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Determining Differences in Bilingualism and Learning Disabilities

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Determining Differences in Bilingualism and Learning Disabilities

Mayreni Villegas

Merrimack College

2019

MERRIMACK COLLEGE

CAPSTONE PAPER SIGNATURE PAGE

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF EDUCATION

IN

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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AUTHOR: Mayreni Villegas

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

In U.S. history, people who have any form of disabilities have been overlooked, hidden at home and other were sent away. Much like minorities who enter the US educational system and are often times placed in remedial classes or special education due to their language barrier. The over-representation of minorities in special education classes has sparked researchers' interest in determining if being multi-lingual can cause any form of learning disability. After much research, it has been concluded that being multi-lingual does not correlate with having learning disabilities however; which does not explain the over-representation of multi-lingual minorities in special education classes. The *Determining Differences in Bilingualism and Learning Disabilities* workshop aimed to educate new educators in the field to determine if the students in their classroom have a learning disability or a language barrier. With the minorities of this country soon becoming the majority, the timing for the workshop seemed appropriate. The results of the workshop confirmed that a workshop for educators in the field was an effective pathway to learning the differences in language barriers and learning disabilities.

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Determining Differences in Bilingualism and Learning Disabilities

For the last half-century, psychologists, psychiatrists and researchers have looked into disabilities, what causes them, how to prevent them, and how to treat them. Yet an increasing numbers of immigrants arriving to the United States for the past few decades have changed the focus of researchers to determine if being multi-lingual plays a part in having learning disabilities and why multilingual minorities are overrepresented in the learning disabilities field. After much research, experts in the field have concluded that being multi-lingual does not correlate with having learning disabilities however; that does not explain the over-representation of multi-lingual minorities in special education classes.

The lack of understanding, resources and accommodations leads to students' inappropriate diagnosis and feeling like they do not belong in school. A misdiagnosis can cause higher dropout rates, which contributes to the higher education achievement gap in minorities, making the issue a never-ending cycle. There needs to be more education and professional development for educators so are better equipped to teach their curriculum in ways that are more creative and provided assistance to the students in the classroom.

The proposed project will offer an appropriate curriculum in collaboration with experts in the field of special education and speech pathology to host a full workshop for the Merrimack Institute of New Teacher Supports (MINTS) and leave it open to the community so anyone who is interested in learning about ways to help English Language Learners and students with diagnosed or suspected learning disabilities. The goal is to be able to educate professionals, and soon to be professionals, to identify when a child in the classroom may need a referral for learning disability assessment or when the student is facing a language barrier.

Literature Review

Since the 1960's, the United States has been the number one immigrant destination following the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act (MPI, 2018). Housing one-fifth of the world's immigrant population, the United States has constantly battled in deciding if such a high number of immigrants are an asset or a burden not only on the country's economy and the educational system. According to the American Community Data (2018), the United States is home to over 43 million immigrants and whose first language is not English. For the purpose of this paper, English Language Learners (ELL) refers to anyone born in or out of the country and whose primary language is not English.

According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, 1 in 5 children in the United States has a learning disability (National Center for Learning Disabilities) ranging from Dyslexia and ADHD that are less visual and harder to identify to others like Visual Perceptual or Non-Verbal, which are more easily identifiable. In the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), learning disabilities are described as a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes; which are composed of understanding or using language, verbal or written, resulting in the inability to think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations. In this paper, students with a diagnosed Learning Disability (LD) will be anyone who fits into the description of LD's as defined by IDEA.

It is important to note that under IDEA's description of learning disabilities (LD's), students with difficulty in writing and reading in English become an easy target for a false disability diagnosis thus resulting in over representation of learning disabilities among ELL students (Meyen, 1989). The National Center for Learning Disabilities measures LDs as the biggest category of disabilities under the education law with a school dropout rate of 18.1%

compared to 6.5% of all other students (2018). The harmful link between LD's and ELL is an important detail when considering why Latinos and other minorities are not going to college, and those who are, are not graduating at the same rate as their Anglo peers.

Disabilities: U.S. Schools and Legislation for Education

In 1963 concerned parents of adults with learning disabilities put together a conference in Chicago to educate the community on learning disabilities. In that same conference, the group reached a consensus that these types of disabilities needed their own category and that is when Samuel A. Kirk first used the term Learning Disabilities. As a result of the conference the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities ACDL (now the LDA) was formed.

Right around the Civil Rights Movement (1950s and 1960's) and *Brown V. Board of Education*, parents of children with disabilities and adults living with learning disabilities also went out to advocate for a fair and appropriate education for themselves and their children (Smith & Kozleski, 2005). While advocating for children with learning disabilities, researchers found that there were about 1.75 million children who were not receiving any form of education and another 3 million who were in school but weren't receiving the appropriate education for their learning ability. The Office of Special Education Programs also notes that in the early 1970's only 20% of children with disabilities were receiving an education at all (OSEP, 2000). Furthermore, in order for some of these children to be able to attend school, some parents were forced to bring their children to schools that were far out of their school district at their own expense as education for the disabled was seen as privilege, not a right (Huefner, 2000).

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed in 1965. This was the first law that allowed the government to fund public education for schools and school districts that served communities with low socioeconomic status. The funds were allocated for

professional development, resources, educational programs, instructional materials and encouragement of parent involvement (Katsiyannis, Yell & Bradley, 2001).

A few years later, congress passed the Children with Specific Learning Disabilities Act with the Education for the Handicap of 1970 (EHA). This law broadened the amount of grants of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. There were grants available to higher education institutions to develop programs to educate teachers about learning disabilities. In 1974, the law was amended to require all states that receive federal funds insure full educational opportunities for all students including students with disabilities. In 1975, the law was amended once again to Education for All Handicap Children Act (EAHCA) which provided federal funds to states that demonstrated they provided direct services to students with disabilities and furthermore that they received Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) (Huefner, 2000).

Rates of Learning Disabilities and English Language Learners in the U.S.

LDs forms the largest category of student receiving special education in the United States public school system according to the National Center for Learning Disabilities report of 2014, however, the rate has steadily been dropping by almost 2% every year since 2002 (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Even with numbers dropping, the National Center for Education Statistics, reported that 6.7 million students or 13% of all students in Public School received special education during the 2015-16 school year (NCES, 2018). In an article in the Journal of Child and Family Studies, it was noted that although the rate of students receiving special education is dropping, the rank of representation for all racial and ethnic groups has stayed the same for learning disabilities. (Zhan, Katsiyannis, Ju & Roberts, 2014)

Unlike LD's, the rate of ELL students in the United States public education system is steadily rising. In a 2018 report, The National Center for Education Statistics reported a one

million-student increase from fall 2000 (8.1%) to Fall 2015 (9.5%). The number of ELL students

varies by state ranging from 1% in West Virginia to 21% in California. The National Center for

Education Statistics also identified Kindergartners as having the highest concentration of ELL

students, with 16.3% of all Kindergarteners labeled as ELL. The center also determined that as

grade level increases, the number of ELL students decreases with only 3.9% of 12th graders

labeled as ELL (NCES, 2018).

The lack of English proficiency places minorities in a vulnerable position to go

undiagnosed and/or overrepresented in the LD category due to the difficulties presented by

differentiating between language barrier and a LD (Skiba et al, 2008). Klingner, Artiles and

Barletta (2006) noted the difficulty in measuring rates and levels of "normal second language

acquisition," and a lack of English proficiency is often interpreted as low intelligence or as a

disability by the educators in the classroom and even during special education assessment. The

link between English language proficiency and low levels of academic attainment complicates

the appropriate identification of minority students in the LD category.

