Examining Administrator Perspectives on Educational Experiences for ELL Students with Disabilities

Karley Strouse
Northwest Nazarene University, karleystrouse@gmail.com

Paula Kellerer
pkellerer@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

Examining Administrator Perspectives on Educational Experiences for ELL Students with Disabilities

As the population of ELL students continues to rise, so does the number of ELL students with disabilities. This unique group of students represents over 1.3 million students in the public school system in the U.S. (Jozwik et al., 2020). Despite this trend, the preparation of educators has lagged behind the evolving demographics, particularly in adequately supporting ELL students with disabilities (Accardo et al., 2020; Jozwik et al., 2020; Smith & Larwin; 2021). ELL students with disabilities require high-quality instruction to simultaneously navigate English acquisition and academic subjects. However, a mere 33% of U.S. teachers have received training in teaching linguistically diverse students (Padron & Waxman, 2016). Given this substantial gap in preparedness, it becomes imperative for school administrators to possess a deep understanding of effective educational methodologies tailored for ELL students with disabilities.

Educators commonly encounter challenges in distinguishing between ELL students undergoing language acquisition and those grappling with learning disabilities, leading to difficulties in identifying ELL students with disabilities (Karvonen et al., 2021; Park, 2019; Yamasaki & Luk, 2018). The intricacies and intersections of language development and learning impediments often contribute to misrepresentations of ELL students within special education (DeMatthews & Knight, 2019; Yamasaki & Luk, 2018). Notably, ELL students are frequently underrepresented in early elementary grades yet overrepresented in later grades within special education settings (DeMatthews & Knight, 2019).

Extensive research underscores the pivotal role of administrators as the second most influential factor in student academic achievement, following teachers (Grissom et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2018). Administrators wield considerable influence over student outcomes, teacher retention rates, the development of bilingual educators, and the instruction of ELL students (Padron & Waxman, 2016). Despite their indirect impact within classrooms, administrators' leadership profoundly shapes the experiences of all staff and students, particularly students with significant educational needs (Auslander, 2018; Grissom et al., 2021; Vintan & Gallagher, 2019).

School administrators are key components in enhancing the educational outcomes of minoritized students (Vintan & Gallagher, 2019; Von Esch, 2018). As leaders, they possess the authority to guide teachers towards employing effective strategies for ELL students with disabilities (Reyes & Gentry, 2019). A nuanced understanding of statewide and school policies pertaining to ELL students with disabilities is crucial for administrators to advocate for equitable practices and procedures (Cruze & López, 2020; Thompson et al., 2020). However, administrators often lack sufficient training in curriculum selection for students with disabilities, oversight of special education programs, and addressing the needs of ELL students with disabilities (Roberts & Guerra, 2017).

Research indicates that exploring educator perceptions regarding students with diverse language and learning needs can serve as a valuable starting point in mitigating biased beliefs and attitudes (Hafner & Ortiz, 2021; Smith & Larwin, 2021). Unfavorable perceptions can significantly impact the quality of instruction provided to students (Rizzuto, 2017; Yough, 2019). Conversely, educators demonstrating high confidence and positive attitudes towards supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students can enhance student achievement (Yough, 2019).

Despite these insights, there remains an insufficient body of research addressing the confluence of English language acquisition challenges and disability-related issues (Karvonen et

al., 2021; Wanzek et al., 2016). Moreover, studies examining school administrators' perceptions concerning ELL students with disabilities are scarce, particularly in the Pacific Northwest region. Investigating how school administrators perceive educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities is a crucial step towards fostering supportive and inclusive environments. The purpose of the current study was to examine the perceptions of school administrators in the Pacific Northwest on equitable educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities.

Research Design

The study utilized an exploratory qualitative approach using semistructured interviews to examine the perspectives of school administrators in the Pacific Northwest on equitable educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Marshall et al., 2022). The exploratory qualitative research design facilitated the process to seek understanding from participants' views and experiences through semistructured interviews (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The study was guided by the following research question: How do administrators in the Pacific Northwest perceive equitable educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities?

