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A Framework for Incorporating Best Practices to Provide Foundational Literacy Skills to English Learners for Sustained Academic Success

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A Framework for Incorporating Best Practices to Provide Foundational Literacy Skills to
English Learners for Sustained Academic Success

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The lack of long-term academic success between monolingual English-speaking students (non-ELs) in the United States and their non-native English speaking peers (ELs) is a phenomenon that has existed for generations. Its existence is complicated and its continuation is detrimental to multiple stakeholders. This inequity in educational settings across the country has led me to ask: *How do we incorporate best practices for English Learners (ELs) to provide foundational literacy skills for sustained academic success?* The purpose of this capstone work is to create actionable social awareness around this barrier and to provide a solution for educators in order to narrow this gap between students. The chapter will also outline my professional experience that led to my interest in the topic, explain the context and rationale for engaging in this work, detail the significance of this work for the stakeholders, as well as provide a summary of this chapter and a framework for the rest of the capstone.

Professional Experience

Over the last decade, I have worked with diverse groups of students across various grade levels, ranging from kindergarten (K) through 9th grade. These students are not only diverse in a racial or cultural sense, but are linguistically, developmentally, and emotionally diverse as well. Being part of a work study program as an undergraduate student, I began working in public education as a K-6 elementary reading tutor located near the university I attended. Soon after graduating with a B.A. in Psychology, I began working as a middle school English as a Second Language (ESL) Instructional Assistant, primarily teaching students with new-to-country status in a sheltered instruction setting

for English Language Acquisition (ELA). In a sheltered classroom, language and content instruction coexist to provide ELs with the same rigorous, quality instruction as their mainstream peers with their unique needs in mind. After working with these students for two years, I decided to become a licensed teacher and returned to my alma mater to pursue an initial license in ESL. During this time, I continued to work at the same middle school, though in a different role as a 6th grade special education paraprofessional. Working as a special education paraprofessional broadened my understanding of diversity in all its forms for the students I worked with.

Upon receiving my teaching license, I worked as a substitute teacher for a short time before being offered an Emotional-Behavioral Difficulty (EBD) Level III teaching position to finish out the school year. I viewed this as another opportunity to expand my experience of working with diverse populations of students and accepted the position. After teaching in this role, an ESL position became available at an elementary school in the same district, where my passion for working with diverse populations was ignited ten years prior, and I have remained in this position for the past four years.

Acquired Insight

During this teaching experience, I developed a sense of inquiry related to the consistent number of ELs who struggle with their literacy skills by the time they reach third grade, regardless if they qualified for the program in kindergarten or recently moved to the United States from another country. I learned after having many conversations with peers who have years of experience that this was a problem that has persisted for decades in public education. I found myself constantly contemplating this issue, namely the cause of this problematic cycle and its impact on students. This insight led me to think: *How do*

we incorporate best practices for English Learners (ELs) to provide foundational literacy skills for sustained academic success?

Seeking Answers

I decided to participate in a district-provided self-paced professional development program through Lexia Learning Systems called LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) (Moats & Tolman, 2019). The program provides teachers current scientific research and knowledge about language acquisition and reading with applicable classroom strategies for the improved teaching of literacy. The experience was very informative and allowed me to understand the many reasons why some students still continue to struggle with reading and writing. However, acquiring an understanding of the phenomena was not satisfying. I was left wondering why this inequity continues to persist if current research and knowledge is available to explain the cause of this problem. The dissatisfaction of my understanding was the inspiration for my pursuit of this capstone project and research surrounding it.

Rationale

In order to create sustained academic success for ELs, best practices that meet their unique needs must be implemented to effectively build their foundational literacy skills. However, the implementation of best practices is not enough. Every stakeholder needs to hold the ubiquitous belief that the implementation is worthwhile. If ELs and their families are able to experience consistent academic success while in school, it is my belief that more accessible and meaningful opportunities will become available for these families, increasing the number of paths for a better quality of life. Research indicates that best practices for ELs are best practices for all students (Dussling, 2020). In turn, any

possible benefits or opportunities created for ELs and their families by restructuring the implementation of best practices permeates to all students and their families.

Sustained academic success is possible when the majority of students academically perform at or near grade level, year after year, without an over-reliance on reading interventions in an attempt to expedite students to grade-level standards. Implementation of best practices for ELs could also help alleviate the overidentification of students in special education, especially for ELs and students of color. An entire generation of students experiencing sustained academic success would create a path towards a more informed, intelligent, and understanding society. With such an impact at stake, my mind circles back to the question: *How do we incorporate best practices for English Learners (ELs) to provide foundational literacy skills for sustained academic success?*

Generational Impact

Historically, the needs of ELs have not been met with best practices and have been impacted by state and federal policy, leading to the creation of barriers for this community (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Moore, 2021). Some barriers include poor educational experiences that have caused negative attitudes towards education as well as their own culture and self-worth stemming from English-only policies of the past. When barriers exist, they exist because of the decisions made in the past by those in charge of creating the system. Their continuance is fueled by the disconnect between best practices for teaching foundational literacy skills and the distinct needs of ELs that exist due to circumstance. The importance of learning from the past cannot be ignored and must be included in the understanding of incorporating best practices for teaching foundational

literacy skills to ELs. Before a theorized implementation of these practices can be discussed and realized, there must be a certainty about foundational literacy skills and what they include.

Foundational Literacy

There are many different literacy skills that exist, though according to the National Reading Panel & National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000), the following five skills are foundational for effective reading instruction:

- *phonemic awareness*
- *phonics*
- *fluency*
- *vocabulary*
- *comprehension*

Phonemic awareness (PA) is the ability to perceive, identify, and manipulate phonemes (sound units) present in an individual's environment. It is typically the first skill a child learns on their journey towards achieving literacy. Most public elementary schools only focus on intentionally developing this skill during kindergarten and first grade, then shift their focus towards *phonics*, *fluency*, *vocabulary*, and *comprehension* during the remaining elementary school years. The reasons behind this sudden end to actively developing PA has existed for decades and will be explored throughout the literature review in Chapter 2. Given that developing these five skills is considered best practice for achieving literacy in students while ELs continue to struggle academically, I continue to wonder: *How do we incorporate best practices for English Learners (ELs) to provide foundational literacy skills for sustained academic success?*

For decades, a misguided understanding related to PA and reading is that as long as basic PA skills are achieved by students, such as blending and segmenting, they would become skilled readers (Bottari, 2022). With this skewed understanding, instruction of PA typically ends after first grade. Given that ELs continue to disproportionately struggle in academic achievement compared to non-ELs, this consensus was not made with unique needs of ELs in mind. In fact, recent research has indicated that PA continues to develop through fourth grade and that these skills are transferable between languages (Dussling, 2020; Gillion, 2007; Richards-Tutor, 2016). It is imperative that this research is included as best practices for the sake of ELs and that elementary classrooms through at least 4th grade are consistently taught PA as ELs are constantly working to develop this important skill between two or more languages. Its implementation is essential for these students to experience sustained academic success and would be an initial step towards ending generational barriers stemming from outdated educational research.

Understandably, the correction of a broken system cannot and must not fall only on the shoulders of educators. A public system such as education affects society at large, therefore the general population must attain and sustain actionable social awareness around this inequality experienced by ELs. Such awareness can only be realized if it is presented practically with hope and encouragement, rather than as a daunting burden.

