
May 2021

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Repository Citation

Gonzalez, T., Okhremtchouk, I. S., & Esposito, M. (2021). Arizona and California Special Education Teachers on Their Readiness to Work With Dual Language Learners: Re-Centering Social Justice in Special Education. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 20 (2). Retrieved from <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo/vol20/iss2/8>

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Arizona and California Special Education Teachers on Their Readiness to Work With Dual Language Learners: Re-Centering Social Justice in Special Education

Taucia Gonzalez, Irina S. Okhremtchouk, & M. C. Kate Esposito

Abstract

The number of dual language learners (DLLs) attending public schools across the nation has increased dramatically over the last three decades, resulting in more students dually classified as having a disability and being a DLL. The preparation of special education teachers (SETs) to work at the intersection of ability and linguistic difference is a critical social justice issue. This survey study used sociocultural theory to theorize and frame Arizona and California SETs' self-reported readiness to work with DLLs. SETs described much less opportunity to work with DLLs in their preservice programs than they encountered in their SET practice. Consequently, they described (a) limited knowledge of how to use DLLs' native language as an instructional resource, (b) teaching *about* rather than *through* culture, and (c) challenges related to DLL diversity and differentiating between disability and language acquisition. Findings speak to a dire need to center intersectional approaches in SET preparation in order to use special education as an equity tool.

Keywords: Special education teachers, English learners, intersectionality, teacher preparation

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Introduction

Schools throughout the nation are experiencing demographic shifts resulting in increasingly diverse student populations, which are consequently reshaping the role of special education teachers (SETs) (Shepherd, Fowler, McCormick, Wilson, & Morgan, 2016; Sindelar, Wasburn-Moses, Thomas, & Leko, 2014) and the need to effectively prepare SETs to work in racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse schools (Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012). As of 2014-2015, 10% of K-12 students in the United States were dual language learners¹ (DLLs) (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Effective SETs are those who are not only prepared to work with students with disabilities (SWDs) but also to work with DLLs, and DLLs with disabilities (DLLwD).

The role of the SET is encountering a new and required professional turn within the diverse student landscape, which is especially pertinent given the critical role SETs play in advancing educational equity by preventing inappropriate disability identification, ensuring early supports, and providing opportunity to learn (Ortiz et al., 2011)—all of which require understanding of how language and disability intersect. Previous scholars have noted equity concerns related to SET practice including the lack of attention to the intersection of language and ability differences, or how DLL and disability classifications intersect in practice and service delivery (Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006; Linan-Thompson, Cirino, & Vaughn, 2007; Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Zetlin, Beltran, Salcido, Gonzalez, & Reyes, 2011).

The Need for Equity Leaders at the Nexus of Language and Ability Difference

Schools, researchers, and policy makers have long attended to sociocultural differences through the use of static markers (Artiles, 2015). For example, classifications such as SWD, and “at risk” are used to categorize certain types of learners in a way that qualify them for specified services and supports. While these identity markers are tied to policies and even funding mechanisms, they constrain teaching by ignoring the fluid and intersectional nature of these identity categories. A student may be classified as an DLL upon entry into school and later also become classified as an SWD. Yet the services these two classifications provide are treated as separate categories, with differing personnel responsible for developing educational interventions, often with limited interaction between language-support services and special education services (Zehler et al., 2003).

Even more troubling, many schools have informal “no dual services” policies (i.e., either a DLL *or* a SWD), which highlight the tension around this intersection. Recently the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, and the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2015) published a joint “Dear Colleague” letter in response to the illegal and inequitable practice some schools engage in of prohibiting DLLs from being labeled with a disability or withdraw-

ing students from DLL status (rather than reclassifying them) before they are allowed to be classified as LD (i.e., no dual services). In essence, both practices deny students their right to the free appropriate individualized education they are entitled to as per the federal and state mandates established under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) (2004).

Historical sedimentation coupled with current demographic shifts has resulted in a complicated relationship between the DLL and disability categories. Practitioners are faced with the delicate dance of being attuned to historical special education injustices (e.g., *Diana v. State Board of Education*, 1970; overrepresentation in disability categories) that ignored students' English proficiency. However, in the current era of special education, teachers must also safeguard the importance of early identification for students who do indeed have disabilities. Currently, for instance, DLLs tend to be underrepresented in the category of learning disabilities in the early elementary grades and overrepresented in the middle and secondary grades (Samson & Lesaux, 2009). As schools adjust to the intersection of DLL and disability classifications that are not mutually exclusive, SETs play a critical role in advancing equity.

