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Teachers' Perceptions of the Supports and Resources Needed to Prepare English Language Learners for the Future

■ A survey of elementary school teachers in Southern California was conducted by mail to identify their perceptions of supports and resources that were necessary and available for the education of English language learners (ELs) within their classrooms. A total of 306 usable surveys was returned (61%). The findings indicated that while many resources were available, others such as materials, training, access to paraprofessionals, support for release time for meetings, parental support, and contact with bilingual educators were less available. Future professional development activities for teachers serving ELs can be successful if they take into account these perceived needs of teachers.

What will the workplace of 2025 be like? How can the students of today be prepared for tomorrow? Clearly early school experiences, including literacy education, will influence the quality of adult life for our students (Feinberg & Soltis, 1992; Oakes & Lipton, 1990). There is little debate regarding a school's responsibility to prepare its learners for the future. Business leaders have become increasingly critical of schools as they see inadequately educated young people entering the workforce (Wilson & Daviss, 1994). These business leaders, as well as parents and community members, expect graduates who can solve problems, think critically, work as team members, and make clear judgments. Schools are preparatory in nature, and our communities are beginning to hold them responsible for preparing youngsters for adult life (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

One area of education that has attracted significant debate is the education of ELs (e.g., August & Hakuta, 1998; Flood, Lapp, Tinajero, & Hurley, 1996; Penedes, 1997). As the number of students involved grows rapidly, so does the intensity of the debate. In California, for example, the number of ELs increased 250% between 1982 and 1997 (California Department of Education, 1999). By the year 2000, there were estimated to be more than 5 million ELs, ages 5 to 14, in U.S.

schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993). Discussions about student placement as well as about the focus of English language programs have been especially contentious (Clair, 1995; Mora, 1999; Statham, 1995; Torres, 1994).

The passage of California's Proposition 227 (Unz & Tuchman, 1997) turned the focus to placement rather than instruction. Prior to the passage of this proposition, approximately 29% of California's ELs were in bilingual education programs, meaning that students received instruction in their home language for a portion of the school day. An additional 22% of California's ELs received home language support, meaning that their instruction was in English and was supplemented by an instructional aide or teacher who spoke the home language of the student (California Department of Education, 1999). In addition to these service delivery models, dual language instruction was also advocated prior to the passage of Proposition 227 (Thomas & Collier, 1997-1998). In dual language instruction, native speakers of English and native speakers of Spanish are educated together and all groups of students learn both English and Spanish, for example. Thus, every student in the class is learning a language in addition to the one spoken at home.

Following the passage of Proposition 227, "Structured English Immersion" was introduced. This one-year intensive program in English is intended to bring students to "reasonable fluency" or a "good working knowledge" of English (Unz & Tuchman, 1997). Thus, except when a parent requests a waiver for continued bilingual education, many ELs are being educated in mainstream classes earlier than their predecessors. As a result, increased numbers of general education teachers are challenged with implementing the California English Language Development Standards (California Department of Education, Standards, Curriculum, and Assessment Division, 1999) as well as the California English Language Arts Standards (California Department of Education, Standards, Curriculum, and Assessment Division, 1998).

While there are many resources available for regular classroom teachers (e.g., Canney, Kennedy, Schroeder, & Miles, 1999; Herrell, 2000), little research has addressed what these classroom teachers need or want as they attempt to prepare second language ELs for the workplace of tomorrow. In fact, an ERIC search revealed little research investigating the point of view of classroom teachers on this issue.

Method

In direct reaction to this lack of information, this study sought to investigate the perceptions of teachers dealing with ELs. Specifically, the study sought to answer the question: What are the perceptions of teachers in self-contained classrooms regarding the supports and resources needed to prepare ELs to be successful, contributing participants in the world of tomorrow?

Participants and Mailing Procedure

Participants for this study were general education public school teachers

in self-contained classes, grades kindergarten through fifth, in Southern California. A total of 500 teachers was randomly selected from the county database of credentialed teachers. Similar to the study done by Wolery, Werts, Caldwell, Snyder, and Lisowski (1995), a personal letter was sent to each participant's address with the one-page survey (see the following section for more details about the survey), a complimentary gourmet tea bag, and a stamped return envelope. Each survey was coded with a three-digit number that identified the respondent. Two weeks after the original survey was sent, a post-card reminder was sent to those who had not yet responded. Two weeks following the post-card, another copy of the survey was sent to any participant who had still not responded.