Context

While this capstone project is designed to promote an impactful shift in the approach to teaching foundational literacy skills for ELs, it is also important to mention that multiple viewpoints exist for this topic. These viewpoints can differ linguistically and culturally, as well as but not limited to gender identity, sexual orientation, religious

affiliation, race, level of education, and socioeconomic status. To that acknowledgement, it is important that I take ownership in the fact that my viewpoint as a straight, cisgendered, agnostic, multiracial, bilingual, middle-class male affects how I approach this topic and present the information. While I am bilingual in English and Spanish, I was never tested or labeled as an EL during my time as a student in a public education. I must acknowledge that my personal experience affects how I approach this topic and present the information as well.

Significance for Stakeholders and Teaching

All students and their families have plenty at stake if there is no action taken to create a more inclusive, equitable approach to teaching foundational literacy skills. However, ELs are the focus for this capstone project and their academic performance will continue to fall behind non-ELs if no action is taken. Opportunities for ELs and their families for a better quality of life will remain suppressed and the social barriers they experience will continue. Teachers and administrators will also continue to witness this academic struggle as they remain unequipped for making change that needs to happen. The significance of finding a solution to the current inequitable approach to teaching foundational literacy skills is not limited to ELs and educators. If allowed to continue, this broken system will deprive society of having the opportunity to become better educated, more informed, and equitably inclusive for the diverse populations that exist today.

Summary

Establishing a process for implementing best practices for ELs in order to provide foundational literacy skills for sustained academic success is multifaceted, as described in

this chapter. My professional experience is the key reason I decided to approach this topic. It allowed me to understand the reasons behind why action should be taken to implement improved practices for ELs, as well as the context surrounding it. There are multiple stakeholders involved and each one of them plays an important part in making this process a reality. If the stakeholders do not share a mutual interest or ownership in the process, then its implementation remains futile.

At large, creating a consensus about how best practices are discussed, defined, and incorporated into the education of ELs would have a lasting effect on society. It would provide the possibility to reduce the literacy gap between non-ELs and ELs, creating opportunities for a better quality of life as well as an early education system that is more accessible to students, regardless of their language background. The more students there are with strong foundational literacy skills, the higher the chance of increased academic success, potentially leading to higher graduation rates and a more educated workforce regardless of the skills required. A more educated society means a more informed society, and it all begins with strong foundational literacy skills. For first-generation families that have recently arrived to the U.S., this circumstance would reflect the adherence of the United States being known as “The Land of Opportunity.” In order to make this become a reality, the answer to the following question must be answered: *How do we incorporate best practices for English Learners (ELs) to provide foundational literacy skills for sustained academic success?*

The rest of the capstone will review literature concerning past research studies about reading instruction leading up to the current understanding of foundational literacy skills, scientific theories about how children learn, as well as a historical recount of U.S.

language policies. Additionally, the unique needs of ELs related to their development and educational experience will be reviewed, along with current best practices for teaching foundational literacy skills to achieve sustained academic success. In Chapter Three, the project for this capstone will then be described, stemming from the findings of the literature review. Finally, my reflections, conclusions, limitations, and future considerations will be presented to the reader. My hope is that this project will create actionable awareness about early elementary ELs and their unique needs related to the acquisition of foundational literacy skills.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

The literature review conducted in this chapter is bound by the following research question: *How do we incorporate best practices for English Learners (ELs) to provide foundational literacy skills for sustained academic success?* There are three major topics that will be reviewed to support the answer to this question. The first is related to foundational literacy skills regarding the formation of its definition, theories of learning concerning its acquisition, and the impact of legislation on its accessibility for ELs. The second major topic involves discussing the unique needs of ELs related to their educational experiences and the existing social barriers that make meeting the needs difficult to achieve. Finally, best practices for achieving sustained academic success for ELs are reviewed. This literature review is meant to provide sufficient background knowledge to create a comprehensive understanding of the historical and present experiences of ELs so that awareness is actionable for all stakeholders.

Foundational Literacy Skills

Foundational literacy skills are vital for young children to acquire in order to become successful readers. One of the skills, phonemic awareness, is an effective predictor of long-term success in reading (Gillion, 2007; Moats & Tolman, 2019). For ELs, the importance of acquiring all the skills, such as phonics and fluency, is more significant as they learn to navigate between their home language(s) and the dominant language of society. In this section, foundational literacy skills will be defined from a historical perspective and the research-based theories of learning will be discussed in

order to understand how students comprehend them. Additionally, this section will briefly cover past and present legislative policies related to language and public education for a broader understanding of current social barriers affecting ELs. In order to best advocate for these students and their families, it is important to examine and learn from the past so that connections are made for comprehending the constant gap in long-term academic success between non-ELs and ELs.

Background

Best practice for children when it comes to early literacy instruction is a highly debated topic that has existed in the education community for decades. The controversy became well-known in 1948 when reading scholar Gray published a book titled *On Their Own Reading*, in which he challenged the traditional method of teaching children letter-sound relationships and how to blend them to form words. Instead, Gray (1948)(as cited in Dehaene, 2010; Kim, 2008) advocated for a whole-word approach for literacy instruction in which students memorize whole words and later analyze them to form an understanding of their meaning. These two schools of thought became known as *systematic phonics* (letter-sound) and *intrinsic phonics* (whole word) and were at the forefront of what became known as *The Reading Wars*. As this ‘war’ raged on for the better part of four decades, the amount of published research studies related to early literacy instruction began to grow.

Prior to the beginning of the 21st century, there were approximately 115,000 published research studies related to reading instruction in the United States. About 15,000 were published prior to 1966, and about 100,000 had been published since (National Reading Panel [NRP] & National Institute of Child Health and Human

Development [NICHD], 2000). Despite a plethora of these studies being published, The Reading Wars continued on. This highly debated topic took center stage when, in 1997, Congress submitted a request to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to form an advisory group, in partnership with the Secretary of Education, to assess and determine the most effective means of reading instruction for children (NRP & NICHD, 2000). The advisory group became known as the National Reading Panel. This panel would spend the next 2 years carrying out the research task appointed to them by Congress by analyzing the relevant research studies that existed (NRP & NICHD, 2000).

Definition

Upon concluding its extensive research on determining the most important elements of effective reading instruction, the NRP released a 449 page report called: *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction* (NRP & NICHD, 2000). In it, the report determined that effective reading instruction consists of the following components: *phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension* (NRP & NICHD, 2000).

Phonemic awareness is the ability to manipulate the phonemes identified by a child in their linguistic environment and is usually the first foundational literacy skill they acquire (NRP & NICHD, 2000; Moats & Tolman, 2019). *Phonics* is the ability to understand the correspondence between speech sounds (phonemes) and letters of the alphabet (graphemes), and that when grouped together, meaningful words are formed. This skill typically begins to develop after enough phonemic awareness knowledge has

been attained (NRP & NICHD, 2000; Moats & Tolman, 2019). *Fluency* is the ability to accurately read written words on a page with expression and speed. This skill develops as students begin to recognize words and their meaning at first sight (NRP & NICHD, 2000; Moats & Tolman, 2019). As they begin to recognize the meaning of more and more words, the fourth foundational skill begins to form: *vocabulary*. This skill can be viewed as the collection of known words and their meaning that is stored in a child's working memory (NRP & NICHD, 2000; Moats & Tolman, 2019). *Comprehension* skills begin to form as their vocabulary increases and students are able to understand meaning based on a collection of words rather than the individual meaning of each word (NRP & NICHD, 2000; Moats & Tolman, 2019). This last skill is usually seen as the final goal of literacy.