SETs play critical roles in preventing inappropriate classifications and providing support services, yet little is known about how well prepared they are to teach DLLs and DLLwD. Current institutional norms prepare teachers for an isolated social marker (e.g., disability only) with an add-on approach to diversity (Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012; Hollins & Guzman, 2005) rather than for the intersecting social markers that reflect the fact that students do not fit neatly into single categories, nor are categories mutually exclusive. Students have complex identities, which demand new thinking about how best to prepare SETs to meet the complex demands of these intersecting identities. Waitoller and Annamma (2017, p. 34) suggest that social justice educators engage in 'cultural vigilante' work by examining "the ongoing and changing forms of exclusion and their constant attraction to the gravity of historical legacies of inequities." We posit that as we contribute to empirical understandings of SET readiness to work with DLLs, we better position future SETs as equity leaders.

Preparing Special Education Teachers to Work With DLLs

Teacher quality—as measured by knowledge, expertise, education and experience—plays a more significant role in student achievement than do poverty, race, or parent education (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1999; Muller & Burdette, 2007). As DeMonte (2015) notes, "the most powerful in-school influence on learning is the quality of instruction that teachers bring to their students" (p. 1). Data specific to the provision of quality teachers indicates that those most impacted by the equity gap—the economically poor, the racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse, and those with disabilities—are also the most likely to be educated by

teachers who are underprepared to meet their unique needs (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002; Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016; U.S. Department of Education [USOD], 2012).

The special education literature specific to teacher preparation evidence has increased attention to mitigating teacher shortages, which has decreased the likelihood SWDs will be taught by an underprepared teacher (Esposito, Hamdan, & Benitez, 2014). However, absent from the discussion is attention to the preparation of teachers who are able to teach at the intersection of disability and language for students eligible for both special education and language support services. This discussion is critical, because effectively meeting the academic needs of DLLwDs requires specialized repertoires of practice that must include deep knowledge of both disability and language acquisition (see Ochoa, Brandon, Cadiero-Kaplan, & Ramírez, 2014, for review). There is an insufficient empirical base on the specific practices and beliefs needed at this intersection and the extent to which teachers are prepared to meet the needs of DLLwDs.

Nationally, teacher preparation programs play an instrumental role in providing the needed training to pre- and inservice teachers needed to meet the needs of not only DLLs, but DLLwDs. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO; 2009), most teacher preparation programs require “some” training for prospective general education teachers to work with DLLs. However, the quality and depth of this specialized training is inconsistent, in that some states have certification standards (e.g., National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) specific to DLLs embedded into their programs, others merely reference language within the scope of a diversity standard, and still others have virtually no requirements specific to working with DLLs (Roy-Campbell, 2013). As Roy-Campbell (2013) notes, “it is clear that while 70% of the states require some preparation for general education teachers to teach [DLL] students . . . less than 8% have explicit certification requirements for all teachers” (p. 260). In addition to significant variance in the extent to which content regarding the instruction of DLLs is integrated into credential programs, limited standards exist regarding the extent to which fieldwork placements specific to working with diverse populations—including DLLs—exist (GAO, 2009). Thus, fieldwork placements do not consistently provide the needed experience to ensure teachers are well prepared to meet the needs of DLL students (GAO, 2009). In states such as California and Arizona, standards specific to the instruction of DLL students, including fieldwork placements, exist; however, the extent to which these teachers are well prepared for practice is unknown.

Although federal legislation such as the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) and the IDEIA (2004) seeks to ensure DLLs and SWD—including DLLwD—have access to a high-quality education, the lack of attention to intersecting student identities continues to marginalize many students. As the GAO (2009) notes, some training exists for both special education and DLL student populations sep-

arately; however, challenges within teacher preparation programs persist which impede the training of teachers to meet these unique student population needs, especially when students fall into both categories simultaneously.

A search of the extant literature, using a variety of databases, evidences scant attention to the preparation of SETs to meet the specific needs of DLLwDs. This is quite concerning, because, although language development is pervasive across most disability categories (IDEIA, 2004), language development of DLLwDs may involve more complexity and require specialized knowledge beyond what is needed to work with SWD not learning a target language (More et al., 2016). The extant literature regarding the preparation of teachers to work with DLL students demonstrates that the majority of work has focused predominately on general education teachers, leaving many questions regarding SET preparation unanswered. The body of research specific to SET readiness to work with DLLs is nascent, and more empirical work is needed (More et al., 2016).

The Current Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how SETs described their readiness to work with DLLs, and how that readiness translated into self-described backgrounds, instructional strategies, and challenges in their practice. We examined this critical intersection with the following research questions:

1. How well prepared do SETs feel for working at the intersection of language and ability differences?
2. What are the factors affecting teacher readiness to be effective in classrooms with DLLs who may also have a disability?
3. What instructional strategies and challenges do SETs experience working at this intersection?

We purposefully selected Arizona and California as two states that have large, stable DLL populations. These states can serve as powerful harbingers to better understanding the shifting role of SETs and teacher preparation within a linguistically diverse demographic landscape. While DLL rates in the Southwest have slowed or even decreased, this region foreshadows many of the questions, tensions, and promises of special education practices in other educational settings.