Instrument

The survey designed for the study contained demographic and content-specific questions. It was divided into three sections and was printed on both sides of a single sheet of paper. Section one requested basic demographic data about the participants, including the number of years teaching, grade currently taught, number of languages spoken in the classroom, formal training in English language development, and the number of ELs in the classroom. Section two contained 20 supports or resources that have been cited as potentially important in meeting the needs of ELs. Respondents were asked to make two binary (yes/no) designations: (a) whether each support or resource was available, and (b) whether each support or resource was necessary. Section three contained five questions. Question one asked respondents to indicate their perceived success in educating ELs. Choices on this four-point, Likert-type question ranged from "extremely successful" to "extremely unsuccessful." Questions two and three were open-ended questions and solicited information about supports that were critical in the education of ELs and problems or difficulties that have arisen. The fourth question allowed respondents to grade, on an A to F letter-grade scale, the success they have had with students who were ELs in their classrooms. The final question was open-ended and asked teachers to complete the following sentence, "I think students who are acquiring English should be taught…"

Analysis

Survey responses were quantified to determine frequency of responses made by teachers. Data from the surveys were used for measures of central tendency and to create frequency tables. Data from the open-ended questions were categorized using a constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). A number of coding categories was identified following multiple reviews of the data (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Each of these categories was named and quotes that typified the category were identified. For example, as the researcher reviewed the data, it became clear that the data on critical supports clustered into four main categories: parental support, primary language support, classroom support, and administrative support. In addition, direct quotes were obtained from the surveys.

Limitations

Three important limitations must be discussed prior to reviewing the findings. First, this study was limited to one geographic region of the U.S. This region is diverse, large, and represents urban, suburban, and rural school districts, and as such may be representative of many communities in the U.S. However, the many languages spoken in this region may limit our ability to generalize these findings to communities in which one or two languages predominate.

Second, this study was a survey and was therefore at risk for volunteer bias and for a trend to socially appropriate answers. To address these potential limitations, a large sample size was used and procedures to ensure a high return rate were implemented. In addition, 10 teachers from 10 different schools who participated in the survey were asked to review the findings section. Nine of the 10 agreed to participate in this "member check." Each of these teachers was provided a draft copy of the findings. A group meeting was held with the researcher to discuss the findings and consider possible recommendations. The discussion lasted approximately 75 minutes but did not result in changes to the findings section.

Third, this study focused on self-reported perceptions and beliefs. The teachers who completed the survey may not have enough experience in the field to always make appropriate judgments. For example, on the question about student success, it is unclear how teachers determined student success. However, self-report data can be helpful in planning professional development activities focused on attitudes versus skills.

Findings

Response Rate

Seventy eight percent (390) of the surveys were returned. Of these 390 teachers, 84 did not teach ELs in their classrooms and were therefore disregarded in the analysis. Thus the useable sample of teachers was 306, or 61% of the total population. This sample consisted of teachers who ranged in experience from 2 to 29 years, with an average of 7.5 years. Ninety-four percent were female. The number of teachers that responded per grade level was fairly consistent: kindergarten (44), first grade (53), second grade (55), third grade (51), fourth grade (54), and fifth grade (49). The teachers identified 26 different languages spoken by the students in their classrooms.

Need for and Availability of Supports or Resources

The survey identified 20 potential supports or resources that were grouped into five areas: training, material and physical resources, personal support, additional personnel, and meetings. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had access to each resource or support and whether they felt it was needed. The data presented in Table 1 identify differences between the supports and resources that teachers believe are necessary and those to which they have access.