While each of these skills are imperative for the academic success of all students, phonemic awareness will be the focus skill for this capstone because of its lack of instruction throughout the elementary years due to misconceptions regarding its development in children. While it is a transferable skill between languages, it is also an important predictor of future reading success as struggling readers in elementary most commonly lack sufficient phonemic awareness skills to make quality reading skills possible (Dussling, 2020; Gillion, 2007; Richards-Tutor, 2016). Most reading curriculums do not incorporate consistent phonemic awareness instruction beyond first grade and this capstone will explain its occurrence while challenging its continued practice. Expanded details about why phonemic awareness is chosen as the focus skill will be discussed later on in this chapter.

Theories of Learning

In order to fully understand the historical and present context of teaching foundational reading skills in elementary, it is important to know the prominent theories of learning. Not only do they allow for an understanding about how children acquire knowledge from an early age, but they can reveal a deeper context for the past decisions made by legislators. These decisions have affected the landscape of public education in the United States with respect to educational practice and language policy (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Kim, 2008). While there are various theories of learning that exist today, this capstone will focus on three fundamental theories: *behaviorism*, *constructivism*, and *social constructivism*.

In 1924, American psychologist Watson published a book based on his research on observable behavior in children. Watson (1924) theorized that children are conditioned by the interactions they have with the environment they are surrounded by, resulting in the learned behaviors they maintain. This theory applies to the role of educators in that they are very much a part of a child's environment and play a significant role in the conditioned outcomes of learning for all students (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Reflecting on this theory, it is imperative that best practices are used to teach foundational literacy skills to all children, including ELs, during their formative years to give ample opportunities for sustained academic success in the future.

An additional learning theory stems from the work of Swiss psychologist Piaget (1936), known for his research on child development. In 1936 he published a book which would eventually be translated to English in 1952. Findings from Piaget (1952)(as cited in International Bureau of Education [IBE], n.d.) influenced the theory of *constructivism*, that children undergo different stages of cognitive development throughout childhood

based on the understanding that children will naturally acquire knowledge from the experiences they have with their environment. Regarding language acquisition in children, this theory can be applied to indicate that children will inherently comprehend language from the linguistic interactions they consistently have with their environment. This helps explain that the brain of a child is hardwired to learn how to speak any language given sufficient linguistic exposure (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Unfortunately, this explanation has been misinterpreted in the past and created a belief for some that this applies to learning how to read as well (Dehaene, 2010). This interpretation has created significant learning barriers that still impact reading development today. With this understanding, teachers must use best practices in teaching foundational literacy skills, especially ELs, so that the daily linguistic interactions students have offer them the best opportunity to learn these vital skills so that sustained academic success can be achieved (Moats & Tolman, 2019).

Around the same time Piaget (1936) released his book, Soviet psychologist Vygotsky who was also known for his work on child development, released a book in 1934 that was translated to English in 1962. He discusses Piaget's theory of *constructivism* but is quick to highlight that the theory fails to recognize the impact of culture on cognitive development in children. Based on his own findings, Vygotsky (1962) argued that stages of cognitive development differ across cultures due to varying cultural beliefs and the impact language has on such development. This is known as *social constructivism* (Berkeley Graduate Division, n.d.). He also argued that a child's greatest potential for learning occurs between what they are able to learn independently and what they cannot. That is, their greatest potential for learning happens through

support and guidance with higher skilled individuals, so long as what they are attempting to learn is not beyond their current cognitive abilities (McLeod, 2019). This is known as *The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)*.

The Zone of Proximal Development. This theory is especially important regarding ELs and their potential for learning. When educators assess ELs solely on individual performative tasks, they are not allowing themselves to understand the entire scope of an EL's ZPD. Instead, instruction and assessments should also include what tasks they can perform in collaboration with others. Not only are independent performance and collaborative performance representative of different developmental stages unique to each EL, any task they are able to complete through collaboration is a task they will be able to accomplish independently in the future (Rassaei, 2019). Their independent and collaborative experiences must be considered when using best practices to effectively comprehend their ZPD so that sustained academic success can become a reality.

The previously discussed theories are important to consider throughout the remainder of this capstone as subtopics are analyzed and discussed. They help to contextualize the next subtopic that discusses legislative measures related to language, education and their impact on attitudes towards learning for ELs. This will also help to understand why best practices are so vital for their future success. Without a contextualized understanding of the current state of learning and well-being of ELs in public education, stakeholders will not be sufficiently informed to demand necessary change and there will remain a false sense of hope around the unique needs of ELs being met.

Past Practice and Policy

The idea of Americanism, or the ideals someone from the United States holds that makes them an American, varies depending on who is asked to define it. Language preference has been a major contributor to its definition. Historically, the United States has used English-only policies as an ideal marker for Americanism at the expense of immigrants, refugees, and Native Americans forgoing maintenance of their native language (Moore, 2021). Proponents of these policies claim that they will benefit EL communities within the dominant society because they prevent such communities from experiencing isolation due to the notion that English-only policies serve as a national unifying force (Moore, 2021). The arguments promoting this ideology have been harmful and aggressive, including corporal punishment for using a language other than English at school and the inhumane conditions for Native Americans during the Boarding School Movement (Moore, 2021). When individuals receive the message that their language and culture is not good enough for society, there are bound to be lasting effects on these communities, particularly resentment towards the dominant society as well as doubts of self worth. These effects will be discussed later in this chapter.

Early Educational Acts. In 1958, the federal government provided the first large-scale funding for language education by establishing the National Defense Education Act which provided funding for the teaching of science, math, and foreign languages, omitting English as a foreign language entirely (Moore, 2021). However, the provided funding was not motivated by opportunities for ELs to maintain their native language or even for the community to benefit from more effective English language instruction. Rather, it was motivated by the effects of World War II and the Cold War for

U.S. citizens to be better prepared for global competition against foreign adversaries (Moore, 2021).

Equality in education was not a focus until 1961 when the federal government investigated the extent of equality in educational opportunities in schools. In 1966, the federal government released their findings and concluded that there was a lack of equality in public education under a report called The Coleman Report (TCR) (Moore, 2021). An important finding in this report was that schools with fewer resources correlated with poorer achievement rates, greatly affecting non-native English speaking communities (Moore, 2021). This led to the creation of the Bilingual Education Act (BEA) in 1968 which provided funding to schools with large populations of students whose families generated an income below \$3000 per year (Moore, 2021). However, the wording of the bill still presented non-English languages as a cause for problems that speakers of these languages needed to overcome. Continued portrayals of non-English languages as being innately problematic intensifies the needs of these communities and fosters negative attitudes towards learning the dominant language of society (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010).

Modern Educational Acts. In the remaining years of the 20th century and into the 21st century, court rulings and new language policies gave traction towards meeting the needs of ELs and their families, however opponents of these initiatives have remained vocal. The ruling of *Lou v Nichols of 1974* defended the rights of ELs to receive educational support (Moore, 2021). The creation of the Department of Education (DOE) in 1980 was formed to oversee the public educational process in the United States and gave rise to the Office of Bilingual and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA) which is currently known as the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) (Moore, 2021).