Arizona and California are two of a handful of states (including Massachusetts) that, at the time of the study, had English-only legislation that predominantly impacted DLLs. In California, Proposition 227 was passed in 1998 and in Arizona Proposition 203 was passed in 2000. These English-only states mandate that DLLs must learn English through English-only instruction, severely limiting or prohibiting DLL participation in bilingual education programs that support their simultaneous language development. Artiles et al., (2005) found that restricting

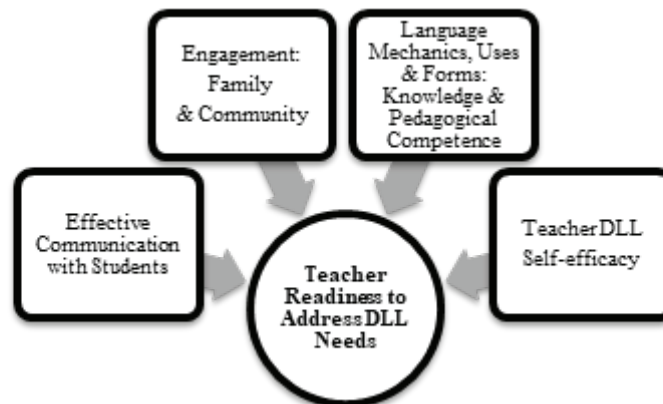
the range of language support programs and access to native language supports, resulted in higher rates of disability identification in DLLs compared to those in bilingual programs.

Recent estimates suggest that DLLs comprise 9.2% (4.4 million students) of the total school population nationally (Kena et al., 2015). Data further suggest that the Western states have seen the largest DLL population enrolled in public schools. For example, 22.3% of California’s school population (California Department of Education, EdData, 2015), and 10% of Arizona’s school population are classified as DLLs (Kena et al., 2015). Corresponding data for the academic year of 2012–2013 suggest that 13% of the school population (or 6.1 million students) received special education services (Kena et al., 2015). As the number of DLLs increases, so does the number of DLLs identified with disabilities (More, Spies, Morgan & Baker, 2016). Though national data on specific to dually classified students is limited, DLLs are estimated to be 8.5% of SWDs (Watkins & Liu, 2013).

Conceptual Framework

We conceptualize this study using the existing literature in SET teacher readiness and within sociocultural theory. We highlight four key factors that have been documented empirically that shape readiness to work with DLLs (see Figure 1): (1) effective communication with students, (2) family and community engagement, (3) knowledge of language mechanics, uses, and forms, and (4) teacher self-efficacy for working with DLLs. Yet, we know that teaching is not a checklist of skills to be acquired, so we also use sociocultural theory to further ground these factors in the social contexts of learning and teaching.

Figure 1
Factors Influencing Teacher Readiness to Work With DLLs
 (Modified and reprinted with permission from Okhremtchouk & Gonzalez, 2014.)



Sociocultural theory deepens our understanding of teacher readiness by framing teacher readiness as cultural, historical, and social processes (Nasir & Hand, 2006; Vygotsky, 1980). Teachers both inherit cultural practices that we call teaching through their participation in teacher preparation programs and other forms of teacher education, but they also create cultural practices as they participate in the social contexts of classrooms, which require them to draw on new teaching tools refine their practice. Nasir and Hand (2006) further explain that sociocultural theory, “articulate[s] a view of culture not only as a system of meaning carried across generations, but also as constantly being created and recreated in local contexts” (p. 458). Consequently, teachers are both inheriting institutional practices from their teacher preparation programs and schools that they work in and creating new cultural practices. Cultural practices can also be thought of as tool mediated behavior, with tools being artifacts such as technology and lessons but also ideational tools such as belief systems (Vygotsky, 1980).

Consequently, when we consider the teacher readiness framework (Figure 1) we know that acquired cultural practices must be considered in tandem with the dynamic nature of social contexts. Indeed, through pre- and inservice work teachers develop cultural repertoires, or ranges, of practices for working with students. We use *repertoires of practice* to refer to the full range of cultural practices (e.g., pedagogical and dispositional tools) available to SETs. Further, we suggest that effective SETs must have rich repertoires of practice that include not only skills and dispositions (see Figure 1), but also the “dexterity in determining which approach from their repertoire is appropriate under which circumstances” (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003, p. 22). Within this framework, we assert that many factors facilitate and support the robust repertoires of practice that contribute to readiness among teachers.

We also point out that this framework does not account for the compounded intersectional inequities (Crenshaw, 1990) of being dually classified as a DLL and SWD. While we frame this study using repertoires of practice, we use intersectionality to think deeply about how linguistic and ability differences intersect within the context of special education practice. SETs, in particular, have historically been prepared to work across disability categories and grade levels, with a primary focus on disability status, which neglects the cultural-historical complexity of student identities.