Theory Behind Misidentification of ELL and LD

The structural functionalist theory focuses on the benefits provided to the students by the

educational system through collaboration between the individual and the different institutions.

However, the current education system is dysfunctional due to the divide between educators and

their students, resulting in the misidentification of ELL and LDs. Through the functionalist

perspective, the current system is used as a sorting mechanism to identify students' educational

placement, which is just perpetuating inequality.

The functionalism theory focuses on benefits like social solidarity, learning the skills

necessary for the workforce, core values and the role of allocation by merit (Revise Sociology,

2015) however, when students are segregated by the level of English proficiency and/or are categorized as having a learning disability, they do not reap the benefits mentioned above.

The elementary and secondary school teacher workforce in the United States is not as racially diverse as the population at large or the students in the public school system. In a 2016 report released by the Department of Education, it was noted that in the 2011–2012 school year, 82 percent of public school teachers were white. In comparison, 51 percent of all 2012 elementary and secondary public students were white. In contrast, 16 percent of students were black, and 7 percent of public teachers were black. Likewise, while 24 percent of students were Hispanic, 8 percent of teachers were Hispanic.

According to the role-modeling theory, when students see educators that look like them or are culturally diverse, they are more likely to try harder in that class (Morgenroth, Ryan. Peters, 2015). A teachers' cultural understanding of their students can lead to a deep and meaningful interpersonal connection as well as vicarious learning. However, when a student from a minority group is segregated because of their English proficiency in addition to not seeing any or few educators that look like them and who understand their cultural background they are less likely to ask for help or to succeed in school.

The lack of diversity in school faculty and administrators further exacerbates the cyclical nature of minorities not perceiving academia is a viable career option, which leads to lack of motivation to further their education. Furthermore, "The United States would have 30,000 more teachers of color if students of color were represented equally among education graduates" (Libasi, 2018). By having those 30,000 more teachers of color, we could have prevented one of the causes of higher education gaps, which is having teachers with diverse cultural backgrounds

Out of all ELL students in the US public school system, 77.1% reported Spanish to be the primary language spoken at home followed by Arabic at 2.4% (NCES, 2018). However, the lack of higher education in the biggest minority group (Latinx) in the United States affects much more than just that ethnic group. The existing gaps in higher education affect gender, class, and even educational intuitions. In an article by CJ Libasi (2018), he notes that there is a lack of representation of female both Black and Hispanic in the field of engineering, computer and information science as well as in history and business management. There is also a lack of representation of Black and Hispanic male in the field of education, engineering and physical and medical science. Libasi, also explains, "If black and Hispanic bachelor's degree recipients were as likely to major in engineering as white students, this country would have produced 20,000 more engineers from 2013 through 2015" (Libasi, 2018).

Impact to Youth and Schools

According to the American Youth Policy Forum (2009), "When ELL students enter public schools, they face the dual challenges of learning a new language while keeping up with the academic content of their grade level" (p. 2). Often times, students are held back a grade and placed in ELL classes or placed in special education classes, which keep them out of the academic track thus increasing the number of students who are undereducated.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities reports students with LD earn lower grades and experience higher rates of course failure in high school than students without LD, resulting in one-third of students with LD having to repeat a grade at least once. Additionally, sixty-eight percent of students with LD leave high school with a regular diploma while 19 percent drop out and 12 percent receive a certificate of completion, which contributes to students' devaluation of education and high educational attainment (NCES, 2014).

By not providing the necessary resources and meeting the needs of students in the current public educational system, the system is essentially failing the students. Not only do student devalue education but so do the people/family around them, further demonizing of the public school system and keeping the community uneducated and/or undereducated.

Project Plan

With a mission of helping educators (teachers and after school personnel) identify language barriers and or learning disabilities, I will conduct a workshop to educate educators to distinguish ELL and LD indicators to better serve the academic needs of their students.

Situation Statement

Children who immigrate to the United States or who were born in the U.S. but whose first language is different than English are more likely to be placed in classes for students with learning disabilities (Ochoa, Pacheco, & Omark. 1988). However, their needs are different. Other students who may have a learning disability may go unnoticed by their teachers due to their language barrier. Therefore, neither student is truly being served.

Defined Goals

The goal of this this workshop is to provide new teachers in different grade level positions with the tools needed identify when student may have a language barrier and or learning disability when learning. The workshop aims to help teachers in making appropriate referrals for disabilities testing as well as including culturally responsive teaching in the classroom when there are ELL students present and getting the family involved in every step of the way.

Our goal is to work with a population of new teachers, as seasoned educators have shared that while many new and early teachers feel confident in their content knowledge, they often lack sufficient support and preparation for other aspects of the teaching profession like working with the ELL / LD population. Additionally, for the past few years, a number of new teachers coming out of Merrimack College have started their teaching journey in an urban school setting where they are likely to be teaching students from underprivileged communities.

Target Audience and Stakeholders

Due to the nature of this workshop, the ideal target audience would be new teachers about to graduate or who have recently graduated and will be entering the education workforce. The Merrimack Institute for New Teachers Supports (MINTS) is a network that offers professional development to new teachers, seasoned educators as well as student teacher and school admins from all over the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Crafting a Clear Message

While having a learning disability and/or having a language barrier may take a little longer for a student to grasp the content taught in class, having the necessary resources could alleviate some of the stress. However, if students are not given the correct diagnosis or not diagnosed at all, the damage can be detrimental to their academic career as well as their connection to society. By attending this workshop, educators will obtain a better understanding of the differences in learning disabilities and language barriers of each to best help their students.

Incentives for Engagement

Those who attend the workshop will leave with an accurate identification of learning disabilities, how they are tested, and what signs they should lookout for with their ELL students. We will discuss how to bring up this difficult conversation with their students as well as the

parents who may not understand disabilities or may have a language barrier themselves. Lastly, teachers will earn a Certificate of Participation towards their professional development (PDPs) through Merrimack College and undergraduate students will receive extra credit from their professors.

Outreach Methods

We intend to reach out to the new teachers support specialist at the Merrimack Institute for New Teacher Supports (MINTS) with the idea of the workshop and ask to use their platform for this workshop. We will then proceed to make connections with the Schools of Education and Social Policy at Merrimack College.

Once a date and time is settled on, we will begin outreach through the contact list from MINTS as well as an email blast to all the Academic Deans and Academic Advisors in the School of Education.

Responsibilities Chart

Name:	Organization:	Responsibility:	Contact Info:
Mayreni Villegas	Merrimack College	Program Planner and facilitator	villegasm@merrimack.edu
Rachel Aghara, Ph.D., CCC-SLP	Merrimack College & Center for Child Development	Keynote Speaker	agharar@merrimack.edu
Timothy LeBel	Merrimack College	Connection to MINTS	lebelt@merrimack.edu
Megan McCoy	Merrimack College	Assist during event	mccoym@merrimack.edu
Meagan Riche	Merrimack College	Assist during event	richiem@merrimack.edu
Philadenrin Russell	Merrimack College	Assist during event	russellp@merrimack.edu

Tools/Measure to Assess Progress

In order to measure the impact of the workshop, I will send out a pre-survey to those who RSVP in order to compare what knowledge the participants had before they attend the workshop. During the workshop, we will breakout into groups and work through an activity and the groups will then report to the bigger group. At the end of the workshop, I will pass around a post-event evaluation.