Since ELL students with disabilities are severely underrepresented in research, a qualitative approach was selected to explore a phenomenon that previous literature has left unaddressed, especially in the Pacific Northwest (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Marshall et al., 2022). The interview protocol was modeled after an existing study by Roberts et al. (2018) and was modified to center questions on administrators' perceptions on educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities using a DisCrit lens. The interview protocol included 10 questions surrounding participants' views on educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities that was validated by a panel of seven individuals with expertise in school administration and educating diverse learners to assess the relevance of each interview protocol question. The interviews were recorded and transcribed via Microsoft Teams. Microsoft Teams interviews allowed the researcher to reach a broader range of participants throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Participants

A total of 12 participants were recruited using a purposeful, snowball sampling technique which allowed the researcher to reach diverse candidates (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Participants included 12 public school administrators, with representation of four administrators from each state (Oregon, Washington, and Idaho). Participants included 10 principals and two assistant principals. Seven administrators identified as male, while five administrators identified as female. All participants fell in the age range of 40 to 50 years old. Participants represented a wide range of experience in administration (1 year to 23 years). Only two administrators had a background in special education, whereas all participants had previous teaching experience. Nine were administrators at the elementary level, while three were administrators at the secondary level (see Table 1). Participants were all licensed school administrators currently employed in school districts with large populations of ELL students.

Table 1 *Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Role	State	Years of Experience	Sped	Teaching	Level
P1	50	M	Principal	OR	13	No	Yes	Elementary
P2	43	F	Principal	ID	3	No	Yes	Elementary
P3	47	M	Principal	OR	10	No	Yes	Elementary
P4	46	M	Asst. Principal	OR	1	No	Yes	Elementary
P5	48	F	Principal	ID	3	No	Yes	Elementary
P6	46	F	Principal	WA	6	No	Yes	Elementary
P7	54	M	Principal	WA	20	No	Yes	Secondary
P8	45	M	Principal	ID	8	No	Yes	Elementary
P9	46	F	Principal	ID	6	No	Yes	Secondary
P10	57	F	Asst. Principal	WA	4	No	Yes	Elementary
P11	55	M	Principal	OR	23	Yes	Yes	Secondary
P12	50	M	Principal	WA	13	Yes	Yes	Elementary

Eight districts in each state with the largest population of ELL students were targeted to recruit diverse participants. The school district demographics are reported in Table 2.

Table 2 *District Demographics: NCES 2022-2023 Enrollment Data*

School District	District Type	Total Enrollment	Total Schools	Number of School Administrators
A	City	39,253	56	108.70
B	City	19,044	36	56.17
C	Suburb	10,010	20	39.39
D	City	39,507	65	112.51
E	City	20,258	33	62.69
F	Suburb	21,136	46	74.49
G	Suburb	18,485	43	64.44
H	City	15,997	29	58.00

I	Suburb	5,627	11	18.00
J	Town	4,152	7	9.41
K	Town	9,399	18	15.29

Note. NCES Data, 2023. Public Domain.

Data Analysis

The recorded interview data was first transcribed using exact wording from participants' responses via Microsoft Teams transcription. The transcripts were then reviewed and edited manually by the researcher. Qualitative data analysis software, Dedoose, facilitated data storage, organization, and assignment of labels for coding. After the data was transcribed and organized, it was coded to make sense of the text data, then categorized into themes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

The researcher went through each individual interview transcript and coded the document with text segments codes and in vivo codes as part of the first cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2021). Each interview document produced 15 to 25 codes. After the first cycle of coding for each document, the researcher moved into the second cycle coding process to utilize pattern coding to group similar codes together to consolidate the data (Saldaña, 2021). Finally, the researcher reviewed the full list of pattern codes to condense into seven themes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws on disability critical race theory (DisCrit), which examines the intersection of race and disability (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Cioè-Peña, 202; Chiu, 2022). DisCrit is a combination of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disability Studies (DS) that scrutinizes systemic barriers for minoritized people (Cioè-Peña, 2021). The interconnection of race and disability status is paramount to frame this study as it examines administrators' perceptions of educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities.