In short, SET have firsthand knowledge of their preparation and readiness for the local contexts they teach in. Their answers provide valuable insight into the extent to which they have the cultural repertoires and dexterity in drawing the right tools for working with DLLs.

Research Methods

The data analyzed in this study are drawn from Arizona and California statewide surveys. A stratified representative sample was collected (Krejcie & Mor-

gan, 1970) from 865 participants, all of who were Arizona or California inservice teachers at the time of the study. For the participant set, we purposefully narrowed our focus to the 103 SETs who contributed to the open-ended questions of the survey, were certified as SETs, and elected to use special education degrees and/or certification as selection to discern their self-reported DLL readiness.

Design and Survey Instrument

Using the previously presented DLL-readiness framework, we designed an original survey (for complete review see Authors, 2014) in two sections (Gay & Airasian, 2003) using a cross-sectional survey research design method (Sapsford, 1999). The data used for this study are as follows: (1) structured questions to collect demographic (i.e., gender, education) and preservice preparation data (i.e., degrees, certification, years of experience); (2) questions regarding preservice and inservice exposure to DLLs and overall feelings about DLL readiness post preservice, collected by means of a five-point Likert scale; and (3) a section consisting of seven open-ended questions to collect data on instructional practices and beliefs pertaining to DLLs. We piloted the survey with four reviewers who met the same criteria as our sample (Arizona or California inservice teachers) for examination and feedback. In addition to implementing feedback from the reviewers, we conducted a focus group interview with five inservice teachers to further inform and refine the survey instrument before implementation.

Population, Procedures, and Data Analysis

We collected a stratified representative sample (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970) of participants, all of who were Arizona or California inservice teachers. Not all teachers answered the open-ended questions. This could be attributed to the open-ended segment of the survey's being directed at only those inservice teachers who were working with DLLs at the time of the survey. To this end, 511 participants completed the open-ended questionnaire, of whom 103 (20% in this category and 12% of the entire sample) were identified as SETs for the purposes of this study. It is important to note that while it is possible for teachers to have special education qualifications and have a non-special-education position, we elected to use special education degrees and/or certification as selection criteria for this study in order to discern SET DLL readiness across a range of capacities given their special education preparation. For this reason, throughout the findings we use DLL rather than DLLwD.

The demographic and categorical variables (e.g., area of expertise on teaching credential) were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Green & Salkind, 2010) using frequencies and percentages in SPSS (Green & Salkind, 2010). Qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses used a constant comparative analysis with theoretical memo writing (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The process began deduc-

tively with seven parent codes matching the open-ended survey questions and stemming from our framework, which were followed by child codes based on the initial readings of the participant responses (Saldaña, 2012), resulting in a total of 110 child codes. We then used axial coding, which included renaming, dropping, and/or regrouping codes into meaningful categories, resulting in 69 child codes (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). Two coders independently recoded the entire dataset using the final axial coding categories, with a third coder examining all excerpts coded differently to determine a final coding category to ensure reliability.

Participants

In general, the participants in this study were very experienced (see Table 1), with a majority having more years in the profession than the national average and roughly 40% reported fluency in a language in addition to English.

With respect to demographic information, inservice teacher participants were majority female (84%), had master's degrees (67%), and over 40% ($n = 44$) spoke a language other than English (see Table 1). Roughly half of the participants who spoke a language other than English ($n = 20$) had acquired the second language (L2) through primary/family exposure, which theoretically (in addition to preparation in special education) may put them at an advantage in working with DLL-wD due to shared increased understanding of L2 development. Two thirds of the participants possessed master's degrees, which is higher than the national average of 56% of teachers who hold a master's degree or higher (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013). We hold that this is the result of special education credentialing requirements, which include more courses than requirements for general education teachers or those who do not hold a credential.

In terms of years in the profession, the majority ($n = 69$; 63%) had been in the field for more than 10 years, slightly higher than the national average (58% more than 10 years in the profession; NCES, 2013). This is followed by teachers

Table 1
Participant Demographic Information

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Master's degree	69	67
Gender: female	87	84
Was your EL authorization embedded in your teaching credential? Yes	33	32
Additional coursework for EL authorization	81	79
Language other than English	44	43
Primary language exposure	20	19

Note. EL = English learner.

with 7 to 10 years' experience ($n = 15$; 14%). New-to-the-profession teachers made up 13% ($n = 13$) of the sample and midcareer teachers—those who have served between 4 and 6 years—made up 9% ($n = 9$). The same trend was evident for the new-to-the-profession teachers and midcareer teachers combined. That is, 36% of the participants were in their early career or midcareer. Demographic comparisons between the two states demonstrate that participants from California had more experience, on average (77% more than 10 years), than their Arizona counterparts (50% more than 10 years).