Implementation Timeline

Dates:	Action:
October 22 – October 26	• Secure keynote speaker
December 3 – December 7	• Connect to MINTS support specialist Timothy LeBel
January 7 – January 11	• Follow-up with Timothy LeBel, New Teacher Supports Specialist • Connect with the School of Education
January 14 – January 18	• Set up a meeting Timothy Lebel
January 21 – January 25	• Settle on a date • Work on the curricula
January 28 – February 1	• Create flyer and promo material • Finalize agenda and share with partners
February 11 – February 15	• Meet with Tim to settle on catering order
February 15 – March 1	• Send out email invitation • Create RSVP list from email form
March 2 – March 22	• Last minute changes to curriculum • Host workshop • Email Power point to attendees
March 23 – April 15	• Assess evaluation data
Apr 16 – May 5	• Finalize paper

Logical Framework

I Will	Host a workshop to educate teachers, afterschool crewmembers, parents, child advocate and the community to best identify when the children in the community have a learning disability or a language barrier.
So That	They become better informed and can best help their students
So That	They push for the school to revise their standards and methods of ELL and LD assessment.
So That	Schools can adopt new policies, implement improved tools for testing, and hire more diverse faculty to represent the student body.
So That	The students are being accurately tested; are more inclined to respond correctly while being tested; and will also ask for help when needed.
So That	Students get the help they need to persist and continue / further their education.
So That	The achievement gap gets smaller.

Methodology

The workshop was created with the intentionality of helping attendees have a clearer picture of the benefits of bilingualism, the dangers of over and under diagnosis of learning disabilities, and what steps to take prior to referral for evaluations.

Participants

The event took place at Merrimack College through a MINTS professional development. The participants were the MINTS contact; which includes previous and current Merrimack students as well as teachers, principals, and superintendents from neighboring cities and their own personal network. Most of the attendees stated they received the event invite from MINTS, on the other hand, numerous attendees indicated that they were forwarded the email registration from friends. The workshop aimed to train new educators in the current work force, however,

MINTS has an ample array of contacts ranging from teacher who were Merrimack students and recently graduated to more seasoned educators and retired teachers. The MINTS network also sends their emails to the current Merrimack Students who are part of the school of Education and Social Policy as well as the professors in said school.

Materials

For evaluation purposes, I utilized two different materials including a set of registration questions and an event evaluation. The registration questions were answered when participants registered to attend the event. The questions were meant to grasp a better understanding of who the participants were and what school district they came from.

When the participants checked in at the workshop, they received a folder with an agenda, workshop materials, and the workshop evaluation, which was used to assess if the workshop had met its intended purpose. Throughout the workshop, participants were reminded about the workshop evaluation and volunteers walked around the room at the event to collect the evaluation. The evaluation form contained questions that focused the current procedure (if there is one) that educators use to determine if the students have a disability or a language barrier, what they will do differently after this workshop and the quality of the workshop. (See Appendix C).

Procedure

Email invitations were sent out to thirty-two unique subscriber contact lists from the MINTS constant contacts library in mid-February. The email gave the recipients a brief description of the workshop along with a biography of the keynote speaker, a flyer, and a link to register. The email was sent out three times over the course of two weeks. The weekend before

the workshop, the facilitator sent out last minute instructions including a map of the Merrimack

College campus with parking information.

Registration began at 4:00 pm as attendees started arriving. Outside the workshop room,

there were two volunteers who greeted attendees, assisted with the check in process and sign in

sheet, and handed everyone a folder with program material. Two other volunteers showed

attendees to the sitting area and invited them to grab some food and look through the material

until the program begins.

The Senior Administrator for the School of Education and Social Policy, Meredith

Fitzsimmons, welcomed to the attendees on behalf of Isabelle Cherney, Dean of the School of

Education and Social Policy. Fitzsimmons then introduced the program facilitator, Mayreni

Villegas, who also welcomed everyone, shared her personal interest in this topic, explained the

capstone requirement and emphasized the need for everyone to complete the event evaluations at

the end. The facilitator also introduced the keynote speaker, Dr. Rachel Aghara, and together

they began the icebreaker activity. Dr. Aghara then proceeded with her presentation. After the

lecture, attendees were broken into eight groups and began discussions on their given case study.

When all the groups were done with their discussion, each group presented to the larger group

and there was a larger discussion. Participants were once again reminded to fill out the

evaluation forms before they left and hand them in to the volunteers that were walking around.

Findings

The goal of the workshop was to provide educators with the tools needed identify when

children may have a language barrier and/or a learning disability. The effectiveness of the

workshop was gathered through an event evaluation survey. The survey collected information,

which was placed in three main categories: demographics, quantitative data, and qualitative

themes.

Demographics

Prior to the event, there were 89 RSVPs. The day of the workshop, 67 people attended

and 62 of the participants completed an evaluation survey resulting in a 94% response rate. Fifty-

six of the participants identified as female (91.8%) and four of the participants identified as

males (6.6%). Although there were two other gender options, none of these were used and one

participant omitted their answer. Among event attendees, 43 participants were teachers (69.3%),

17 identified as students (27.4%), and lastly two were retired teachers (3.2%).

*Figure 1: Event Attendee Demographics*
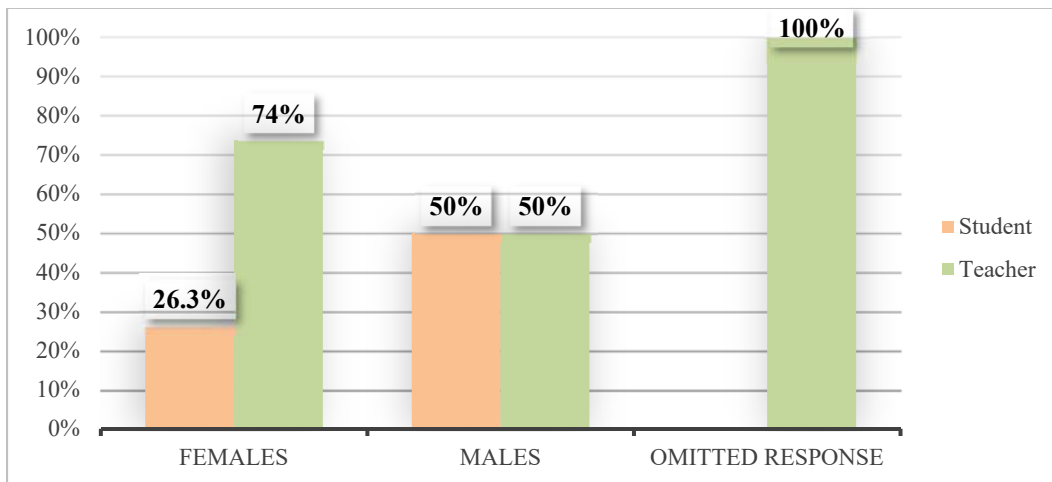
Workshop participants' ages ranged from under 25 years old to 65 years old and over.

The largest age group identified was the "Under 25" which made up 40.3% of the respondents

(n=25). Nine participants identified with the age group "25 – 34" (14.5%). Eight participants

identified with the age group "35 – 44" (12.9). Seven participants identified with the age group

45 – 54" (11.3%). Six participants identified with the age group "55 – 64" (9.7%). Only four

participants identified themselves as "65 and over" (6.5%).