Rooting the study in the DisCrit framework maintains the focus on the systemic barriers that reduce achievement opportunities of minoritized students instead of emphasizing individual limitations of ELL students with disabilities. DisCrit emphasizes that student identities are more than race, level of English proficiency, or disability status (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Cioè-Peña, Chiu, 2022; 2021). Examining administrators' perceptions on equitable educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities is a giant first step to creating inclusive, equitable schools for all students (DeMatthews, 2020).

Findings and Themes

"Qualitative inquiry demands meticulous attention to language and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and meanings of human experience" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 10). Through careful inspection of the data, several common themes emerged from school administrators' perceptions of equitable educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities. The outcome of coding and categorization of 12 interview transcripts led to the production of seven themes: The Power of Perception, Effective Teaching and Instructional Strategies, Equity and Inclusive Practices, Barriers to Learning, Complexities of the Identification Process, Appropriate Curriculum, and Creating Success.

The Power of Perception

The participants shared that the attitudes and perceptions of school administrators can have a powerful impact on education for ELL students with disabilities. The impact of these perceptions can create positive or negative outcomes for ELL students with disabilities. Participants mentioned the importance of administrators' attitudes being based in empathy, passion for educating students, and ownership for all students.

P3 (Participant 3) shared how critical it is for administrators to "lean on their [ELL students with disabilities] strengths and their assets that they bring." P3 continued, "first and foremost, you have to have a belief that all students can learn at a high level, and they can all grow and achieve to the best of their abilities." P6 stated that administrators should have "the mentality that all students can and will learn and that we will meet them where they are." P2 mentioned that administrators must have a "student-first philosophy and know that all students can learn…they may learn at their own levels, but they all can learn, and they can all achieve."

Although participants shared that the attitudes and perceptions of school administrators can have a positive impact on education for ELL students with disabilities, there were also many perceptions noted that can have a negative impact, such as harmful perspectives stemming from racism and ableism. A secondary principal, P9, shared:

> We talk a lot about what not to do. We don't talk about why we don't do it and the impact it has on people…So, there's very little training for administrators on the topics of racism, ableism…all of that. We don't really get trained on how to deal with it and if we do, it very generic and it's not enough.

P12 shared the importance of "putting race at the center of decision-making and data mining and acknowledgement of how implicit bias and bias that we just carry as white individuals happens all the time and bringing that to the forefront." P12 added, "we are talking about race because these are the decisions our school or individuals are making around students who are other than white. So…what is the impact?" P9 stated succinctly, "we can't be colorblind." P1 emphasized how important it is to be "consciously trying to find teachers who come from a diverse set of backgrounds that represent our kids."

Effective Teaching and Instructional Strategies

Participants discussed how classroom supports such as scaffolding, language-rich environments, and the use of visuals can enrich the educational experience for ELL students with disabilities. P8 noted the effectiveness of scaffolding, "scaffold support…so we can see what they do know and then be able to provide them support in that area." P10 shared that the classroom environment needs to be "print and language rich, but with good scaffolds and access points for all students."

Most administrators mentioned how visual supports in the classroom can be an effective instructional strategy for ELL students with disabilities. However, P11 explained that visual supports must be more than just "decoration on the wall" and "it has to be rich print environments but taught to the students. It can't just be a poster on the wall, and we tend to do that."

Participants also reported that building language skills by providing language-rich opportunities and environments is a crucial teaching strategy for ELL students with disabilities. P10 shared that "the environment needs to be…print and language rich…and really deliberate ways of interacting and having students communicate with each other of their learning." P12

stated that teachers can enhance language development for ELL students with disabilities by increasing language opportunities such as "peer dialogue, collaboration time…and being able to thoughtfully plan and predict where challenges for that some population of students may incur." P5 described an ideal classroom as a "really fluid environment of, you know, vocabulary development and experiential learning."