The Arizona and California SETs had no significant differences in the level of education received, gender demographics, or primary language exposure. With respect to additional coursework needed to obtain DLL authorization, California inservice teachers reported higher rates (39%) when compared to Arizona teachers (24%), who reported that their DLL coursework was embedded in their preservice education.

Findings

We report findings in two sections, beginning with the quantitative results from the first two research questions pertaining to SETs' perceived readiness to work with DLLs and related factors. The second section presents the qualitative findings from the third research question, to bring special education DLL readiness to life with findings on the types of instructional strategies they use and challenges they encounter in their teaching practice.

SETs on Readiness to Work With DLLs: The Exposure Gap

When asked to reflect on their preparation to work with DLL students, roughly a quarter of participants (23%) felt that they were “not at all” or “not” prepared to work with DLLs prior to their inservice years in the profession (see Table 2). Combined with “somewhat prepared,” the number of participants who reported “not at all,” “not,” and “somewhat” prepared amounts to 59% ($n = 60$). That is, more than half of teachers did not feel either “prepared” or “well prepared” upon completing their preservice programs, despite 32% of the participants reporting that their DLL authorization was embedded in their teacher preparation coursework (see Table 1). For purposes of this study, we have labeled this factor an *exposure gap*. This gap describes the exposure SETs had in their preservice practice compared to their inservice teaching, which adds to the education debt that impacts academic achievement for racial and ethnic minorities (Ladson-Billings, 2011). There were no significant differences between California and Arizona teachers' exposure gaps.

With respect to the extent to which SETs are currently working with DLLs, all but five participants (95%; $n = 98$) reported currently having DLLs in their classrooms. Further, almost all participants had some exposure to DLLs at their

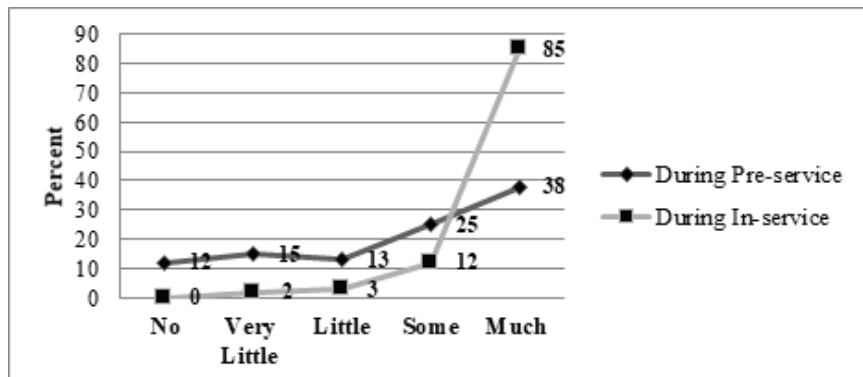
corresponding teaching placements. The difference, or the exposure gap, between pre- and inservice exposure to DLLs creates a compelling picture (see Figure 2). Only 61% ($n = 63$) of participants' responses fell in the combined category of "some exposure" or "much exposure" during preservice teaching, with 94% ($n = 97$) of participants indicating exposure during inservice teaching—a 33% difference. If we were to look at the "much exposure" factor alone, the difference is a staggering 46%. This result further confirms the sentiments about DLL readiness post preservice as reported in Table 2.

When we examined to what extent SETs are exposed to DLLs in their corresponding states and classrooms, we found that in Arizona many ($n = 27$; 51%) worked in classrooms where more than 15% of students were classified as DLLs (above the Arizona average of roughly 9%). However, only 37% of Arizona teachers felt that their teacher preparation program either "prepared" or "well prepared" them to work with DLLs. A similar trend was evident for California SETs. Roughly half ($n = 28$; 49%) worked in classrooms where more than 15% of student populations were classified as DLL. However, only 42% of California SETs

Table 2
Arizona and California Inservice Feelings about Readiness to Work with DLLs

<i>Prepared to work with DLLs after preservice</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Not at all	8	8
Not	15	15
Somewhat	37	37
Prepared	23	23
Well prepared	18	18

Figure 2
Arizona and California Combined Exposure to DLLs During Pre- Versus Inservice Teaching



felt that their teacher preparation program either “prepared” or “well prepared” them to work with DLLs. This difference in the extent to which teachers felt prepared to meet the realities of their classroom is aligned with their perceptions of their teacher preparation program. We speculate that central to their evaluation is exposure to DLL SWDs, and further that this pre- to inservice gap highlights a critical limitation in SET preparation programs.

SET Readiness: Pedagogy, Culture, and “Not Knowing Where to Start”

This section triangulates and builds qualitative nuance into what the SET-readiness gap looked like in practice. While our survey instrument (and quantitative findings) allowed teachers to locate their practice on a continuum of readiness, the qualitative findings illustrate what this repertoire of readiness to work with DLLs looks like through pedagogy, beliefs, and the daily challenges SETs encounter in their practice. We examined these aspects of readiness through our SET-teacher-readiness framework (see Figure 1) with the understanding that disability and language intersect in ways that can require robust repertoires of practice (Gonzalez, 2015; Zehler et al., 2003).