Figure 2: Event Attendee Age Breakdown
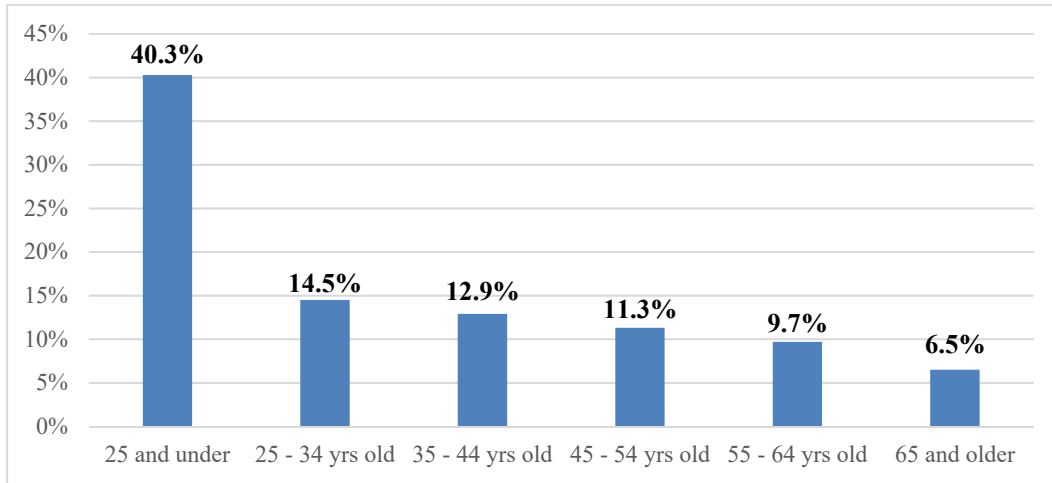
Workshop participants were also asked to self-identify their race as one or more of the following options: Caucasian/white, Hispanic/Latino or Hispanic origin, Black/African American, Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Middle Eastern/North African, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or other. Of the 61 participants who completed the survey question, 52 identified as Caucasian/White (85.2%). One identified as Black/African American (1.6%). Two participants identified as Latino/Hispanic Origin (3.3%). One identified as Asian (1.6). Lastly, five participants omitted their response (8.1%).

Figure 3: Event Attendee Race Breakdown
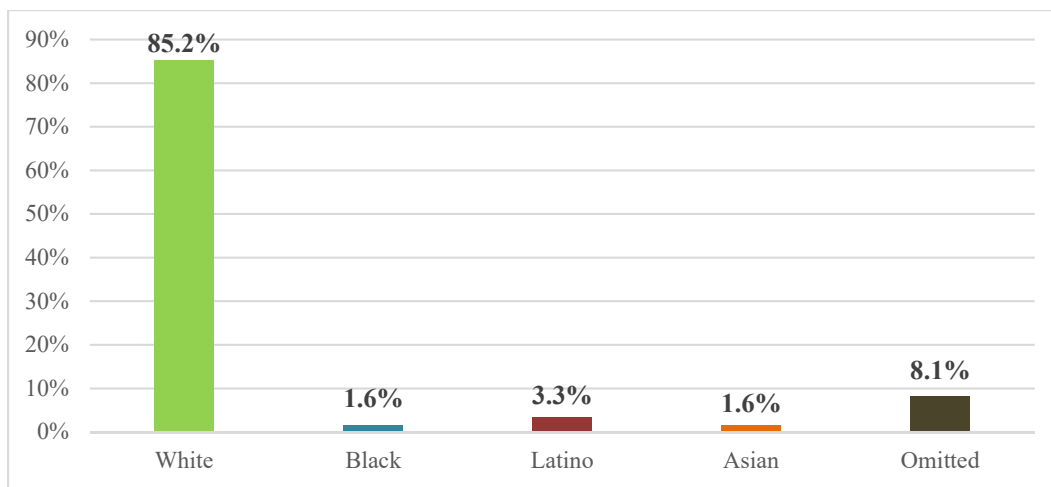
Of the 67 workshop attendees, 43 were teachers and two were retired teachers. In order to get a better idea of what the current procedures are their school systems concerning students who are ELL and/or have a learning disability (or are suspected of such), there were three questions for teachers to answer. When asked if participants received an introduction to ELL and LD training as part of their school orientation, 17 (37.8%) participants responded to having some level of introduction. Twenty-five (55.6%) participants responded to having no introduction to ELL or LD. Lastly, 3 (6.7%) left the response blank.

Figure 4: Event Attendee Received an Introduction to ELL / LD Training
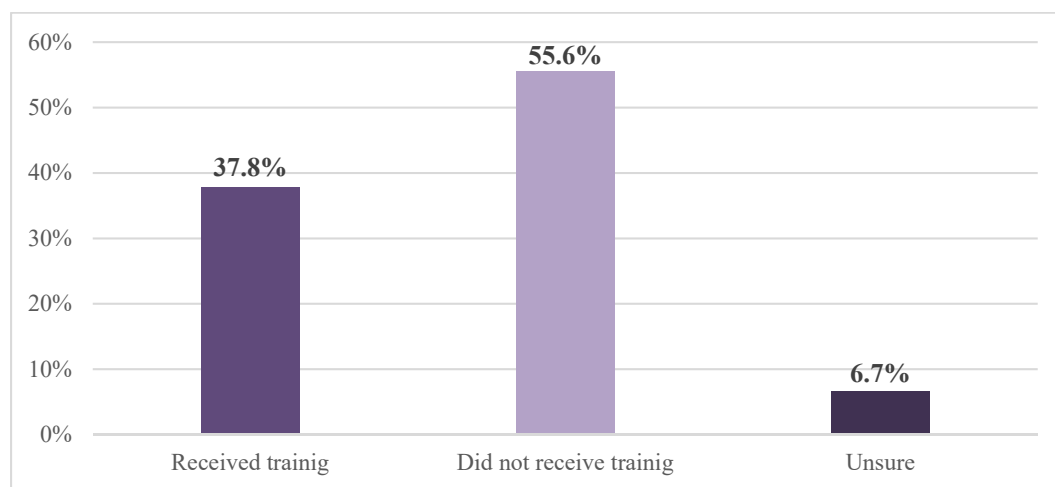
Workshop attendees were asked if they have a specific procedure or protocol that they currently use to determine ELL from LD among students in their classroom, to which 20 of the 45 (44.4%) teachers responded "yes." Ten of the 45 (22.2%) teachers responded to not having a procedure. Fourteen (31.1%) omitted their response to the question and one teacher (2.2%) was unsure. The teachers were also asked if they follow a specific procedure or protocol to teacher students who are identified as "new comers" to the US and 27 of the 45 teachers (60%) responded "yes" to following a procedure. Five of the 45 teachers (11.1%) responded no to

following a procedure. Eleven of the 45 (24.4%) left the question black and two (4.4%) answered

they were unsure of a protocol.

