to other geographic locations outside of the state. The researcher also used self-selection when identifying participants as well as self-reporting the results of the study which could lead to influencing the results by human error and participant response bias (Lavrakas, 2008). The focus of the research study is on kindergarten through fifth-grade general and special educators, counselors, and ESL educators, which can also limit the generalization of the data collection and results. Utilizing purposive sampling, the participants were limited to West Virginia kindergarten through fifth-grade general and special educators, counselors, and ESL educators which could limit results to the location.

**Practitioner Implications**

The study identified important findings that are applicable to Educator Preparation Programs as well as school districts currently instructing students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. The study outlined information that could provide practitioners with recommendations for working with students who are CLD. First, an understanding of a student’s background including culture and linguistic differences should be discussed with stakeholders involved in the student’s education. Having a better understanding of the student’s background
will allow practitioners to better identify a student’s strengths and challenges as well as what instructional strategies may best meet their needs. Additionally, educators should follow the guidelines set by their school district when making referrals for special education.

Implementing evidence-based strategies, collecting data, and progress monitoring can assist educators in making data based instructional decisions and make informed decisions about special education referral and eligibility. Finally, providing educators with the appropriate resources needed to meet the needs of their students who are CLD will allow the educator to focus on instructing the student properly, relating to the theme of Teacher Resources.

Professional development, training materials, and additional resources that can be implemented effectively by the educator are critical to meeting the needs of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Some of the teachers indicated that their attitudes toward the students might influence their decision making. Additional professional development provided in the area of bias would benefit educators to reflect on their internal bias and ensure that only appropriate special education referrals are conducted.

Future Research

The study was designed to determine teachers’ perceptions of the causes of academic difficulties in students who are CLD and if or how those causes influence their use of evidence-based practices or special education referrals. At the inception of this study, only one study had looked at information of the causes of academic difficulties in students who are CLD and focused on preservice teachers. It is important that future research on academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD focus on demographics and locations outside of those identified in the study. Personnel such as administration, related arts teachers, and secondary educators could provide additional perceptions not recognized by the participants. Furthermore,
future research could focus on urban and suburban areas with larger populations of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse due to more experience instructing students who are CLD. Educators with many years’ of experience instructing students who are culturally and linguistically diverse may have differing perceptions. Future research can assist stakeholders in identifying how to reduce unmerited special education referrals and provide meaningful instruction to students who are CLD, relating to the theme of Instructional Strategies. Research identifying teacher training on the learning needs of students who are CLD and the impact of this training on the special education referral process. Due to the ever increasing rise in students who are CLD in school, there is a critical need to ensure that they are receiving a free and appropriate public education that is required by federal law. Additionally, students who are CLD should be provided with an appropriate education that supports their academic development.

In summary, across educators surveyed in West Virginia, limited English proficiency was identified as the primary cause of academic difficulties experienced by students who are CLD. However, due to the lack of experience the educators had regarding instructing students who are CLD, there were potential causes that participants did not rate as agreeable or disagreeable. Implications for future research include identifying the causes of academic difficulties by surveying educators with more experience working with students who are CLD.
References


doi:10.1111/1467-8578.12061


doi:10.1177/001440291207800401


Appendix A

1. I believe ELL academic difficulties are caused by limited English proficiency. 1 2 3 4 5
2. I believe ELL academic difficulties are caused by low motivation. 1 2 3 4 5
3. I believe ELL academic difficulties are caused by low intelligence. 1 2 3 4 5
4. I believe ELL academic difficulties are caused by a disability. 1 2 3 4 5
5. I believe ELL academic difficulties are caused by behavior problems. 1 2 3 4 5
6. I believe ELL academic difficulties are caused by anxiety. 1 2 3 4 5
7. I believe ELL academic difficulties are caused by unknown familial problems. 1 2 3 4 5
8. I believe ELL academic difficulties are caused by interactions with peers. 1 2 3 4 5
9. I believe ELL academic difficulties are caused by an unlisted problem. 1 2 3 4 5
10. What is your age?
11. What is your job title?
12. Are you certified in the area in which you are currently teaching?
13. How many years’ experience of teaching do you have?
14. Where is your school located (county name)?
15. How many students do you instruct on a daily basis?
16. What content areas do you teach on a daily basis?
17. Please explain your experience in providing instruction for students with disabilities.
18. Please identify the number of diverse backgrounds of the students you have taught throughout your career.
19. What instructional strategies have you used when working with students who are culturally and linguistically diverse?
20. I am interested in participating in the focus groups.
## Appendix B

### Focus Group Guiding Questions and Follow-Up Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding Questions</th>
<th>Follow-Up Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you have any students who are CLD in your current classroom?</td>
<td>How you determine what instructional strategies you should implement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe the academic progress of your students who are CLD?</td>
<td>What’s the process you take as a classroom teacher once you’ve made a referral or pre-referral, where do you go from there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What difficulties do your students who are CLD demonstrate in the classroom?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you perceive as some of the causes of academic difficulties in students who are CLD?</td>
<td>What influences your teaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What instructional strategies do you implement in the classroom to work with diverse learners?</td>
<td>Did you feel that any of those strategies provided your students with more success or increased achievement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What resources would you need to help prepare you?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Dear Superintendent _____,

My name is Courtney Miller, and I am a doctoral student at West Virginia University studying special education as well as a current assistant professor of special education at Fairmont State University and a former special educator in Monongalia County. I am in the process of writing my dissertation entitled “Teachers’ Perceptions of Causes of Academic Difficulties Experienced by Students who are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse.” This study wishes to explore elementary general educators’, special educators’, ESL teachers’, and counselors’ perceptions of academic difficulties in students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. It hopes to obtain information regarding the professionals’ perceptions to assist these professionals in making appropriate academic decisions for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse, particularly during the SAT referral process. It hopes to utilize K-5 general educators, special educators, ESL teachers, and counselors in West Virginia as the participants.

I am requesting permission to allow me to contact your K-5 general educators, special educators, ESL teachers, and counselors to participate in the online survey. The information will be gathered by the researchers and remain confidential.

I would appreciate your approval to recruit participants from your county. Please feel free to contact me with any additional questions at (304) 488-3247 or Courtney.miller@fairmontstate.edu. Thank you for your time and consideration and I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,
Courtney Miller
Appendix D

Dear Participant,

My name is Courtney Miller, and I am a doctoral student at West Virginia University studying special education, as well as an assistant professor of special education at Fairmont State University and a former special educator in Monongalia County. I invite you to participate in the dissertation study entitled “Teachers’ Perceptions of Causes of Academic Difficulties Experienced by Students who are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse.” The linked survey has been designed to collect information on your perceptions of academic difficulties experienced by students who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose to answer all questions or leave any blank. There are no known risks to completing the survey, and your responses will remain anonymous and confidential and only reported as a collective whole.

If you agree to participate in the study, please follow the linked survey below and answer the questions to the best of your ability. The survey should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Furthermore, once you have completed the linked survey, if you are interested in participating in a virtual focus group, please indicate so on the survey. Participants in the focus groups will receive a $5.00 gift card.

If you have any questions regarding the study, please contact me at courtney.miller@fairmontstate.edu. This study has been reviewed and approved by West Virginia University. If you have questions about your rights as a study participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact, anonymously, if preferred, the WVU Office of Research and Integrity by phone at (304) 293-7073 or email at ORIC@mail.wvu.edu. Thank you for your assistance in this study.

To complete the survey, click on the link below:

https://s.surveyplanet.com/-hG_mMJfB

Sincerely,
Courtney Miller

IRB Protocol # 2006020258