Native language as a pedagogical tool. We asked SETs, “In what ways do you draw connections between the primary language(s) of your students and the English language to help DLL students transfer language skills?” (i.e., L1² to learn L2). This question could be considered contentious given Arizona and California are language-restrictive (i.e., English-only) states (Gándara, 2015) that rely heavily on English-only instruction with little to no use of students’ native languages.

Arizona and California SETs’ responses demonstrated an understanding of the importance of using language instructional supports. The majority of responses to this question indicated that teachers focused on creating comprehensible input more than language transfer. For example, the most common response to this question was the use of visual aids (e.g., “I use visuals whenever possible”; “I use simplified materials and visual aids as much as possible to draw connections”). This may imply that teachers use visuals with an understanding that students will then connect the visual representation to a word or idea in their L1, rather than teachers making explicit connections between L1 and L2 for the students.

The teachers who used L1 to learn L2 more in line with the notion of language transfer, which constituted slightly less than half of the responses, described a range of methods. The two most common were pointing out L1 and English cognates, or words that are spelled similarly in the two languages and have similar meanings, and studying how English words have roots in other languages. These strategies are especially important in supporting the development of academic language (Lubliner & Hiebert, 2011).

An additional strategy that was equally reported by participants was incorporating students’ L1 into instruction, albeit primarily for the purpose of translating.

Teachers described using translation by “translating directly when needed,” having peers translate, and “if there’s an English word my students don’t understand and I’ve tried using synonyms and several examples and [if] they still don’t understand, then I will ask them the Spanish word or use a Spanish/English dictionary or Google.” Overall, using L1 to learn L2 beyond direct translation was less common.

A final strategy SETs described was drawing from theories or beliefs to understand and guide their practice. This small set of responses ($n = 6$; 7%) was rooted in knowledge of language acquisition or language development theories such as, “I teach kindergarten, so it is very basic. They transfer language, skills, and knowledge quite easily at this age,” “if there is a concept in a primary language, it is easy transferred into a new language,” and “understanding of language acquisition stages.” These and similar responses spoke to an understanding of how SETs used L2 development theories to make sense of their practice. Most of these responses specifically focused on language transfer and advocated for the importance of utilizing native language fluency as a resource.

In summary, the SET participants’ responses unveiled a range of pedagogical methods for working with DLLs. While the participants recognized students’ L1 as an instructional tool, only half of their responses explicitly described methods for using L1 to learn L2.

The cultural context: teaching in and with cultural diversity. When asked their views regarding the cultural diversity that exists within California and Arizona schools, the majority of the study participants described diversity as a positive asset. Yet, when asked to describe how they used culture as a learning tool, they treated culture overwhelmingly as a noun, or something to teach students, rather than something students did—an instructional tool *for* teaching.

The most frequently described method for integrating culture into the curriculum was through what we term cultural expeditions—moments that celebrate culture as a thing to view, pass around, taste, and/or learn. These cultural expeditions included a range of methods: “I have had ‘heritage’ parties as a way for students to present their culture’s foods as a way of feeling valued and included”; “We celebrate different holidays and I use that opportunity to introduce cultures they may not have had contact with”; “At different holidays completing activities that go along with the different cultures. This might include: music, dance, food, art.” These cultural expeditions framed culture as a thing to learn about and celebrate rather than something all students already do and have. This in turn meant culture was something to be seen rather than something to be leveraged for instruction.

This dominant conceptualization of culture, cultural expeditions, was contrasted by a small set of counterexamples that integrated culture into the curriculum as lived practices and experiences shaped historically, contextually, and/or politically. For example, four teachers described integrating culture by exploring history and current events: “When teaching social studies, we talk about fairness

and oppression, for example when we come to the concept of ‘manifest destiny’ we talk about other cultures and stress the difference between facts and opinions.” These uses of culture for instructional purposes recognized historical and political dimensions of culture that connect to some students’ material realities.

Many participants described integrating culture through books *about* culture, which we differentiate from teachers that described using literature written *from* diverse perspectives. Integrating literacy from a culture included “read[ing] picture books about culture and student heritage so students see their culture and/or heritage as valued and important,” versus another teacher’s integration that included “literature that is not solely [written by] ‘dead, white guys.’” Overall, the teacher participants attempted to integrate culture; however, their repertoires of cultural understanding were constrained by views of culture as a noun. This translated into *teaching culture* rather than *using culture to teach*.

The challenges: “Not knowing where to start.” Study participants expressed various challenges they encountered in their teaching practice related to DLLs; however, the two challenges that were most salient across all of the participants were not feeling prepared for the heterogeneity of DLL (i.e., within-DLL differences) and not knowing how to differentiate whether an DLL was struggling academically because they are learning English or due to an underlying LD.