The purpose of this office is to oversee bilingual programs at state and local levels, professional development for bilingual educators, as well as evaluation and research related to bilingual education (Moore, 2021). In 1994 the Clinton administration created new grants under the BEA to provide school funding for teacher training, instructional materials, and teaching strategies aimed at improving EL education with preference given to schools with bilingual education programs (Moore, 2021). Despite these efforts, English-only initiatives were still being passed in some parts of the country.

Current Educational Acts. Since then, states, individually or collectively, have worked together to give prominence to bilingual education and bring awareness to the needs of ELs and their families. For example, in 2014, Minnesota passed the Learning English for Academic Proficiency and Success (LEAPS) Act which created a state legislature emphasizing the support of ELs in the classroom (Minnesota Department of Education [MDE], 2014). It requires that educators are effectively trained in developing the English language proficiency of ELs, that districts provide bilingual or multilingual seals on high school diplomas for students who meet proficiency standards for languages other than English, as well as holding schools accountable for reporting the number of students that meet the definition of Students with Limited Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) (MDE, 2014). Despite state-sponsored support for meeting the needs of ELs, the academic success rates of students from these communities continues to remain low in comparison to their non-EL peers (The Nation's Report Card, 2022). While educators cannot control the efficacy of legislation for these communities, teachers can positively impact their overall educational experiences in the classroom (Doran et al., 2019;

Dussling, 2020). To best provide this experience, it is key that all stakeholders know how the needs of ELs differ from non-ELs, as well as strategies for these needs to be met.

Unique Needs of English Learners

There are many needs to be met for the developing mind of any young learner so that they can become successful while in school. Taking into account the historical context related to educational experiences of ELs, their needs are comparatively unique. This section will examine these unique needs related to language and identity development, the relationship between these important developmental components, and how they are affected by the multilingual navigation these children experience. This section will also discuss the barriers created by past educational practices, the effect it has had on ELs and their families, and the importance of their dismantling. This capstone posits that the future academic success of ELs depends on their unique needs being understood and met by all stakeholders who are willing to demand change in order to break the barriers that stand in their way.

Language Development

Throughout childhood, every young person undergoes language development of one form or another. All children experience stages of cognitive development that determine their capability for learning, especially language acquisition (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Given this ubiquitous experience, it is fundamentally important to understand that the experience is vastly different for ELs compared to their peers. ELs are simultaneously developing their native language skills and English-language skills (Genesee, n.d.). This multilingual development creates linguistic needs for the student, including ample speaking opportunities, extra processing time, and precise scaffolds and supports (Doran

et al., 2019). It is imperative that educators seek to meet these needs to provide ELs the most effective means for their unique linguistic development (Bunch, 2019).

Meaningful Speaking Opportunities. When ELs begin their educational journey in elementary school, many of them are entering a scenario where they are required to remain in an unfamiliar linguistic environment without the support of their parents or guardians for the first time. Many of their monolingual English-speaking peers are also experiencing an extended separation from their family for the first time. However, these students return home after the school day and the language they were surrounded by in the classroom is the same language they are surrounded by at home. The distinction of being surrounded by a language ELs are not accustomed to while at school is a unique EL experience. Oral language competency lays the foundation for learning to read and write (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Given the importance of oral language development, it is important that teachers provide this for ELs in a low-anxiety environment that allows for repeated practice, various forms of comprehensible input, and excitement (Guccioni, 2014). This type of learning context gives ELs the best opportunity to develop their oral language skills.

Extra Processing Time. Along these same lines, any new experiences, not just for ELs, often takes extra time to process. All young children need ample wait time for all types of learning as their brains are still developing (Wasik & Hindman, 2018). After ELs are surrounded by the English language for the entire school day, these same students are then required to code-switch as they return home and engage in their native language (Doran et al., 2019). Most of their peers return home without code-switching and remain linguistically navigating the same language they have been surrounded by at school. For

this reason, ELs need an extended amount of time to process any understandings or questions posed to them (Wasik & Hindman, 2018). This can sometimes be difficult for teachers given the pressures of completing curriculum in a timely manner. However, teachers must plan for this if they truly want to effectively support the language development of their students (Wasik & Hindman, 2018).

Meaningful Supports. As ELs are embarking on this first-time educational journey, teachers should not expect that these students will keep up with their peers without any support. A sink-or-swim model is an ineffective mindset for teaching ELs and negatively impacts their educational experience (Roseberry-McKibbin, n.d.). These students require concise support that is provided with purpose (de Oliveira & Athanes, 2017). Providing a dictionary or an extensive list of words without context or an explanation is an ineffective practice. ELs need to understand why these supports are being offered to them and how they should be used (de Oliveira & Athanes, 2017). These can be in the form of word banks, sentence stems, or graphic organizers to name a few options. Refraining from offering these supports perpetuates any struggles ELs might be experiencing in the classroom.

In order to constructively assist ELs to stay on track towards sustained academic success, it is crucial that their linguistic needs are met for proper language development (Larson et al., 2019). Teachers must not and cannot cause additional obstacles for these students by failing to support this development. Offering plentiful speaking opportunities in a low-pressure environment, extended processing time, and purposeful supports will assist them in developing their language skills. Children are very aware when adults demonstrate a caring attitude towards their well-being, and when they see their teachers

embody this approach, it makes it easier for them to build positive connections and perform to the best of their abilities (Breiseth, 2020). While children undergo language development it is important to understand its connection to the formation of their identity.

Identity Formation

At the same time that children experience language development from a young age, they are also going through the process of identity formation. Identity and language are incredibly intertwined and must be at the forefront alongside language development when considering the best interest of ELs (Larson et al., 2019; Nematzadeh & Narafshan, 2020; Rishel & Miller, 2018). Many cultural components, beyond language, affect identity formation, such as values, morals, and expectations. Not only are ELs forced to navigate different linguistic environments between home and school, they also need to learn how to navigate between different cultural environments (Rishel & Miller, 2018). This navigation is what makes their journey of identity formation uniquely different from their English-speaking peers. For educators to sufficiently provide support for this process, they must be willing to guide students through acculturation, perceive their ELs as assets to the classroom, and create a learning environment where students can express themselves without judgment (Doran et al., 2019; Guccione, 2014; Rishel & Miller, 2018).

Acculturation, Not Assimilation. Acculturation is the process of any individual learning to socially navigate between their own culture and the dominant culture of society. Adults have more life experience to help them navigate this process, whereas children, especially young ELs, are still forming their identity within their own culture (Nematzadeh & Narafshan, 2020). Educators can help guide them through this process by

making it abundantly clear what is expected of the students and offering evaluative feedback when they meet those expectations, including social expectations as well as academic expectations (Doran et al., 2019). Being clear with expectations creates predictability for the student, which makes social navigation easier and less stressful. Simultaneously, educators need to be aware of how they communicate these expectations so as to not promote assimilation instead of acculturation (Patterson, 2017). Responding in ways that denigrates one culture to uplift another is harmful to the student and the overall acculturation process. Any decision to assimilate to the culture is a family decision and should have no influence on the part of the teacher.