Table 1
Differences Between Resources and Support Needed and Available

Item	Needed (%)	Available (%)	Difference (%)
1. Beginning of the year inservice training on teaching English language learners	76	38	38
2. Regular and ongoing inservice training on teaching English language learners	72	37	35
3. Opportunities to attend conferences on teaching English language learners	77	67	10
4. Access to university courses on English language learners	85	81	4
5. Access to professional journals	75	68	7
6. Written information on how to adapt classroom and curriculum	90	71	19
7. Use of supplemental materials and supplies	94	84	10
8. Support from the family of the students	95	64	31
9. Support from classroom peers	94	94	0
10. A principal who supports my teaching philosophy and approaches	95	94	1
11. Help by volunteers in the classroom	85	57	28
12. A part-time teacher's aide	88	65	23
13. A full-time teacher's aide	57	9	48
14. A part-time peer tutor	58	25	33
15. A full-time peer tutor	36	2	34
16. Contact with a language specialist	90	88	2
17. Contact with a psychologist	80	73	7
18. Contact with a bilingual educator	76	53	23
19. Ongoing meetings with bilingual educators to discuss English language learners	76	38	38
20. Release time for meetings	84	28	56

The data are also presented in Table 2 in four categories: "I have it and it's needed," "I have it and it's not needed," "I don't have it and it's needed," and "I don't have it and it isn't needed."

Table 2
Percentage of Teachers Indicating Supports or Resources
Were Necessary and/or Available

Item	I have it and it's needed (%)	I have it and it's not needed (%)	I don't have it and it's needed (%)	I don't have it and it isn't needed (%)
1. Beginning of the year inservice training on teaching English language learners	38	0	38	24
2. Regular and ongoing inservice training on teaching English language learners	32	5	40	23
3. Opportunities to attend conferences on teaching English language learners	57	20	20	3
4. Access to university courses on English language learners	70	11	15	4
5. Access to professional journals	59	9	16	16
6. Written information on how to adapt classroom and curriculum	65	6	25	4
7. Use of supplemental materials and supplies	79	5	15	1
8. Support from the family of the students	61	3	34	2
9. Support from classroom peers	89	5	5	1
10. A principal who supports my teaching philosophy and approaches	89	5	6	0
11. Help by volunteers in the classroom	52	5	33	10
12. A part-time teacher's aide	63	2	25	10
13. A full-time teacher's aide	9	0	48	43
14. A part-time peer tutor	22	3	36	39
15. A full-time peer tutor	2	0	34	64
16. Contact with a language specialist	83	5	7	5
17. Contact with a psychologist	65	8	15	12
18. Contact with a bilingual educator	51	2	25	22
19. Ongoing meetings with bilingual educators to discuss English language learners	36	2	40	22
20. Release time for meetings	27	1	57	15

As shown in Table 1, the respondents perceived several supports or resources to be extremely necessary. Ninety percent or more of the teachers indicated that having written information on how to adapt the classroom and curriculum, access to supplemental materials and supplies, contact with a language specialist, and support from classroom peers, families, and the principal were necessary in the education of ELs. Of these most significantly identified support needs, support from the family of the student was perceived to be least available followed by written information on how to adapt the classroom and curriculum and access to supplemental materials and supplies. The other extremely necessary supports were perceived to be more available.

The largest difference between the supports available and the resources needed was the item release time for meetings, followed by the items—a full-time teacher's aide, beginning of the year inservices, ongoing meetings with bilingual educators, and regular and ongoing inservices.

In terms of needs that are being met, principal and peer support were perceived to be both very necessary and available. Similarly, contact with a language specialist and access to university courses on ELs were both deemed necessary and available.

Table 2 provides another view of the perceptions of teachers regarding supports available and resources needed. This table allowed for an analysis of supports that were being delivered but were not necessary as well as supports that were not provided and not needed. The resource that was most often available but perceived to be unneeded was "opportunities to attend conferences on teaching English language learners." It does not appear, however, that teachers do not want information and training since 38% of the respondents wanted beginning of the year inservices and 40% wanted regular and ongoing inservices. Rather it seems that the conferences were perceived to be less useful to these teachers than other forms of professional development.

In-class support was a resource that divided the teachers in this study. While many teachers indicated that they needed but did not have access to full-time teacher's assistants or peer tutors, an almost equal number indicated that this type of support was not necessary. Dividing these three items by grade level revealed that primary grade teachers (kindergarten through second) saw more benefit in teachers' assistants while upper grade teachers (third through fifth) saw more benefit in the use of peers. No other items on the survey could be easily differentiated by grade level taught.