Equity and Inclusive Practices

Administrators discussed their schools' approaches to implementing inclusion to the general education setting. P11 stated, "we are changing our model to meet the needs of the kid rather than changing the kid to meet the needs of the model, which is what we often do in education, especially in special education." Many participants explained that they want their school staff to understand the benefits of including ELL students with disabilities in the general education setting as much as possible. P11 noted, "we've been training staff and special education teachers and our ELL staff…how to work with all students rather than just sending them to a location, no more location, special education, not by geography, but by need."

P6 recounted that after the pandemic and racial injustice throughout the U.S., that "equity became a huge topic." P10 shared that in her district, "the whole district started an equity training thing…we went through a year and a half of *Courageous Conversations* and then we've been working on responsive teaching." P11 stated, "equity becomes equality, and we have to recognize that equity and equality are not the same word which we tend to merge them together and make equity into equality. You have to start with equity to get to equality."

Barriers to Learning

School administrators reported that there are several barriers that can arise to impede the educational experience for ELL students with disabilities. Some of these barriers include a lack of educator training, language differences, and school-family relationships. Even with full staffing, administrators said that educator training is lacking and becomes a barrier for ELL students to adequately learn and access their education. P12 stated, "I honestly don't believe that our classroom teachers are equipped, and neither are our special educators to really support that subgroup." P9 noted, "we do a very poor job of training people."

Several administrators discussed how language acts as a barrier for ELL students with disabilities both individually and at a systems-level. P1 shared, "language is a barrier, right? It's a barrier for us to help them get to a point where they're able to engage in school in a meaningful way…to feel like they're a part of something bigger." At the individual level, P11 said, "learning two languages can be very difficult and not having enough special education staff who speaks Spanish…making that connection is difficult." At the systems level, when there are many diverse languages represented in the school, it can become difficult for schools to provide appropriate instruction. P1 shared, "we have 17 languages in my building and…so, it's just one of those things but I try and find some common ground."

Administrators also mentioned that the disconnect between schools and families can be a barrier for learning for ELL students with disabilities, with P9 stating, "I think all around we need to do better with parents." P4 described it as a major shortcoming, "this is maybe the biggest shortcoming we have in the system right now is really getting an understanding of the families…and understanding what's being done in the family, in the home, and seeing what's happening."

Complexities of the Identification Process

Many participants stated that the biggest obstacle they face to providing equitable educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities begins with identifying whether students' difficulties are due to learning differences, language differences, or both. P11 questioned, "Is it the language? Is it the disability? Is it both?" A few participants believe that the process to evaluate and identify ELL students with disabilities is too long and cumbersome. P2 stated, "the process to get them qualified for special education can be kind of convoluted." P7 expressed, "I wish there was like a faster way to identify the students…so that they can be placed in the right program."

Administrators also expressed concern for the overidentification, under identification, or misidentification for ELL students with disabilities. P10 stated, "I think mostly kids are overqualified for special education and so I'm pretty passionate about that." P1 described the role that administrators should play in the identification process:

> As administrators it's really important for us to engage our systems for identification of these problems…in a more meaningful way so that we're not misidentifying the student…I think that that's important for administrators to keep in mind too, are your student study teams, is your identification process, are all those things that you have going on in your building, are they helping your kids or hinder, right?

Appropriate Curriculum

School administrators believe it is crucial to have curriculum that is appropriate, culturally responsive, and accessible for ELL students with disabilities. Most participants mentioned that curriculum should be culturally responsive and include diverse representation. P8 noted, "we want curriculum that speaks to our kids, and the kids when they look in there, they can say like, *hey, this kid looks like me*."