Within-group DLL differences. Evident in this data set is that inservice SETs encounter many within-group DLL differences, especially as they relate to disability, yet teachers’ repertoires of practice specific to meeting these varied needs are limited. These within-group differences manifested in challenges related to language differences. These challenges included students’ academic history in their first language (L1). One teacher explained the following:

The grammatical structure of English is so different from other languages. That has been a significant challenge. Especially since so many of my students are [LD] and therefore are not fluent in their own language. They have not mastered the structure of their native language so they struggle that much more with the structure of English. This was true when I had students from Russia when I was teaching on the East Coast and is also true now when I am teaching Native American students.

The SETs in this study often framed fluency and literacy in students’ native language as an asset to learning and developing English. Consequently, respondents viewed limited L1 education experiences as deficits.

Participants described the various levels of students’ English proficiency and range of native languages SETs encounter in their practice as another within-DLL difference that they struggled with. One teacher noted the challenge of “Having several DLLs in various levels in the same class. Meeting all the needs can be challenging as to not bore the other students or leave anyone behind” and another added, “DLLs are in differing places in learning English. Until you face these

stages and go through that part of teaching English and concepts, they are all challenging.”

Some teachers expressed frustration in their perceived inability to provide special education services without adequate resources/personnel fluent in their students’ native languages. One SET explained, “It is time consuming to test the DLL child as I have to test them with the help of an interpreter. We don’t have speech and language assessments for the Hmong or Vietnamese speaker. There are assessments in Spanish.”

Other SETs attributed communication barriers to cultural differences that were based on faulty cultural stereotypes. These deficit-framed challenges were a small segment of the data sample, yet provided important insights into the continuance of cultural and linguistic hegemony as enduring equity issues compounded for DLLwD.

The intersection of language and disability. The second theme related to SETs’ greatest challenges was difficulty in understanding the intersectional relationship between language and disability. The intersection of developing English as L2 and having a disability was discussed related to discerning between disability and English development but also in constructed sameness between English development services and special education services.

Discerning between disability and English development. Generally speaking, all teachers across all grade levels and settings will encounter DLLs who struggle academically. Evidenced in our findings is that SETs had difficulty in discerning whether DLLs struggle because they were still acquiring English, because they had an underlying disability, or because of the interplay between the two—disability as it influences language acquisition in L1 and L2. As noted by SETs in this study, “I teach special education. The most difficult area for me is figuring out if it is a language issue or part of the disability,” and “I teach Special Ed[ucation] English, and sometimes it is difficult to ascertain whether a student is struggling because they [have an LD] or if they are still learning how to access material in English when it is not their first language.” These teachers were not alone in this line of inquiry; many others also described this struggle. A primary grade teacher explained “in first grade, determining whether lack of progress is due to second language or a learning disability” as her greatest challenge. As ELs aged into secondary grades, SETs faced similar problems: one teacher asked, “kids who have been taught in English for 6–7 years and still cannot pass the [English proficiency assessment]. What is their need?” This tension is connected to the disproportionate over- and underrepresentation of ELs in some special education categories. Teachers and teams in the primary grades may be hesitant to refer an EL for special education assessment, which can result in under-identification practices in the early grades and over-identification in the middle and secondary grades (Samson & Lesaux, 2009) this study was designed to investigate pro-por-

tional representation, identification rates, and predictors of language-minority status. As noted above, a stronger understanding of English acquisition equips SETs to discern—both in the early and middle grades—the difference between typical English acquisition and the existence of a disability. This differentiation matters beyond identification. As one teacher explained, “from a special education standpoint [a challenge working] with moderate to severe disabilities is isolating the interaction of primary language influences and cognitive delays on learning, especially language acquisition.” ELs with and without disabilities may display similar academic struggles for different reasons. For example, Klingner and Eppolito (2014, p. 15) have identified “difficulty carrying out a series of directions” as a difficulty an EL may display, yet SETs need opportunities to develop repertoires of practice that would assist them in determining the *reason* for their difficulty. A student with LD may experience this difficulty due to struggles with his or her short-term memory while an EL may experience this difficulty due to not comprehending the directions (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014).

One teacher summed up the demands of teaching at the intersection of language and ability differences as “not knowing where to start.” The lack of agency in a teacher “not knowing where to start” speaks not to his or her capacity but to the need for building capacity within teacher preparation programs that prepare SETs to work to prevent inappropriate disability identification and support dually EL- and LD-classified students.

Discussion

The study findings are a compelling reminder that SETs are at the forefront of critical equity work for DLLs with and without disabilities (Darling-Hammond, Furger, Shields, & Sutcher, 2016; DeMonte, 2015; Mason-Williams, 2015). We sought to examine how SETs described their readiness to work with DLLs and DLLwD, and how that readiness translated into self-described backgrounds, instructional strategies, and challenges in their practice.