Figure 5: Event Attendee Has Specific Procedure to Determine ELL or LD
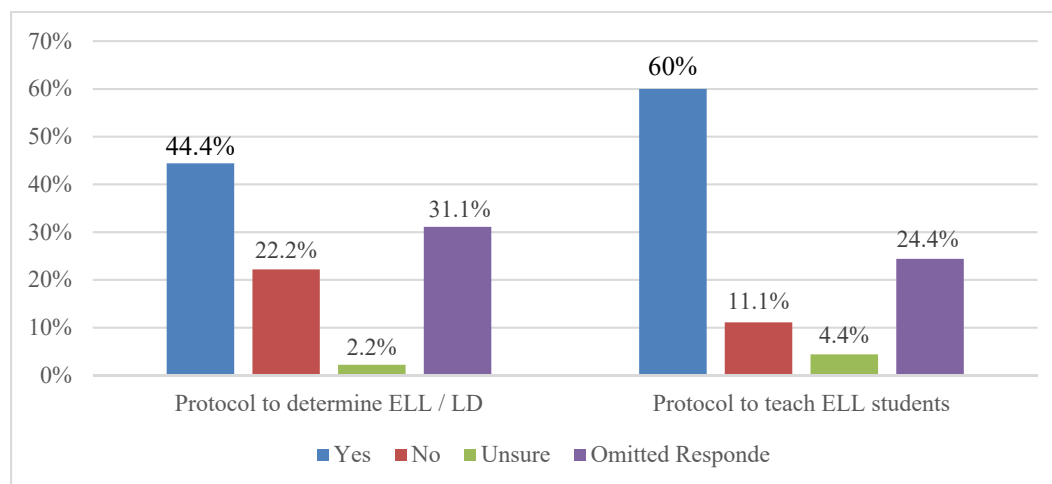

Quantitative Data: Quality of Workshop

The event evaluation invited event attendees to reflect on eight statements measuring the

workshop's relevance to their career, the keynote speaker, the likelihood they will look for

opportunities to learn more about ELL/LD issues, and the way the workshop was conducted.

Attendees were asked to rate their responses on a 4-point scale; strongly agree (4), agree (3),

disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). Most of the responses were within the "strongly agree"

and "agree" classification.

The first question on the event evaluation statement asked, "Overall, how would you rate

this workshop?" to which participants on average graded with a 3.6 out of 4. When asked if "the

goals of this workshop were clear to me," participants gave it an average score 3.7 out of 4 score.

When event attendees were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following

statement "[t]he activity was meaningfully connected to the topic," 43 participants (70.1%)

strongly agreed, 14 participants (23%) agreed, 2 participants (3.3%) disagreed, and 2 more

participants (3.3%) left the statement blank. Participants were also asked to rate the following

statement "[t]he activity made me think more about ELL/LD issues," of which 47 participants

(75.8%) strongly agreed, 12 participants (19.4%) agreed, 1 participant (1.6%) disagreed, and 2

participants (3.2%) left the statement blank.

*Figure 6: Event Attendee Responses to Workshop Activity*
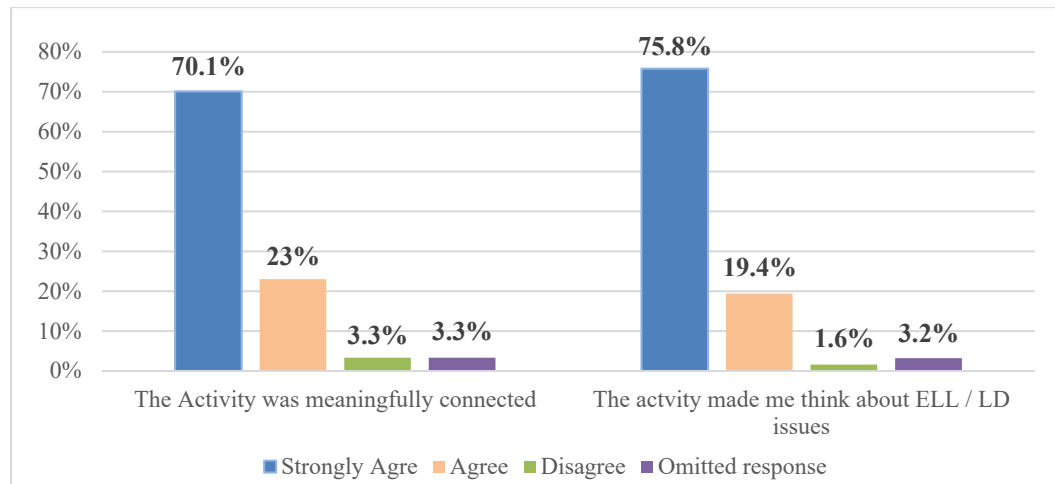
Event attendees were also asked to rate the keynote speaker in the following statement

"[t]he guest speaker was well informed on the topic" to which 50 participants (82%) strongly

agreed, 10 participants (16.2%) agreed, and 1 participant (1.6%) left it blank. As most of the

attendees were teachers in different capacities, it was important to know if the content of the

workshop was significant to them. When asked the following statement "[t]he content is relevant

to my work/career," 17 participants (30.9%) strongly agreed, 36 participants (65.5%) agreed, and

2 participants (3.6%) omitted their response.

Figure 7: Event Attendee Responses to Speaker and Content
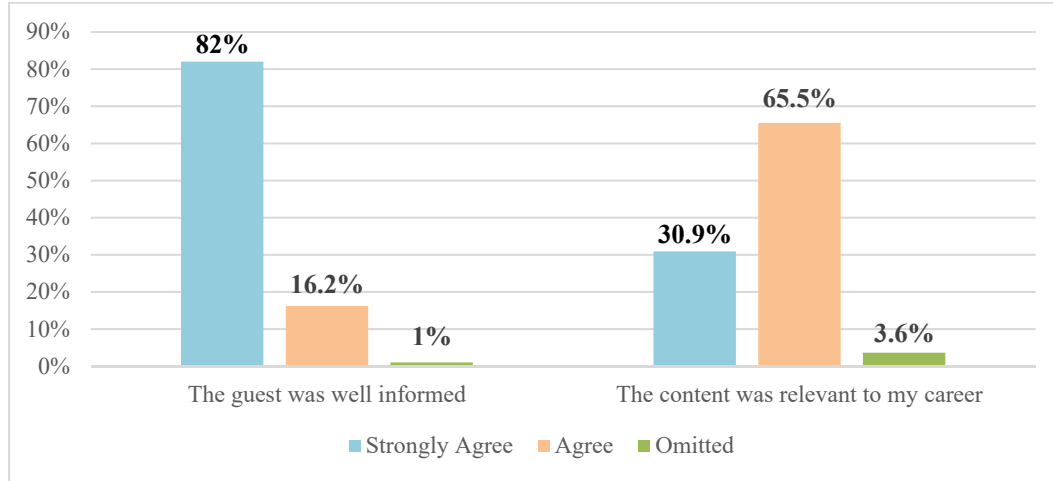
In order to measure if the workshop reached its goal of educating the participants, participants were asked the following statement "[t]he workshop has made me a better informed educator." Forty-three participants (70.5%) strongly agreed, 15 participants (24.6%) agreed, 2 participants (3.3%) disagreed, and 1 participant (1.6%) omitted their response to the statement. Secondly, participants responded to the following statement "[t]he workshop has inspired me to learn more about my school's ELL/LD policies" of which 34 participants (56.7%) strongly agreed, 22 participants (36.7%) agreed, one participant (1.6%) disagreed, and three participants (5%) omitted their response.