Administrators believe that curriculum should be not just accessible to the students to meet them where they're at, but also easily accessible for teachers to implement. P10 stated, "the biggest thing about curriculum…would be that the teacher knows how to use the curriculum as a base." Participants noted that educators need to understand how to adapt curriculum into the classroom. P10 shared, "I just think we're fooling ourselves if we think we can just pull out a curriculum and teach a student that way. It just doesn't work, and it has to be able to adapt it into the classroom."

Participants also noted that educators need to understand how to adapt curriculum to deliver specially designed instruction, provide accommodations, and know the difference between a modification and accommodation. P10 stated:

> Many curriculums will sell themselves as having SDI, specifically designed instruction, for ELL students. But it's like maybe one paragraph or one page…So, I think whatever the curriculum that you are using, you have to have that special ed and language focus to really be able to adapt to your curriculum, to the students that you have with whatever proficiency level and whatever level of need that there is.

Creating Success

The last theme that surfaced was creating success. School administrators believe it is critical to have a strong school staff, focus on relationship building, and individualize approaches to education. Participants reported that creating success begins with a strong, supportive school

team. P3 stated succinctly, "you gotta have a strong team." Administrators believe it is key to focus on building relationships with students and their families. P8 stated, "I think first and foremost, like at our school, we really focus on the relationship first, like kids have to feel safe in their environment before they're ever gonna trust and put forth a great effort academically."

School administrators believe that the educational experience should be tailored to provide an individualized approach to best meet the needs of these unique students. P12 noted the importance of "making sure that we're addressing the students in front of us in ways that we know that can provide them access." P2 shared her experience of leaning on other experts, "I really appreciate the ELD teachers and how their specialization in that and…sped too and really relying on them for their expertise and their knowledge about the student and their knowledge about just the system, the education system" and how important it is for administrators to "take the time to really understand what students need, not just assuming that everyone's kind of at this one level and differentiating, but really being very specific about what students needs are in their academic journey."

Discussion

This study unveiled a rich tapestry of school administrator perceptions on equitable educational experiences of ELL students with disabilities, with the identification of seven themes: The Power of Perception, Effective Teaching and Instructional Strategies, Equity and Inclusive Practices, Barriers to Learning, Complexities of the Identification Process, Appropriate Curriculum, and Creating Success.

Administrators' perspectives emerged as powerful drivers of either positive or negative outcomes for ELL students with disabilities. The positive perceptions emphasized by participants, such as maintaining a student-first philosophy, fostering a collective responsibility, and exhibiting empathy and ownership, align with the ideals of fostering inclusive and equitable educational environments. The commitment to a positive mindset underscores the importance of administrators actively modeling beliefs in the capabilities of all students and closing the achievement gap.

Conversely, negative perceptions rooted in biases, racism, and ableism pose significant challenges to creating equitable educational experiences. The study illuminates that unintentional biases emphasize the need for proactive strategies like root cause analysis and exposure to different cultures. The impact of harmful perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic emphasizes the urgency of addressing deep-rooted beliefs that can lead to the loss of staff and compromised educational environments.

Equity training, inclusionary models, and targeted training for educators emerged as critical factors in the quest for equitable educational experiences. Principals have a core responsibility in guiding schools towards equitable outcomes for all students (Grissom et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2018). As the top leaders in individual schools, principals have the most authority to implement change (Grissom et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2018; Roberts & Guerra, 2017). For ELL students with disabilities, principals can impact students' level of access to general education by promoting inclusive practices (Roberts et al., 2018). However, most research has found that principals are often not adequately trained to lead school teams to make equitable decisions for students with disabilities, especially ELL students with disabilities (Grissom et al, 2021; Roberts & Guerra, 2017). The findings from this study do not align with the literature asserting administrators' limited knowledge in equity and inclusive practices. Participants emphasized the importance of equity and inclusion and cited specific practices and

goals of their schools. Initiatives like equity transformation cycles, *Courageous Conversations*, and the push for inclusion underscore administrators' dedication to dismantling barriers related to racism, ableism, and language differences. However, administrators noted that they are often constrained by budget, hiring qualified personnel, and time for training and professional development.