Linguistic Assets. While there is a lot of work needed to assist ELs in accessing monolingual content instruction, the language diversity in these students should be seen as an asset and not a deficit in the classroom (Doran et al., 2019; Rishel & Miller, 2018). Diverse perspectives bring new ways of thinking about academics, social situations, and solving problems. Encouraging ELs to share these perspectives gives them the opportunity to connect with their peers and view themselves in a positive light (Patterson, 2017). Additionally, social competency is something that all students should strive for, though ELs are somewhat forced into this role by virtue of their social context. They have no choice but to code-switch between social settings, especially between school and home, and therefore are more advanced in this regard compared to their monolingual English-speaking peers (Doran et al., 2019). The need to be socially competent requires a great amount of resiliency on the part of the student as well (Doran et al., 2019). This resilient attitude, along with the social competency and diverse perspectives they bring to

school, should be highlighted by the teacher in a way that inspires the rest of the classroom to perceive their EL classmates as assets to the learning community.

Free of Judgment. This community, however, should be a learning environment where students are free from any sort of negative judgment, of which the teacher needs to take the lead on creating. When ELs feel comfortable expressing themselves and taking risks in their learning, they are forming positive views of their identity as well as what they are capable of achieving. This helps build confidence in the student, which is extremely important if the end goal is for them to attain sustained academic success. ELs need to believe that they are capable learners and teachers need to show them that they are by providing meaningful support and viewing them as assets, all within a positive learning environment.

Stakeholders must understand the ramification of the progression of legislature related to language and education on identity and language development in ELs. These ramifications will be unpacked in the next subtopic to explain the social barriers that surfaced due to legislation which omitted the unique needs of ELs. These barriers have created negative educational experiences and attitudes for ELs and their undoing is of the utmost importance.

Breaking of Barriers

The unique needs of ELs have always existed but historically, their needs have not been enough of a priority for stakeholders for them to be consistently met. There certainly have been advocates in the past, such as the findings of The Coleman Report of 1966 that highlighted inequities in public schools, the ruling of *Lou v Nichols* in 1974 that defended the rights of ELs, the formation of the Office of English Language Acquisition

in the 1980s to oversee bilingual programs across the country, and the creation of educational grants for promoting and funding bilingual education in the 90s under the Clinton administration (Moore, 2021). It is important to note that these policies were created in response to the pervasive English-only policies that were previously promoted that still have a lasting effect on EL communities. Additionally, after releasing the findings of the NRP & NICHD (2000) on the components of effective reading instruction, there was another educational movement that began to surface at the beginning of the 21st century that also continues to affect ELs. An oversimplified view of how students learn to read became popularized that from kindergarten to 3rd grade students learn to read, and from 4th grade to 12th grade students read to learn (Hauck & Ross, 2012). This oversimplification gave teachers the impression that they could forgo reading instruction after 3rd grade, negatively affecting the reading potential for children across the country (Hauck & Ross, 2012). This misguided understanding is not helpful in meeting the unique needs of ELs.

Policies and advocates for the improvement of the rights and well-being of ELs have increased over the years, especially since the Civil Rights Era (Moore, 2021). Prior to this increase, the prevalence of English-only policies laid a foundation for some staunch monolingual English-speaking Americans to believe that this was best practice for ELs (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). Such policy implementations perpetuated the achievement gap between non-ELs and ELs. Sadly, this achievement gap still exists and this plight continues to be used against ELs by education reformers who believe that the use of native languages is what contributes to their low achievement rates (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Rishel & Miller, 2018). It is troublesome that learning theories that have

existed for decades, most notably *social constructivism*, as well as the needs of ELs and current studies that refute the effectiveness of English-only policies are ignored, igniting a false narrative that can continue to spread (Berkeley Graduate Division, n.d.; Doran et al., 2019; Gándara & Hopkins, 2010).

It is also important to note that while English-only policies existed before any prominent learning theories were published, the policies continued to spread even after the theories were made public. Ignoring these theories is a harmful practice that continues to affect the EL community. It causes families to believe that they need to assimilate to the dominant culture in order to find success, and if they do not, the lack of academic achievement of their children will continue (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). It is vital that this barrier is struck down by those who have the power to do so and that factual evidence and supported theories are used to uplift these communities instead of continuing to denigrate their value to society.

In addition to striking down English-only policies, there is another practice that is in need of being altered so that it is no longer a hindrance to ELs. Within the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, a government-funded multi-billion dollar reading program called Reading First (RF) was created (Shanahan, 2021). The program granted public schools extra funding based on standardized test scores related to reading performance beginning in 3rd grade (Shanahan, 2021). This was the federal government's attempt at codifying the findings of the NRP into schools across the country (Shanahan, 2021). With this precedent, an expectation was set that all students in 3rd grade should no longer be learning to read and instead should be reading to learn, regardless of the content area. At the time RF was implemented, only 31% of 4th grade students in public schools

across the country were deemed proficient in reading (The Nation's Report Card, 2022). This framework created a high-stakes testing environment for schools across the nation and put an immense amount of pressure on school districts to push students towards reading proficiency as to receive funding under the provisions of RF and avoid any sanctions for failing to do so (Acosta et al., 2020). Given that NCLB's language focus was English only, this put ELs at a further disadvantage compared to non-ELs (Acosta et al., 2020).

Even with the findings of the NRP, there remains a harmful belief among educators that learning to read is a natural process even though research indicates quite the opposite (Moats & Tolman, 2019; Wren, n.d.). Given this misconception, many educators continue to believe that phonemic awareness is a byproduct of learning to read and that it is not an important skill to teach (Wren, n.d.). This illusion continues to perpetuate the belief that so long as students have a basic understanding of phonemic awareness, the remaining skills of phonemic awareness will develop naturally with sufficient language exposure, similar to the way children learn to speak (Dehaene, 2010). These incorrect assertions have culminated into a common practice to abandon phonemic awareness instruction after 1st grade (Bottari, 2021). This approach, however, has not proven effective as the percentage of 4th grade students at or above grade-level reading proficiency in 2022 is 33% when research indicates about 95% of children are capable of being proficient readers (Bottari, 2021; The Nation's Report Card, 2022). This ineffective instructional approach continues to this day and only adds to the barriers that impact ELs. It must be changed if ELs are to find sustained academic success in the future. These changes will be discussed in the following section.

Best Practices

Understanding the educational practices best suited for ELs is imperative for improving the academic achievement of this student population. Research indicates that instruction must be systematic, sequential, and communicated specifically about what is being taught and what is expected from students (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Proficiency rates for standardized tests among ELs and non-ELs will be highlighted to add significance to its implementation. A comprehensive understanding of what is currently happening and what is at stake is a necessary and final step for all stakeholders to embody for promoting the improvement of academic success for ELs. Before discussing current research and practices, it is important to define sustained academic success.

Sustained Academic Success.

The definition of academic success is dependent upon the context, criteria, and those in power who define it. In the world of education, it can take on many different forms. In its simplest form, this capstone defines it as the acquisition of knowledge across content areas, such as language arts, mathematics, science, or any other subject taught in school. However, acquired content knowledge is not observable in students unless they demonstrate it in written form, through oral communication, or an action or performance. After producing the knowledge, students are evaluated on the extent of their understanding by means of a grading scale, typically using numbers or a letter grade. Major decisions regarding teacher efficacy and school performance are made based on standardized test scores, given that federal funding for schools is attached to meeting the exam's expectations for student performance (Acosta et al., 2020). Only 33% of 4th grade students demonstrated reading proficiency on standardized tests in 2022. If the

percentage is divided between ELs and non-ELs, only 10% of ELs meet expectations compared to 37% for non-ELs (The Nation's Report Card, 2022). Stakeholders should be alarmed that the reading proficiency rate for non-ELs is more than triple than that of ELs. It is essential for the future academic success of ELs that they demonstrate an ability to meet reading proficiency expectations at a rate similar to their counterparts (Gottschalk, 2019).