Figure 8: Event Attendee Responses to Being Better Informed and Inspired to Learn
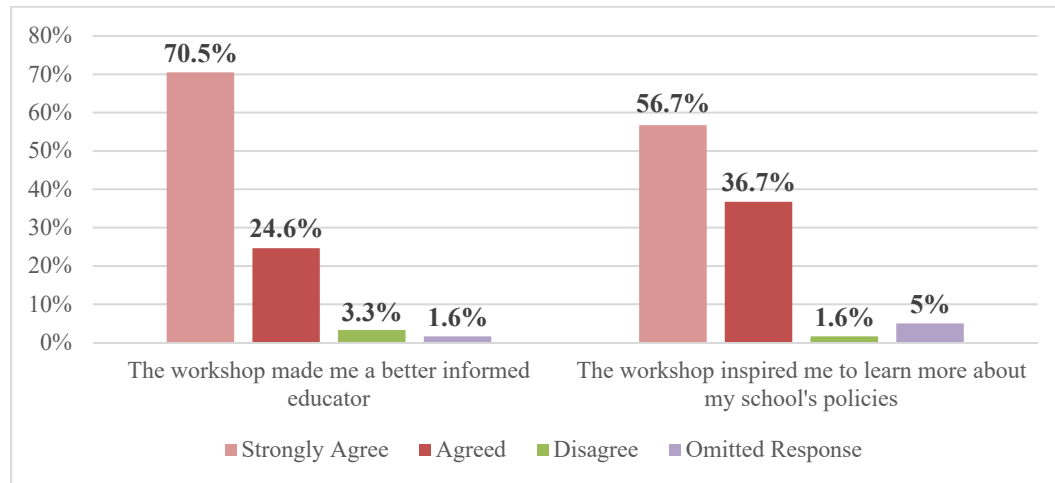

Qualitative Data: Open Responses in Evaluations

In order to get a better understanding about the outcomes of the workshop, the event evaluation had a few open response questions for participants, both teachers and undergrads, to further explain what they got out of the workshop. There were many reoccurring themes in their responses and therefore, they were categorized in the following categories: referral, direct action, home language survey, no action, recognizing ELL/LD, actively use native language, and new strategies.

Event attendees were asked to reflect on "[w]hat steps do you currently take when you suspect students in your classroom has a learning disability," of which 39 of the 45 teachers (86.7%) answered. Their responses were placed into two categories: either referral, which many admitted to referring their students to an assessment; or direct action such as approaching the student or asking to meet with the parent(s).

*Figure 9: What Steps Do You Take When You Suspect a Student Has an LD?*
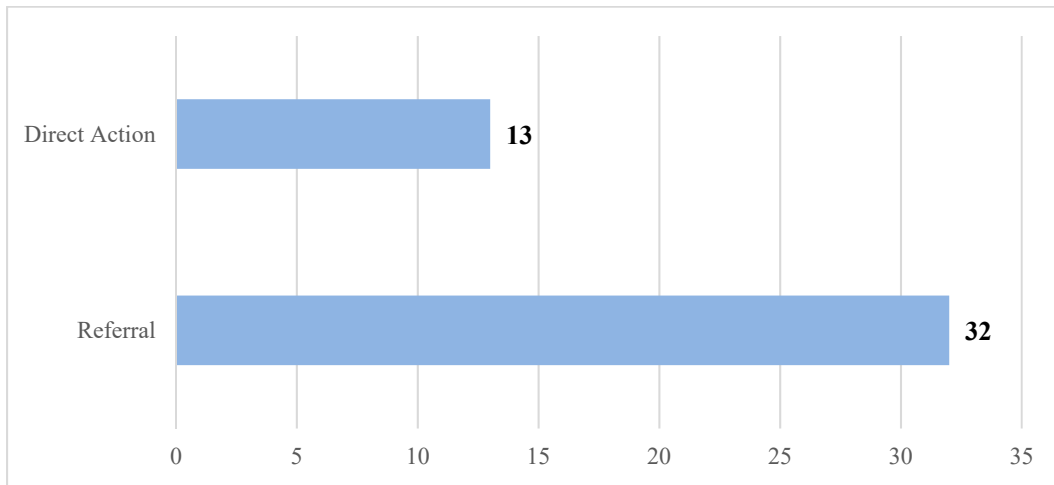
Event attendees were also asked, "[p]rior to this workshop, did you have a method for determining if a student was ELL or had an LD? If so, what was the method?" Answers varied very much and therefore were placed into four categories: home language survey, testing, referral, and nothing. Thirty-eight of the 45 teachers responded to the question. Eleven teachers identified using the home language survey, eight teachers acknowledged that they use testing as a way to determine ELL or LD, 15 teachers identified that they use referral as a method, and eight teachers acknowledge that they do nothing to determine ELL or LD.

Figure 10: Prior to Workshop, What Method Do You Use to Determine ELL of LD?
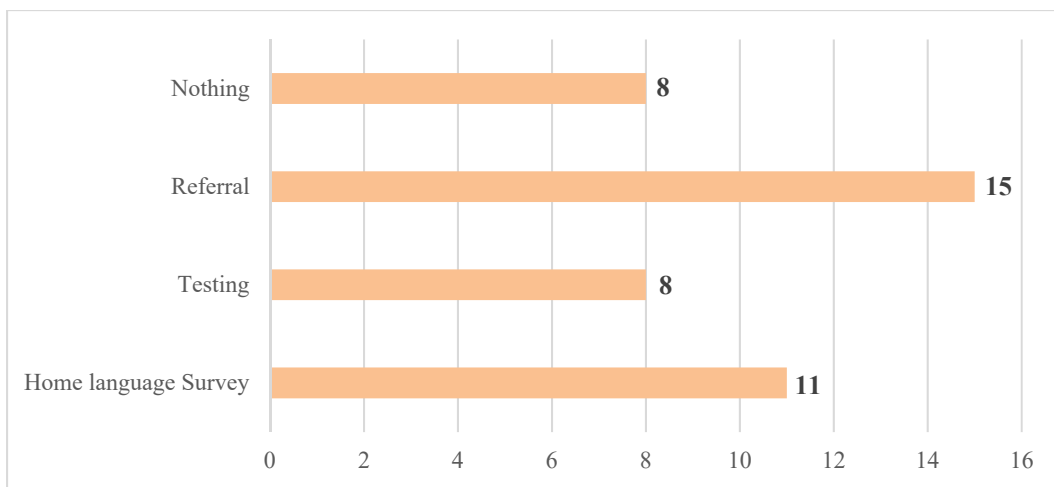
When asked "[a]s a result of attending this workshop, what do you think you will do differently in your future interactions with youth in your classroom," this question received 100% positive answers. Generally, participants shared that would pay more attention to the student and their behavior instead of depending so much on their academic content. Others shared that they would contact the parents and or interview previous instructors. Others stated that they would use different forms of assessment and refer student for evaluations when necessary. The largest category, however, was allowing the student to use multiple languages during class time. One participant wrote "To be honest, this affected how I will approach colleagues more. I will be <u>much</u> less likely to support teachers who refuse to allow students to use both languages. As for the youth, I will continue to encourage them to use what they already know and build on that."