Several barriers can arise for ELL students with disabilities that impact access to their education. Communication and educator training were the two most significant barriers noted by participants. Communication is the most critical part of creating positive relationships between educators and parents (Accardo et al., 2020; Cioè-Peña, 2021; Kroesch & Peeples, 2021). The findings from this study support the literature. Participants stated that communication can be a huge barrier for students and their families due to many diverse languages, a lack of bilingual staff, and a lack of trust among families. Participants also expressed skepticism about the preparedness of classroom teachers and special education teachers to effectively support ELL students with disabilities.

Educator hesitancy and lack of training can lead to misidentification for ELL students that may have disabilities but are not referred for evaluation in a timely manner (Umansky et al., 2017). Administrators must consider the impact of intersectionality for ELL students with disabilities (Chiu, 2022). It is inadequate to evaluate language and learning differences as standalone issues (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Whitenack et al., 2019). The findings of this study support the literature. Participants noted the significant challenge of teasing out language versus learning differences and how a lack of educator training can lead to misidentification and overidentification in certain categories (e.g., communication disorder). The identification process complexities and the need for accurate identification reinforce the call for clarified processes and careful evaluation to ensure timely support for ELL students with disabilities.

Furthermore, administrators stressed the importance of a culturally responsive curriculum, recognizing the significance of diverse representation and multiple entry points to cater to students' diverse needs. The emphasis on adapting curriculum, delivering specially designed instruction, as well as the role of a supportive staff, building strong relationships with students and families, and fostering an individualized approach collectively form a foundation for creating success. The findings from this study do not align with the literature purporting administrators' limited knowledge on effective classroom practices (Grissom et al., 2021; Munguia, 2017; Roberts et al., 2018). The participants in this study demonstrated a high level of knowledge and expertise with naming specific examples, such as naming learning goals, pre-teaching language, visual supports, and Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP).

ELL students with disabilities have some of the most unique needs in a school system (Jozwik et al., 2020; Szymanski & Lynch, 2020). When educators create positive relationships with students, it improves students' attitudes and beliefs towards school (Jozwik et al., 2020). For educators to cultivate relationships, they must increase their cultural awareness of diverse learners (Irizarry & Williams, 2013; Jozwik et al., 2020). Research has found that when students feel understood and comfortable voicing their opinion, it increases academic achievement (Danzak & Wilkinson, 2017; Shim & Shur, 2018). The findings of this study align with the literature. Participants all agreed that relationships are the cornerstone of creating success for ELL students with disabilities. New findings emerged regarding administrators stating the importance of providing an individualized approach, shifting the education model to meet students' needs, and relying on building experts.

These findings emphasize the necessity for administrators to view themselves as critical players in providing equitable educational experiences, addressing biases, and fostering an environment where every student thrives. As we move forward, the study highlights the imperative for ongoing professional development, systemic changes, and a continuous commitment to creating inclusive, culturally responsive, and equitable educational environments for ELL students with disabilities. The narratives shared by administrators offer valuable insights and underscore the need for collective efforts to dismantle systemic barriers and foster a more just educational landscape for all students.

Discussion of Themes Related to DisCrit

DisCrit posits that the intersectionality of race and disability creates unique challenges that must be addressed to achieve educational equity (Annamma, 2017, Perouse-Harvey, 2022). DisCrit emphasizes that student identities are more than race, level of English proficiency, or disability status (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Cioè-Peña, Chiu, 2022; 2021). Examining administrators' perceptions on equitable educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities is an important step to creating inclusive, equitable schools for all students (DeMatthews, 2020). The seven themes that emerged from this study and their relation to the theoretical framework, DisCrit, are outlined below.