We found a surprising gap between preservice opportunities to work directly with DLLs compared to what SETs actually encounter in practice. Of note, we found that SETs’ caseloads and classes readily include DLLs, despite little exposure to DLLs during their teacher preparation programs. Further, upon completion of their teacher preparation programs, only half of the SETs in this study felt they had developed the repertoires of practice needed to effectively work with DLLs. This finding further supports previous research that found that for DLLwD, disability classification often times eclipsed their DLL status resulting in little to no language supports.

The exposure gap between pre- and inservice work was triangulated with qualitative descriptions of instructional pedagogies that were limited in understandings of how to use DLL students’ cultural and linguistic resources as tools

for instruction beyond differences to be celebrated and direct translations. The repertoires of practice developed in their pre-service work did not prepare them for the within-DLL diversity they actually encountered in their practice, nor did it assist them in differentiating between English acquisition and a disability before and after identification.

The exposure gap highlights a need to better coordinate language and special education supports so that DLLwD are able to receive coordinated supports for both their disability and language development. The current practice of teacher preparation in disciplinary silos results in preparation for imaginary youth that fit neatly into single categorical dimensions. Inattention to this complexity will result in persistent equity issues and low academic outcomes for DLLwD.

Re-mediating the Exposure Gap: Preservice Ecological Validity

The DLL exposure gap between pre- and inservice teaching was a startling finding given that the study was purposefully situated in two states with high DLL populations. We argue that the lack of exposure to DLLs in preservice training equates to a lack of ecological validity between preservice preparation and inservice practice. This attention to pre- and inservice ecological validity highlights a major equity concern that can be addressed through purposefully designed and mediated preservice experiences that ensure teachers have the opportunity to develop robust repertoires of practice in schools that reflect the range of linguistic diversity teachers will actually encounter in practice. This is in contrast to add-on approaches that teacher preparation programs continue to largely utilize (Hollins & Guzman, 2005), which address diversity by adding a course or chapters on diverse learners with little substantive change to actual programs. The add-on approach to teacher preparation is intensified in special education, a field that more readily engages in what others have described as color-evasive practices (Ferri & Connor, 2014). Treating diversity as a bucketed issue in teacher preparation, rather than the new context for teaching, denies preservice SETs the purposefully designed experiences they need to develop robust repertoires of practice for working at the intersection of language and ability differences.

Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, and Higuera (2005) drew attention to DLL within-group diversity connected to disproportionate representation in different disability categories. Treating DLLs as a monolithic group is an enduring equity concern that has resulted in inappropriate instruction, disproportionate representation in special education, and constrained capacity building for SETs. SET preparation can shift the current paradigm from preparing teachers for DLLs as a monolithic group to preparing SETs for understanding the wide and varying range of access DLLs have had to instruction in their L1, through which type of language programs (e.g., English-only, bilingual, pullout services, transitional bilingual), how long they have been classified as DLLs, and other such differences among DLLs.

Our findings support previous scholars' attention to differentiating between language acquisition and disability (García & Tyler, 2010; Klingner, Artiles, & Bartletta, 2006). We argue that attention to these sorts of differences can provide more complex and accurate insight into not only whether an DLL is struggling due to language acquisition or disability but also whether struggles may be due to restricted opportunities to learn.

Aside from the DLL exposure gap, Vossoughi and Gutiérrez (2010) have argued that there is misalignment between theories taught in the university and pedagogies used in local practice. Mediated teaching experiences in ecologically valid contexts afford SETs the opportunity to align theory and practice within diverse contexts where they can learn to disrupt patterns of inequality with attention to culture and language while developing the dexterity to decide which repertoires to draw from in what context. As indicated by our findings, this exposure gap is not merely a new-teacher issue: seasoned teachers continue to struggle with the intersection of language and ability differences. Providing opportunities to develop special education practice within classrooms that include DLLs can ensure additional opportunities for DLLs with and without disabilities to learn while also providing teachers with the repertoires they need to remain in the profession.

In summary, the nature of this study is a critical reminder of the fluidity of student learning identities. As student identities become more complex with the shifting educational landscape, professional roles and preparation programs must also embrace fluidity in order to respond to student needs. The SETs in this study were prepared to enter the field and work with diverse learners, yet our findings reveal that they need mediated exposure to ecologically valid learning environments that will allow them to connect conceptual ideas of DLLs to practice. This study is a compelling reminder that pursuing equity requires an intersectional imagination for the future of socially just SET preparation.

Notes

¹ We use the term *dual language learners* to refer to students who are learning English as an additional language, and whose home language is a language other than English. We use this term rather than the official term *English language learners* as an assets-based alternative to highlight their bilingualism.

² We use L1 to refer to first language and L2 to refer to English, while acknowledging that English may actually be an additional language rather than a second.

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