Figure 11: After the Workshop, What Will You Do Differently?
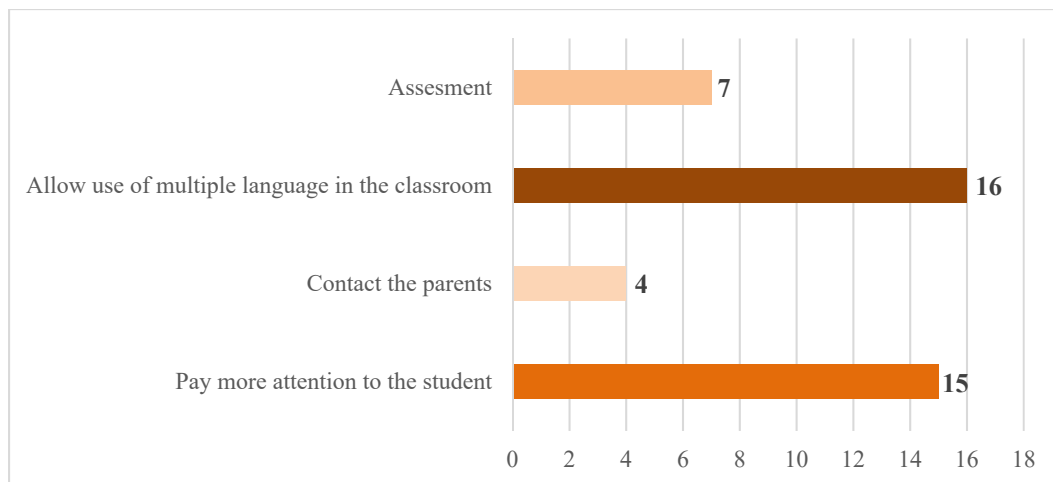
Event participants were also asked, "[w]hat were the most valuable things you learned from today's workshop," which also received 100% positive feedback. Due to the high volume of responses, each response was categorized in three categories: new strategies, active use of native language and recognition of ELL / LD. Participants shared that they valued all the benefits

of speaking multiple languages, and that they also liked understanding the common indicators of

ELL and LDs. Others, such as the undergraduates who are not teaching yet, stated that they

appreciated the "new strategies" that were discussed and allowing students to use their native

language during tests if they do not know the word in English. A few participants shared that the

workshop reinforced what they had thought and will continue using their method of teaching.

Figure 12: What Was the Most Valuable Part of the Workshop?
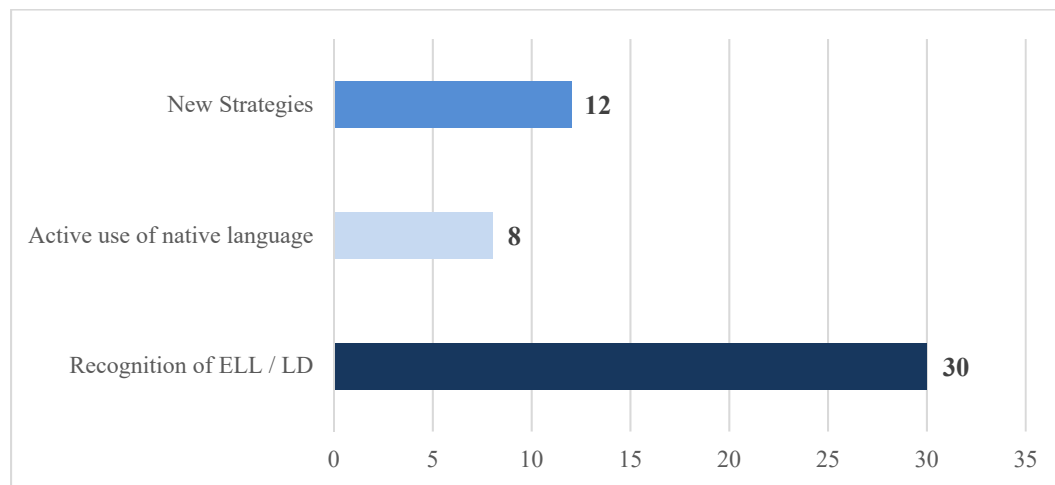
Discussion

The findings from the evaluation analysis supported the goals of the event and reinforced

the review of literature it stemmed from. In the evaluation, I included a question about the

procedure/method educators used to determine if a student is ELL or has a learning disability and

19% disclosed that they do not have a method and they usually just use "intuition," which shows

the lack of policies (or enforcement of policy) in our educational system. Another 26.2% stated

they use the Home Language Survey to determine the primary language at home and then 35.7%

refer the student for a language evaluation if the primary language at home is anything other than

English – which according to the latest data, is 1 in every 5 homes in the US. The lack of

consistency across US educational institutions further perpetuates the high numbers of students

being misdiagnosed and/or falling through the cracks and not furthering their education.

About 71% of educators who filled out the workshop evaluation shared that they refer

student for an evaluation when they suspect a learning disability. Although that may sound like

the proper thing to do only 28.9% of respondents admitted to taking direct action. Most

educators do not take the time to speak to the students directly and state their academic concerns

with the student or parent/guardian. That in itself causes detachment and has the educators

disengaged from the evaluation process if there is an evaluation at all. The school may not have

the necessary resources to evaluate the student or may lack some of the components mandated by

the IDEA, like evaluating the student in their native language if there is a language barrier. By

not following up and/or taking direct action in the evaluation process and communicating with

the parents, the educator is detached and often times may not even get the result of the

examination and is unaware of the circumstances in which the evaluation was carried out. This is

yet another reason why the workshop emphasized the need for communication between the

educators, their students, the parents/guardian, and the school evaluation team.

It is encouraging that attendees plan to do things differently when engaging with their

students as a result of the workshop. Fifteen of the 42 responses involved paying more attention

to the student, some mentioned focusing on the student and their interactions and less on test

results, and yet others shared they would stop assuming and contact the parents and speak to the

student. However, the most impactful was letting students use their own native language when

needed. During Dr. Aghara's presentation, she stressed that many students often know the

answers to the questions they are being asked, however, they may not always know the answer in

English. By allowing the use of multiple languages in the classroom, teachers can have a positive

effect on students, and it is good to know that educators who attended the workshop also see this value.

Similarly, another important point milestone was the regarding the policies of ELL and LD in schools. The event attendees came from different schools and different districts, both from public and private schools, and it is remarkable that 94% agreed that the workshop inspired them to learn more about their school's policies (or lack thereof). If we want to see change in the long run, there needs to be more policies, more people lobbying for policies, and more people reporting to the Department of Education when such policies are not being implemented.

As for the workshop itself, it was well received. Over 94% of attendees agreed that the activity was meaningfully connected to the topic. There can be difficulty to profoundly connect an activity to the topic in a short workshop timeframe so the fact that attendees were able to get as much as possible out of the workshop in such a short amount of time is remarkable. Over 98% also agreed or strongly agreed that Dr. Aghara was well informed and knew what she was talking about. Lastly, when asking participants what the most valuable things were they learned at the workshop, the responses were all positive. People stated that they really liked the LD/ELL indicators, they liked learning about the health benefits of being bilingual/multilingual, and others commented on the new strategies they learned and also as how well the workshop was put together.

Limitations

While the workshop was a success, there were limitations in the implementation of the workshop, which were confirmed in the event evaluation. The first limitation was that the content of the workshop was introductory and although I partnered with the Institute for New Teacher Supports, and the biggest age group was "under 25", there were a couple (two) seasoned

teachers who were the outliers in the surveys. When reviewing their responses with some of the statements like "[t]he workshop made me a better informed educator" or "[t]his workshop has inspired me to learn about the ELL/LD policies in my school", their responses were within the "disagree" option. It would be advisable that for the future, participants are informed of the level of intensity of the workshop, so the target audience is reached and only the target audience.

The second limitation was the time. Although the MINTS events typically only go for two hours, they often do a series of the same topic in order to go more in depth on an issue or topic. Due to the nature of this project, a series was not possible. We had also thought of doing an all-day training at a specific school in Lawrence due to their high population of ELL students however, with Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) testing in the state occurring at the same time, this was not possible. Event participants also noted in the evaluations that there was not enough time in the workshop to explore the topic, noting that they liked the group discussion but would have also liked some time for questions and answers for the keynote speaker at the end.