The Power of Perception and DisCrit. In the first theme, The Power of Perception, the positive perceptions identified by participants resonated with DisCrit's emphasis on dismantling systemic barriers. For instance, the commitment to a "student-first philosophy" aligns with DisCrit's call to center the experiences of marginalized students, including those with disabilities and linguistic differences. Conversely, negative perceptions identified in the study, including biases rooted in racism and ableism, align with DisCrit's focus on uncovering and challenging the systemic injustices faced by individuals at the intersection of race and disability. The experiences shared by participants, such as concerns about the lack of specific training for administrators on topics like racism and ableism, resonate with DisCrit's call for critical reflection and action.

Moreover, the emphasis on cultural competence and understanding racial differences among school staff, as highlighted by several administrators, aligns with DisCrit's emphasis on recognizing and addressing the racialized aspects of disability. The call for addressing implicit bias and acknowledging the impact of race on student achievement reflects DisCrit's commitment to dismantling the interlocking systems of oppression that affect marginalized students.

Effective Teaching and Instructional Strategies and DisCrit. The emphasis on scaffolding, as highlighted by several participants, reflects a perception that acknowledges the diverse linguistic needs of ELL students with disabilities. This aligns with DisCrit's overarching goal of dismantling systemic barriers, including those related to language proficiency. Participants' caution against overusing scaffolding and the advocacy for a print and language-rich classroom environment demonstrate a nuanced perception that goes beyond a one-size-fits-all approach, recognizing the individual strengths and challenges of each student, in line with DisCrit's call for culturally responsive practices.

In the realm of classroom accommodations, the emphasis on visual supports by administrators aligns with DisCrit's recognition of the diverse needs of students with disabilities, emphasizing the importance of accessibility beyond mere decorations. Participants' call for a

personalized approach to visual supports resonates with the DisCrit framework's emphasis on individualized, culturally responsive strategies. Furthermore, the administrators' views on creating language-rich environments align with DisCrit's focus on recognizing and addressing language-based disparities. This perception reflects a commitment to fostering inclusive learning environments that benefit all students, including those with disabilities and language needs, as promoted by DisCrit.

Equity and Inclusive Practices and DisCrit. The reported initiatives and policies aimed at promoting equity in schools and districts, as highlighted by administrators, resonate with DisCrit's foundational principles of dismantling systemic barriers and addressing issues related to racism and ableism. The discussion of equity transformation cycles, district-wide equity policy rollout, and dedication to a robust equity program reflect a commitment to fostering inclusive practices that consider the unique needs of ELL students with disabilities.

In terms of inclusion, administrators consistently emphasized their commitment to promoting inclusive practices for ELL students with disabilities. The distinction between the "pull-out" and "push-in" models, reflects a nuanced understanding of the diverse needs of students. The push towards complete inclusion and administrators' advocacy for push-in models reflects a perception that values comprehensive and effective approaches to benefit ELL students with disabilities in diverse educational settings, aligning with DisCrit's emphasis on fostering inclusive environments that consider the interconnected systems of oppression faced by marginalized students.

Barriers to Learning and DisCrit. The challenges described by administrators at both individual and systems levels, such the lack of bilingual special education teachers and the difficulties posed by diverse languages, underscore DisCrit's call for addressing systemic inadequacies in providing appropriate instruction for ELL students with disabilities. The highlighted challenges in communication with families align with DisCrit's focus on recognizing and addressing barriers that extend beyond the school environment. The acknowledgment of factors influencing communication challenges, including fear, language barriers, and cultural differences, resonates with DisCrit's call for culturally responsive and inclusive practices to create a supportive educational environment.

The lack of educator training illuminates DisCrit's concern with systemic inadequacies in preparing educators to effectively support ELL students with disabilities. The skepticism expressed by administrators about the preparedness of educators aligns with DisCrit's emphasis on dismantling systemic barriers that impede access to quality educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities.