Evaluating the Experiences of Teaching ELs

Teachers in this study generally believed that they were moderately successful. A total of 27% indicated that they were extremely successful, 54% indicated that they were moderately successful, 16% indicated that they were moderately unsuccessful, and 3% indicated that they were extremely unsuccessful. A post-hoc review of the three percent of the teachers who indicated that they were extremely unsuccessful revealed that all nine of them had less than five years of experience in the classroom. Two of the nine had four dif-

ferent languages spoken in the classroom and one of the nine had seven languages spoken in the classroom. It is important to note, however, that not all the newer teachers indicated that they were "extremely unsuccessful." Twenty-eight teachers with less than five years experience in the classroom rated themselves as "extremely successful" in educating ELs.

Another way of assessing success as perceived by the teachers in this study was through the letter-grade question on the success of ELs in the classroom. While the previous question focused on the individual respondent's experience, another question asked the teachers to rate the whole school. The overall grade point average was 3.12, on a 4-point scale. The letter grade of F was not assigned by any of the teachers.

Critical Supports and Potential Barriers

As for critical supports, the data clustered into five areas: materials, administrative support, parental support, primary language support, and classroom support. Each of these areas influenced the teachers' ability to effectively provide quality literacy instruction for their students learning English.

Materials. The most common support or resource identified was classroom materials. These materials consisted of access to multi-level books, books in various languages, basal readers in Spanish, computer programs that support early literacy learning, and supplemental classroom materials such as photographs to support content area texts and music that reinforces lesson plans. Regarding books, a first grade teacher wrote, "Buy books, books, books. There are no where [sic] near enough of them to support all the languages and reading levels of my students." A fourth grade teacher commented on the relationship between the training she received and her access to materials when she wrote, "I got a lot from the training that the district did at the beginning of the year, but I don't have any of the books that they used as models. To be successful, we'll need both consistent inservices and materials, especially books." A fifth grade teacher believed that she could successfully meet the literacy needs of her students if she had access to appropriate instructional materials, including "computer programs to reinforce English speech, books that are written in two languages that students could use during independent reading, and center activities that reinforced content but were less language dense."

Administrative support. The second most common area was administrative in nature. Teachers indicated that they needed support from their principals and access to beginning-of-the-year and regular inservices. As a second grade teacher reported, "My principal is very good at providing us resources and he supports our efforts to try new things with our language learners. He observes classes regularly and talks with us about making sure that students new to English in our classrooms are participating in our literacy instruction. Based on this feedback and the trainings that he has arranged, I now plan lessons that address a very diverse range of needs."

Parental support. The next most common critical area centered on parental support. This issue was identified in the binary choice items. When the respondents had the opportunity to respond to this open-ended question, the issue of parental support was further clarified. Teachers most often wrote that the parent support they most needed was better communication. A third grade teacher wrote, "I feel so bad because I can't explain the homework to Razia's parents. The language barrier between us is very wide. They respect me so much, but I don't feel that I get my homework instructions across to them." A few teachers were also concerned that parents were unable to reinforce their child's education via homework because of work demands, including late hours and multiple part-time jobs. In addition to the issue of communication between teachers and family members and homework completion, several teachers indicated that parents were not comfortable with school involvement projects because they did not have an understanding of English. One of the third grade teachers wrote about the family literacy project at her school: "We couldn't be successful with our students if we didn't help their parents become more literate. We have weekly parent literacy nights at our school. During these, we provide parents with books and activities that they can do with their children at home. I have several students whose parents regularly come to the parent nights. This support helps me be more effective and helps the child learn English."