Equally significant for ELs is to maintain this success overtime. Stakeholders cannot be satisfied with any academic achievement demonstrated on a case by case basis for particular EL communities or select regions of the United States. It is the hope of this capstone that year after year, all EL students demonstrate rates of achievement in a variety ways but especially on standardized tests across the nation at similar rates as non-EL students beginning in 3rd grade. While the NAEP only keeps statistics for standardized test scores in 4th grade, schools begin to administer standardized tests to its 3rd grade students. It is the belief of this capstone that high-stakes exams limit all students, particularly ELs, from demonstrating their comprehensive knowledge. However, these tests have been codified by federal policy as the evaluative practice for valuing our schools in this country. Until that changes, it is essential that ELs can demonstrate their ability to sustain this particular definition of academic success at a similar rate as their non-EL peers. To achieve this goal requires an answer to the question: *How do we incorporate best practices for English Learners (ELs) to provide foundational literacy skills for sustained academic success?*

Current Research

The NRP's published findings indicated that the most important components of effective reading instruction consists of *phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension*. These findings are still true and accurate today. It has also been discussed throughout this capstone that due to high-stakes federal policy stating that all students should be proficient readers by 3rd grade as measured by standardized tests along with misconceptions about phonemic awareness and how students learn to read, there exists the common practice to abandon instruction for phonemic awareness by the end of 1st grade. Cited statistics have shown this to be an ineffective instructional approach, particularly for ELs. Current research, however, has indicated that not only are strong phonemic awareness skills indicators for future rates of high reading success, best practices for teaching these skills need to be systematically, sequentially, and specifically taught throughout elementary school (Brady, 2020; Dehaene, 2010; Moats & Tolman, 2019). This will benefit not just ELs, but every student in every classroom across the country.

According to Paulson (2004) and Moats and Tolman (2019) the progression of phonemic awareness skills that should be taught from beginning to advanced include:

Responding to rhyme during wordplay: *recite rhyming words such as 'blue' and 'glue'*. Rhyme recognition: *know that 'may' and 'day' rhyme, but 'may' and 'sun' do not*. Syllable counting: *know that 'bat' has 1 syllable and 'batter' has 2 syllables*. Matching words with similar onset sounds: *know that 'pink' and 'paper' begin with the same phoneme*. Distinguishing phonemes in a series: *use color-specific blocks for different phonemes in a sequence such as: /d/, /f/, /d/*. Blending onset and rime: *what word? h-at (hat)*. Segmenting/pronouncing initial

word sounds: say the first sound in the word 'bake' (/b/). Syllable deletion: say 'wagon' but don't say 'on' (wag). Partial deletion of a compound word: say 'starfish' but don't say 'star' (fish). Beginning phoneme blending: /kw/-ēn (queen), /b/-āth (bathe). Phoneme segmentation with no blends, 2-3 phonemes: use fingers to tap out sounds while saying the sounds in a word; /l/-ĕ/-g/ (leg), /p/-ă/-n/ (pan). Phoneme segmentation with blends, 3-4 phonemes: use fingers to tap out sounds while saying the sounds in a word; /b/-ă/-ck/ (back), /ch/-ā/-n/ (chain). Simple phoneme substitution with no blends: change the /c/ in cape to /t/ (tape). Beginning, medial, and final phoneme extraction of one-syllable words: say the first sound in the word 'walk' (/w/), say the last sound in the word 'walk' (/k/), say the vowel sound in the word 'walk' (/ɔ/). Sound deletion, initial and final positions without blends: say 'beat', say it again but don't say '/b/' (eat), say 'pain', say it again but don't say '/n/' (pay). Sound substitution, words with 5-6 phonemes: 'flash', 'flush', What sound have I changed? (/ă/ to /ũ/). Sound deletion, initial position with blends: say 'drank'. Now say it without '/d/' (rank). Sound deletion, medial and final positions with blends: say 'snail', say it again without /n/ (nail), say 'smoke', say it again without /m/ (soak), say 'fork', say it again without /k/ (for). Phoneme reversal: say 'safe', then say the last sound first and the first sound last (face), say 'slack', then say the last sound first and the first sound last (class). Phoneme chaining: use color-specific blocks to indicate addition, deletion, substitution, and resequencing of sounds from one word to the next in a series of words that only change one sound at a time.

The importance of teaching each of these skills to students cannot be stressed enough. However, the effectiveness of teaching the skills depends on how systematic, sequential, and specific the delivery of instruction is.

Teaching that is systematic is carried out in a step-by-step manner that is related to a system of correspondence, such as that of symbols and sounds in literacy. This style of teaching uses signals, cues, or prompts that are pre-established as a means of creating predictability for both the teacher and the student. Predictability allows the student to be more at ease and focused on what they are trying to learn because they know what procedures to expect. It also allows the teacher to become more fluent with their instruction because it ensures that concepts are being continually explained, practiced, and evaluated. Typically, this type of teaching follows a progression of having students watch the teacher as they model a concept, then the teacher and students practice the concept together until the students are able to practice independently while the teacher monitors for mastery. Mastery is best achieved when instruction is also carried out sequentially in a way that is cumulative. It is more meaningful and predictable for the student when new skills being taught build off of skills that have already been learned. Delivering instruction that is systematic and sequential is only possible if teachers are specific about explaining concepts, what is expected of the students, and how students are assessed throughout the learning experience. (Brady, 2020; Dehaene, 2010; Moats & Tolman, 2019). If teachers strive for systematic, sequential instructional practices guided by specific communication when teaching phonemic awareness, achieving sustained academic success for ELs becomes a hopeful possibility.

Summary

It is most effective when providing solutions to others to include sufficient background information to explain why incorporating such solutions is essential to impact change. The literature review of this chapter was meant to provide such information so that all stakeholders are invested in answering the following research question: *How do we incorporate best practices for English Learners (ELs) to provide foundational literacy skills for sustained academic success?* To achieve this, the presented literature concerning a historical context of foundational literacy skills and the unique needs of ELs were analyzed, synthesized, and connected to the current educational experience of ELs so that the best practices presented carries significance for all stakeholders. This comprehensive review of literature will be used to create a professional development meant to be accessible to all stakeholders. It is the goal of this capstone that large-scale awareness is made about the past and present lived experiences of ELs so that the presented solution for their achievement of sustained academic success can be realized. A more in-depth description of the professional development will be provided in Chapter 3, along with an expanded understanding of the context, rationale, and reasons for its creation.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Overview

The present barriers that impact the educational experiences of ELs have existed for too long. These barriers, created by restrictive legislative policies and teaching practices, have prevented ELs from achieving the same levels of sustained academic success compared to non-ELs. In order to achieve any academic success related to content, students need strong foundational literacy skills that allow them to become good readers and writers. As students enter kindergarten, classroom teachers begin to teach these skills. When students reach third grade, schools begin to administer standardized tests to evaluate their overall reading abilities. Year after year, the Nation's Report Card (2022) shows that ELs fall significantly behind their non-EL peers in standardized 4th grade reading proficiency scores. With the existence of this perpetual disparity, it is unsurprising that ELs have not been able to achieve higher rates of sustained academic success. This disparity led to the research question that guided this capstone project: *How do we incorporate best practices for English Learners (ELs) to provide foundational literacy skills for sustained academic success?*

This chapter will outline the framework related to the capstone project, including the hopeful outcome of its implementation and the rationale for its creation. The chapter will then go on to describe the intended audience for the project, as well as the possible settings for where the presentation of the project might take place. Additionally, a detailed project description will be provided along with a timeline describing its creation

and the duration of its intended implementation. Finally, a summary will conclude the chapter before an introduction to Chapter 4 is presented.