Lastly, one additional limitation was that we did not anticipate the amount of people that would be interested in this topic and therefore, did not initially have the capacity for the amount of people that were interested. Originally, we intended to host a workshop for 30 to 50 people. The online RSVP form was not capped and in total, we received 75 responses. Additionally, a Merrimack professor who had prior knowledge of the workshop, made it mandatory for their students to attend. At the end, were able to find a new space and accommodate everyone who attended but we did have to implement a waitlist.

In the future, a workshop like this one should: 1) have a series of workshops so that there is more time; 2) be tiered for different levels of professional, both new and seasoned teachers;

and 3) anticipate a larger response, especially as this topic is becoming more and more prevalent in the US public school system.

Future Implications

The quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that hosting a workshop for educators is a successful pathway for educators to learn more about the differences in learning disabilities and multilingualism, which their students may be struggling with. Furthermore, a workshop like this one can have a bigger effect in the current policies and procedures at the schools where attendees are teaching. For our particular workshop, we had attendees come from a variety of different school districts within the Merrimack Valley region and many of the attendees stated they left with new strategies, which they are likely to share with their peers. Most importantly, attendees were able to get a better picture of what ELL and/or LD's look like and are now better equipped to work with the different populations within their classroom.

In the future, hosting a workshop like this should include a series of workshops going more in depth so that everyone who attends the workshops can leave learning something new instead of having a refresher (such as the two seasoned educators who came to this workshop). Additionally, the method of participant outreach should be expanded as this project only collaborated with MINTS. Although my partnership with MINTS attracted many educators interested in the topic, the participants were homogenous. Bringing some diversity to the conversation and group discussions would be beneficial, as it would offer a different point of view.

If having a series of workshops is not a possibility, having a day long symposium would be valuable as the morning half could be concentrated on just ELL and the afternoon part could be concentrated on LD. There could be experts in each field and go over what ELL and LD looks

like, the services available, the policies in place, and what else could be done. After each info

session, there could be a panel to discuss the overlaps of both and how educators can best help

their students.

       Finally, yet importantly, a deep look into both state and federal policy would be very

beneficial in the future. From my event data, 93.4% of the attendees stated that the workshop

inspired them to learn more about their school's ELL/LD policies and many of the attendees

were not fully aware of the current federal policies (IDEA). One attendee reported that they were

unaware that children who are suspected of having an LD and is identified as ELL should be

evaluated in their native language. Therefore, a workshop dedicated to learning about students'

rights could create positive educational outcomes for both the students as well as the educators.

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Appendix A: Event Flyer

Appendix B: Event Agenda

MERRIMACK COLLEGE
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION & SOCIAL POLICY

Merrimack Institute for New Teacher Support
(M.I.N.T.S.)

www.merrimack.edu/mints

Determining Differences in Bilingualism & Learning Disabilities
Mayreni Villegas, Workshop Facilitator
Rachel Aghara, Keynote Speaker

Agenda

Welcome & Check-in .... Mayreni Villegas .... 4:00 – 4:14

Introduction .... Mayreni Villegas .... 4:15 – 4:20

Ice Breaker .... Mayreni & Rachel .... 4:20 – 4:35

Keynote .... Rachel Aghara .... 4:35 – 5:05

Group Activity 1 (case study) .... 5:05 – 5:25

Report back to group .... 5:25 – 5:55

Evaluations .... 5:55 – 6:00

Appendix C: Event Evaluation Form

Thank you for participating in the _____ Workshop. This post-event evaluation is being conducted as part of a student research capstone. The purpose of this evaluation is to gain your thoughts and opinions on the workshop. This evaluation should take no more than 5 minutes to complete. Please **DO NOT** write your name on the evaluation and all answers provided will be kept confidential.

1. Overall, how would you rate this workshop?
   ◯ Excellent   ◯ Good   ◯ Fair   ◯ Poor

2. Using your best estimate, what percentage of children are ELL in your classroom? _____%

3. When you first started teaching, was there an introduction to ELL and LD as part of your orientation?
   ◯ Yes   ◯ No   ◯ Unsure

4. Is there a procedure or protocol now to determine ELL from LD among your students?
   ◯ Yes   ◯ No   ◯ Unsure

5. Is there a procedure or protocol now for teaching students who are "newcomers" to the US?
   ◯ Yes   ◯ No   ◯ Unsure

6. What steps do you currently take when you suspect a student in your classroom has a learning disability?

   _____

   _____

7. Prior to this workshop, did you have a method for determining if a student was ELL or had an LD? If so, what was that method?

   _____

   _____

8. As a result of attending this workshop, what do you think you will do differently in your future interactions with youth in the classroom?

   _____

   _____

Please respond to the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
9. The goals of this workshop were clear to me	○	○	○	○
10. The content is relevant to my work / career	○	○	○	○
11. The discussions stayed on track with the theme of the workshop	○	○	○	○
12. The guest speaker was well informed on the topic	○	○	○	○
13. The activity was meaningfully connected to the topic	○	○	○	○
14. The activity made me think more about the ELL / LD issue	○	○	○	○
15. This workshop has made me better informed as an educator	○	○	○	○
16. This workshop has inspired me to learn more about my school's ELL / LD policies	○	○	○	○

17. What were the most valuable things you learned from today's workshop?

_____

_____

18. How could the workshop be improved?

_____

_____

19. What is your age?
○ Under 25
○ 25-34
○ 35-44
○ 45-54
○ 55-64
○ 65 and older

20. What is your race? (*Check all that apply*)
☐ Caucasian / White
☐ Hispanic / Latino / Latina / Spanish Origin
☐ Black / African American
☐ Asian
☐ American Indian / Alaskan Native
☐ Middle Eastern / North African
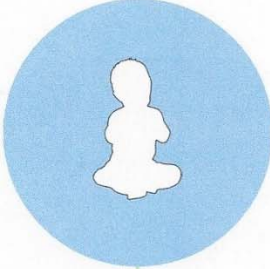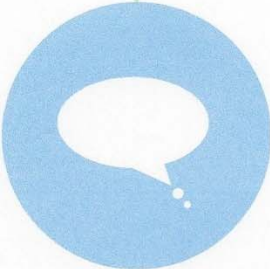☐ Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander
☐ Other (not listed)

21. How do you define your gender? (*Check all that apply*)
☐ Male   ☐ Female   ☐ Trans / Non-binary   ☐ Other:_____

Appendix D: Myths Versus Facts Activity

Bilingual Language Development

MYTHS vs. FACTS

Exposing infants and toddlers to more than one language may cause delays in their speech or language development.

All children are capable of learning more than one language. Research shows that bilingual children can detect & discriminate differences in sounds between two languages.

Exposing children with language delays or impairments to two languages will cause them to become further delayed or confused.

Bilingualism does not cause language delays. Even children with language impairments are capable of learning more than one language.

Bilingual children will have academic problems or difficulty learning once they start school

Bilingual children should always receive native language accommodations or support when necessary. Research shows academic advantages of being bilingual, including superior problem solving/multitasking skills, as well as increased cognitive flexibility.

When children mix their languages it means that they are confused & having difficulty learning

Mixing two languages or "code-mixing" is normal. Code-mixing can show that the person has an understanding of the rules of both languages & he/she can use both without difficulty

Citation: Guiberson, M. (2013). Bilingual myth-busters series language confusion in bilingual children. *Perspectives on Communication Disorders and Sciences in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Populations, 20*, 5–14.

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