Primary language support. The fourth most common area identified was primary language support for students whose home language was not English. Examples included resource teachers, paraprofessionals, and peers who spoke the languages of the students and who were regularly available for quick translations, friendly conversation, and response to questions. About half the teachers who identified primary language support as an important issue indicated that the students needed this support to maintain their fluency in their home language. A fifth grade teacher wrote, "Get help from people who speak the languages of your students. They can help you understand the students so much better and be a better teacher for them." A first grade teacher reported that peer tutors from the middle school provided conversations with her students that she could never have. She said, "We have peer tutors come from the middle school to work with our first graders. Most of these kids have brothers and sisters at our school so they know us. We use the middle school kids to provide bilingual language models and to allow our young students time to talk. I know some Spanish, but I have students who speak Hmong, Vietnamese, and Cambodian in my class. These older kids really help out!"

Classroom support. The final area identified by the respondents focused on classroom support. Included within this area were paraprofessionals, language brokers, and curriculum accommodations and modifications. As a fourth grade teacher wrote, "Advocate for yourself—get an aide, full-time if you can. All your students will benefit, but especially those who are learning English." A second grade teacher recommended that we "teach the students to help one another. Using language brokers, you can get a lot more infor-

mation covered quickly." In terms of curriculum accommodations and modifications, the teachers who identified this need shared a belief that someone else knew more about curriculum support for ELs. As a first grade teacher wrote, "You have to have accommodations. These students need curriculum support to do well in class, not just aides." A fourth grade teacher wrote, "Hold your expectations high, but let students show you what they know in lots of different ways."

Barriers in Educating ELs

The respondents also identified four types of barriers or problems that they have faced in educating ELs in the classroom. The first and most common concern centered on classroom materials. Consistent with the critical supports identified above, the teachers in this study overwhelmingly indicated their need for more books and other materials to provide appropriate literacy instruction for ELs. The second most common concern was also a reflection of the critical supports—parental support.

The third area of concern was the political environment in which these teachers taught. Several teachers identified the California voter initiative, Proposition 227 (Unz & Tuchman, 1997), as one of the main causes of this problem. From the responses in general, and from these comments specifically, it is clear that the lack of a clear and consistent message about the education of ELs has caused confusion and concern for many of these teachers. As a fifth grade teacher wrote, "I hate being worried about political attacks because I teach LEP [Limited English Proficient] students." A kindergarten teacher wrote, "There are too many debates about this, we need to get in there and do our very best for our students." A second grade teacher wrote, "The theories are being debated while I have to figure out what to do in my classroom." One final comment on this topic was from a third grade teacher: "Problem? What should I do? I hope I'm doing the right thing. I go to all the trainings that are offered."

A final barrier or problem identified by the respondents was time. Like all teachers, these teachers noted that there just wasn't enough time in the day to do all the things they wanted to do. In the same vein, they requested additional time from paraprofessionals and language specialists. Several also wrote that they felt the need to create more time in their classroom so that they could provide one-on-one instruction for their students. As one of the second grade teachers wrote, "I've had to change the way I teach during the literacy block to meet my students needs. Now I use center activities[1] as my grouping strategy so that I get time each day with homogeneous groups of students for guided reading. The rest of their day is heterogeneous groups so that students get language models and good peer interactions."

Recommendations for the Education of ELs

The final question on the survey asked respondents to complete the sentence starter, "I think students who are acquiring English should be taught…"

The responses to this item were consistent with the rest of the survey. Table 3 provides a rank ordered list of items identified from this question.

Table 3
Rank Ordered Responses to the Prompt
"I think students acquiring English should be taught"

Rank	Response
1	…with more books.
2	…in a print rich environment.
3	…in a safe, low affective filter environment.
4	…with some additional support in their primary language.
5	…surrounded by fluent peers.
6	…relevant vocabulary.
7	…in sheltered classrooms with trained teachers.
8	…with many interesting, relevant, and hands-on lessons.
9	…in a balance between English and their own language.
10	…in English all day.
11	…in a two-way bilingual classroom.
12	…with lots of visual materials.

Because the question asked how ELs should be taught, respondents focused on instruction rather than issues of parent involvement, philosophy, time, or administrative support. Interestingly, the most common response was "with more books." Teachers also indicated they would provide a print-rich environment and a safe, welcoming, or comfortable classroom. The issue of primary language support was also raised in this question, as was peer support. However, this question is the first time that the respondents identified vocabulary instruction as a need. They also recommended that instruction should be balanced, interesting, and contain lots of visuals and hands-on activities.