Framework

It is essential that actionable awareness that demands systemic change in the current method of teaching foundational reading skills is achieved for the improvement of academic success for ELs. In order to achieve this goal, this capstone will approach the creation of a social and professional development (PD). However, this PD will not be limited to teachers and administrators as every stakeholder must be empowered to make this change happen. Therefore, this PD will include a strategic framework that combines professional learning along with adult learning so that its accessibility extends to the families of ELs as well as the general public.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) provides features of effective professional training for teachers that will help guide the creation of the PD. This includes the incorporation of active learning, supporting collaboration, offering feedback and reflections, and being of a sustained duration. These features will all be included in the creation of the PD, along with others discussed by Knowles (1992) that reflect general adult learning. Such features pertain to assumptions and process elements of andragogy (adult learning), including the role of the learner's experience, their motivation and readiness to learn, and the learning climate. In conjunction, these features will be used to create a more accessible PD that branches beyond the world of education.

Audience and Setting

The intended audience for this PD is for all stakeholders described in Chapter Two, including ELs and their families, educators and administrators, as well as the

general public. Since the disparity in reading performance on standardized tests between ELs and non-ELs continues to exist, it is clear that there is a lack of awareness among stakeholders for actionable changes to take place, especially for those in power to do so. The EL community deserves to be informed about the present barriers that impact their educational experiences, how these barriers were formed, and how they can begin to be dismantled. Most educators and administrators are aware of the disparity in standardized reading performance, but may not be informed enough about the barriers, how they came to be, nor the permeated impact of removing them. The general public is perhaps less aware of this matter since the media does not typically cover it on a consistent basis and the disparity does not directly impact everyday life. If all stakeholders are informed in such a way that their awareness demands action, change becomes hopeful.

Given that this professional development is not limited to a specific group of stakeholders, there are vast locations where it could take place. The presentation style is meant to be flexible depending on the setting as to not limit accessibility for any particular stakeholder. For teachers and administrators, common locations may include school classrooms, auditoriums, gymnasiums, libraries, or cafeterias. These locations could also serve as settings for the EL community and the general public since it is common for public school districts to make their buildings available for community activities. However, since these stakeholders are not limited to school districts, other possible locations include community centers, places of worship, banquet halls, concert halls, and convention centers. Wherever the interest is for becoming aware to create actionable change, the professional development will be made available regardless of the location.

Project Description and Timeline

The intended purpose of the professional development is to create actionable awareness among multiple stakeholders in order to demand change to the traditional approach of teaching foundational literacy skills. Traditional methods typically abandon phonemic awareness instruction after first grade, which fuels the disparity in sustained academic success between ELs and non-ELs given that, according to Gillion (2007) and Moats & Tolman (2019), strong phonemic awareness skills are indicators of future reading success. While this project is meant to be informative to create awareness, the presentation is also meant to be persuasive so that change is demanded. Stakeholders who may be aware of the disparity but do not see the change as necessary are in need of the most persuasion. Therefore how the information is presented will be particularly important.

Using the research and information laid out in Chapter 2, three different sections will be created that make up the entirety of the PD. The first section will cover foundational literacy skills, including the background leading up to its definition, learning theories related to their acquisition, as well as the effect of past practice and policy on the educational experiences of ELs. The second section will cover the unique needs of ELs within an educational setting, such as language development, identity formation, and the preventative barriers that make sustained academic success unjustly difficult. Finally, the third section will cover best practices related to teaching foundational literacy skills with an emphasis on defining sustained academic success and current research that supports increasing phonemic awareness instruction throughout elementary school. These sections

will take place back to back in the same day, each lasting one to one and a half hours with a fifteen minute break scheduled after the first two sections.

This information will be presented in a way that is captivating for whom this is new, that challenges the beliefs of those who do not see change as necessary, and that creates a sense of empathy for those willing to listen. Attendees will complete a survey at the beginning and end of each section to determine initial beliefs and understandings surrounding the information, as well as what they learned. There will also be a guided note-taking booklet for the audience to use for those who prefer to take notes during a presentation. At the end of the PD, a question and answer session will take place for those who would like to partake, in which questions from the audience will be answered. Additionally, the audience will also be asked to share whether or not they found the sessions informative and if their prior beliefs were challenged or if the information solidified their current beliefs and why. Feedback will also be requested in written form for the improvement of the PD, along with suggested supplemental resources for attendees to seek to deepen their understanding and awareness of the topic presented that day.

It is important that there is sufficient time dedicated for creating the PD to ensure the quality and effectiveness of the presentation. Devoted time for its creation was from late January 2023 until early May 2023; about three and a half months. The duration of each presented section will last about one to one and a half hours, though precise duration can be found in the Project Overview. In order to avoid monotony and inattentiveness, it is planned for the presentation to be interactive for the audience with plenty of opportunities to participate.

Summary

In summary, the goal of the capstone project is to create lasting change in the teaching of foundational literacy skills at the benefit of ELs for sustained academic success. The chosen method to achieve this is to create a PD that is intended for all stakeholders by incorporating elements of professional training with features of adult learning. The setting for this PD will be fluid as to meet the needs of the various stakeholders it is intended to serve, such as proximity and availability. It is estimated that the creation of the PD will take at least 3 months to complete to ensure its effectiveness to be as informative as it is persuasive. The fourth and final chapter of this capstone includes reflecting on the experience of creating the PD, implications and limitations of its realization, as well as considerations for future research.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

This capstone was created based on the experience I have had working with the EL community and the academic struggles they have endured. This led to the creation of the research question that this capstone intends to answer: *How do we incorporate best practices for English Learners (ELs) to provide foundational literacy skills for sustained academic success?* In this chapter, I will reflect on key insights I gained throughout the research process, revisit the literature that provided the research for this capstone, and discuss the implications of the project created based on the analysis and synthesis of such research. Additionally, I will discuss the limitations of this project as well as possible future research that could be conducted before summarizing all of the topics covered throughout the chapter.

Key Insights

The inspiration for creating this project came from major insights that were brought to my attention during my first five years as a licensed teacher, regarding the continued academic struggles of upper elementary ELs, whether they were of new-to-country status or had been in our ESL program since kindergarten. Additionally, throughout the research process for writing my thesis and creating my capstone project, there were major learnings that occurred as well. These insights were helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of the topic as well as becoming an improved researcher and writer.

After finding out from colleagues through meaningful discussion that this problem has existed for decades and affects non-ELs as well, I became curious about why

this struggle has continued for so long. Around the same time, I was asked by my building administration if I would like to partake in the self-guided professional development LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) by Moats and Tolman (2019), and given what I became curious about, I agreed to do so. Early on in the training, I discovered that the science of reading had existed for decades, which only fueled my curiosity about why this academic struggle has existed for so long when the science about how children learn to read was not new information. Many questions arose but the most prominent one was wondering how it could be that these important research findings had not been known or put to practice by teachers on a wide-scale basis across the country for so long. I felt the importance of sharing this topic should not be limited to only teachers and administrators, but also made accessible to the EL community and general public. While conducting the research for this project, there were a couple key insights that I gained as well.

The first insight I gained was realizing that presenting the information would not be sufficient if I wanted the presentation to be effective. I quickly realized that the presentation must also be persuasive so that the audience would understand how this struggle came to be, how it is even more pervasive for ELs, and why this information should be implemented across the country. Simply presenting statistics or research findings would not be enough to be persuasive. The information needed to be written in a way that was not accusatory towards any stakeholder or school of thought regarding how children should be taught to read. Through this process, I feel that I became an improved research writer, especially regarding my ability to analyze and synthesize information in

an organized fashion while using persuasive language to make my writing and project as effective as it could be.

The other major learning was that I found persuasive writing to be more enjoyable than I anticipated. Reading has always been a tiresome process for me as I have double amblyopia, meaning I have to deeply concentrate on keeping my eyes focused on the print while absorbing the content I am reading. The enjoyment I found in persuasive writing helped offset the tediousness I experienced while conducting the research. Without this offset, I believe it would have been fairly difficult to complete my writing. While the research process was tiresome, it is still worth revisiting the literature used throughout the research process.

A Look Back at the Literature

As previously mentioned, conducting the research for this topic was a tiresome process. Nonetheless, research is a pivotal part of creating an effective capstone and the research I conducted was not only informative but was also an important part of making the capstone persuasive. There was particular information that I found to be most helpful in achieving a presentation and writing that is as informative as it is persuasive.

While I knew that 4th grade reading proficiency scores have been historically low across the country for decades, I did not realize how low they actually were. The shock of discovering information such as reading proficiency scores for all 4th graders only increasing about 2% over the past twenty years, or that these scores have been about 3 times lower for ELs compared to non-ELs, helped to improve my writing (The Nation's Report Card, 2022). I tried to incorporate this shock value into my writing and presentation to make them more persuasive.

Additionally, the research on historical language policy was also eye-opening and helped create a strong capstone. I felt it was particularly important to include policy because it is often overlooked when examining discrepancies between demographics, regardless of the topic. I also felt that language policy in particular is not as well known to people, especially for monolingual English-speakers who are not generally impacted by such policies. Specifically, understanding that policies aimed at improving English language acquisition while portraying other language use as problematic was especially helpful (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). This reinforced the understanding that good intentions are not enough unless those intentions are thoroughly examined. In addition to the literature regarding this topic being an important part of creating an effective project, there are implications to consider as well.

Project Implications

As stated throughout the capstone, the purpose of this project is to provide a strategic framework for creating actionable awareness related to the pervasive academic struggles of ELs compared to their non-EL peers. In order to achieve this, the research needed to be presented in a way that was persuasive without alienating any particular school of thought regarding language policy or teaching children to read. When considering the purpose of this project, there are two implications that should be considered.

The first implication is that if actionable awareness for all stakeholders (the EL community, teachers and administrators, and the general public) is a success, public demand will carry enough leverage to create systemic change through legislative policies for how foundational literacy skills are taught in public schools. My hope is that the

general public will buy into the demand by realizing that such change will not only benefit the EL community but every student that attends a public school, regardless of their background. As former Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone famously said, “We all do better when we all do better.”

The second implication if actionable awareness is successful is that misconceptions about how children learn to read will fall to the wayside and the importance of providing ELs and non-ELs strong phonemic awareness skills is given credence. If 95% of children are capable of learning to read, then it is in the best interest of society that we do what we can to get as close as we can to that percentage. My hope is that the scientific-based research surrounding this topic will suffice in changing attitudes about literacy and young children. However, even with the scientific-based research provided, it is important to discuss the limitations of this project.

Project Limitations

Even with the best of intentions of any capstone or research-based project, transparency is vital in discussing the possible limitations that exist. These limitations do not negate the intent of this project, nor do they take away the factual information provided. They merely provide a better understanding of the conditions in which a project was created. To that extent there are two important limitations that should be considered for this capstone project.

The first limitation is that this presentation was not created through the lens of a former EL student. I have over a decade’s worth of experience working with the EL community, however as previously stated, I was never identified as an EL during my time in a K-12 public school setting. While this does not take away from the quality of

research, synthesis, or analysis completed for this project, an individual who was identified as an EL adds an element of firsthand experience that I am unable to provide. There may be those who feel that someone without such firsthand experience invalidates the intended advocacy of this particular community, therefore they cannot be convinced of the content of this project. My hope is that in addition to the experience I have working with this population, the passion, empathy, and conviction displayed in the capstone as well as the presentation carries enough merit for the majority of those reading this capstone or experiencing the presentation.

The second limitation of this capstone is the timeframe in which it was created. It is important to acknowledge that the majority of the research conducted for this capstone was completed in about three months, given that it was conducted during a semester-long graduate-level course. This time frame limits the amount of resources that were able to be retrieved, as well as the amount of analysis and synthesis that was able to be completed regarding this topic. Given that the hopeful outcome is for systemic change to be demanded, there may be those who feel that three months is not a sufficient amount of time spent on a product that intends to yield widespread results. It is a fair point to be made, however the creation of this capstone project is not meant to be a comprehensive solution to a complex problem. Rather, it is a starting point that will hopefully lead to systemic change. To that effect, it is hopeful that future research can be conducted to make such a change more likely.

Future Research

For systemic change to occur, it is vital that the practices in a system that have been shown to be ineffective yet are still pervasive across society are critically examined.

The intended purpose of this research is to provide a starting point for such critical examination to have a platform. While this capstone has highlighted some misconceptions regarding the way children learn to read and how especially detrimental they are to the EL community, future research could examine other possible misconceptions that hinder student academic progress. One such possibility is examining the remaining pillars of literacy (phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency) and whether or not misconceptions exist regarding these pillars. If so, the extent to which educators focus on teaching these components of literacy using misconceptions could be examined as well. These possible examined misconceptions are not limited to literacy, but could also occur in other content areas, such as math, science, and social studies.

Summary

In this chapter a comprehensive reflection of the capstone process was provided. Key insights were discussed, such as the realization that persuasive writing was imperative to the effectiveness of this capstone, as well as the enjoyment I found in persuasive writing. A review of the literature revealed that particular statistics related to reading proficiency scores effectively put into perspective how pervasively low these scores have been over time, as well as a historical review of the impact language policy has had on these scores for ELs in particular. The implications of this project indicated that it is hopeful that public demand leads to policy-led systemic change for how children are taught to read and the misconceptions about how children learn to read cease to exist. Regarding limitations, it was discussed that my personal experience of not being labeled as an EL may deter others from engaging with this capstone, as well as the limited timeframe of completing this capstone impacting how many resources could be gathered

and the amount of analysis and synthesis that occurred. Finally, it is hopeful that future research takes into account other misconceptions about literacy and other content areas, as well as examining the effectiveness of how educators teach the remaining four pillars of literacy. My hope is that this capstone and project becomes a starting point for lasting systemic change for how children are taught to read, especially those of the EL community, so that sustained academic success can become a reality.

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