This question was also the first time that the respondents provided input on their recommendations for placement. Certainly, they all could have written that ELs should be educated in bilingual classrooms. However, the general education teachers in this study were more interested in providing students a "balance between English and other languages," as a third grade teacher wrote. Although less common, 25 of the 306 respondents indicated that ELs "should be taught in English all day" (fifth grade teacher).

Discussion

The findings from this study indicate that there were generally fewer supports and resources available than were needed. Some areas—such as prin-

cipal support, peer support, and contact with a language specialist—were considered both necessary and available. In other areas—such as access to teacher's aides, release time for meetings, and inservices—teachers perceived they needed significantly more support and resources than were available.

The survey form developed for this study could also be used in a school or school district to assess needs and resources. For example, a district-level employee for bilingual education could use this survey instrument to determine the need for resources and training opportunities, as could a school principal wishing to assess needed resources and supports. The information thus obtained could be used to formulate a request for assistance from the district or to prepare a grant proposal for materials or professional development.

The 306 teachers in this study reported that administrative and peer support were critical components of their success. They felt they had a great deal of access to these supports. Access to beginning-of-the-year and ongoing inservices was also reported to be a very important resource that teachers did not feel was adequately supplied. Interestingly, the finding that conference attendance was not perceived to be as valuable deserves further consideration. It may be that large conferences are perceived to be less valuable because of the research or theory focus. The teachers in this study seemed focused on instructional issues for students who were learning English.

The State of California has spent a considerable amount of money on teacher education in the area of English language development. Between 1999 and 2001, approximately 15 million dollars were spent on training related to this topic.[2] Professional Development Institutes for English Language Development (ELD) offer one or two week institutes with 80 hours of follow-up sessions during the school year. This model seems consistent with the wishes of the teachers who participated in this study. ELD Institutes in the future may be wise to consider the types of supports and resources that this group of teachers found most useful and design specific training events around these issues.

As for recommendations, several significant findings emerge from this study. Even though most of the teachers reported being successful or very successful with their students, they requested additional books and teaching materials. Teachers were less interested in the political and philosophical debate about English language learners than in the availability of many more books for their students, both in their classroom and in the school library. Future staff development activities might focus on the use of multi-leveled texts and texts that present information in more than one language. In addition, the upcoming textbook adoptions could be influenced by the expressed needs of teachers. For example, a group of teachers may argue for ELD textbook adoptions with generous amounts of authentic children's literature, or with connections to Spanish language development, or with specific lesson plans that utilize Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English

(SDAIE), an instructional approach to teaching academic content to English language learners.

Naturally, the findings related to student success from this study are limited to those reported by the teachers. Thus, it may also be interesting to followup with the participants in this study and examine their success with students. Interesting questions might include: How do teachers define student success (grades, standards-based assessments, teacher opinion); are the measures of success different for native speakers and ELs; and which teachers and instructional models facilitate greater student success?

Another important implication of this study was the need for additional parent support and for additional ways to effectively communicate with non-English speaking family members. The teachers in this study indicated a significant need for more interpreters and translators to better communicate with family members, especially about homework issues. Similarly, these teachers desired ways to invite families to participate in school activities, including volunteer activities. They felt that with language support the family members of ELs would feel welcome in their schools.

Future research should focus specifically on the preparation being provided general education teachers who have ELs in their classrooms. It is important to know the types of preparation they believe are most useful and the timing necessary for these trainings. In addition to the preparation needs, further research could focus on the roles of the paraprofessionals in these classrooms. While there is a concern that these paraprofessionals will provide the majority of the instruction to the students who are learning English, these teachers perceived the paraprofessional's role as generally unimportant. This could be because self-contained classroom teachers are not fully aware of how to use well-prepared paraprofessionals. Finally, additional research needs to be conducted to determine indicators of ELs' success.

Author

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Endnote

[1] Center activities are small group activities that students typically complete together without the teacher. For more information about center activities, see *Learning Center Activities* (Sima, 1999).

[2] See the following web site for funding information: http://tepd. ucop.edu/tepd/cpdi/eld_home.html.

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