Complexities of the Identification Process and DisCrit. The administrators' challenges among their school teams in accurately identifying whether difficulties faced by ELL students with disabilities stem from learning differences, language differences, or a combination of both, reflect DisCrit's contention that intersectionality plays a crucial role in understanding and addressing the unique needs of students at the crossroads of race, language, and disability. The criticism of the lengthy and cumbersome identification process, with calls for a faster and more efficient system, resonates with DisCrit's emphasis on dismantling systemic inadequacies that disproportionately affect marginalized students, potentially delaying necessary resources and interventions.

Concerns raised by participants about overidentification, underidentification, or misidentification of ELL students in special education align with DisCrit's focus on addressing disparities in the application of special education categories and recognizing the potential impact of systemic failures on accurate identification. The frustration expressed about the overidentification of communication disorders and the challenges related to misidentification leading to difficulties in transitioning students back to the general education setting underscore the need for a careful and nuanced evaluation process to ensure accurate identification and appropriate support for ELL students with disabilities within the DisCrit framework.

Appropriate Curriculum and DisCrit. Administrators' emphasis on culturally responsive curriculum reflects DisCrit's foundational principles of acknowledging and incorporating the cultural diversity of ELL students with disabilities. Participants' advocacy for curriculum that is inherently multicultural and resonates with students' backgrounds aligns with DisCrit's call for culturally responsive practices to create an inclusive and relatable educational experience.

In terms of accessible curriculum, administrators' stress on multiple points of entry and the need for educators to adapt the curriculum to cater to diverse learners resonates with DisCrit's emphasis on dismantling systemic inadequacies to ensure equitable access to education. The recommendation for built-in scaffolds within the curriculum and recognizing the differences in delivery between licensed teachers and educational assistants aligns with DisCrit's focus on addressing barriers to learning for diverse student populations.

Additionally, the administrators' focus on adapting curriculum aligns with DisCrit's call for educators to understand how to deliver specially designed instruction, provide accommodations, and differentiate between modifications and accommodations. The acknowledgment of challenges at the secondary level, where students are learning complex subjects while grappling with accommodation strategies, underscores the need for individualized approaches to curriculum adaptation, aligning with DisCrit's emphasis on recognizing the unique needs of students at the intersection of race, language, and disability.

Creating Success and DisCrit. Administrators' focus on a supportive staff reflects DisCrit's foundational principles of acknowledging the critical role of adults in creating an equitable learning environment. The emphasis on cohesive teams, quality personnel, and individuals who genuinely believe in students' potential aligns with DisCrit's call for fostering inclusive educational experiences for marginalized students.

Administrators reported the importance of building relationships, which resonates with DisCrit's focus on acknowledging the importance of strong relationships with both students and their families. The recognition that building relationships with families is just as important as those built inside the classroom aligns with DisCrit's emphasis on creating a supportive network that considers the broader context of students' lives. The initiatives to bridge the gap and enhance relationships with parents reflect DisCrit's call for culturally responsive practices and active engagement with families to promote success.

The emphasis on an individualized approach aligns with DisCrit's call for tailoring the educational experience to provide personalized approaches for unique students. Administrators' responses of the shift in school models to meet the needs of students, understanding each student's specific needs, and intervening at appropriate levels for struggling students reflect

DisCrit's emphasis on dismantling uniform approaches and addressing the diverse needs of students at various proficiency levels.

Implications for Professional Practice

The findings of this study on school administrators' perceptions of equitable educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities have several implications for professional practice among school administrators. Here are key considerations for school administrators to enhance their practices and improve the overall educational experience for ELL students with disabilities.

Administrators play a pivotal role in shaping school culture and fostering positive perceptions. The emphasis on maintaining a positive focus, believing in the capabilities of all students, and adopting a "student-first philosophy" underscores the importance of administrators instilling confidence and high expectations in both staff and students. Practicing empathy and celebrating incremental successes contribute to a supportive and motivating educational environment.

The study underscores the need for administrators to proactively address unconscious biases and racism within the school system. Professional development programs focused on cultural competence, implicit bias, and systemic racism could empower administrators to create more inclusive environments. This involves not only acknowledging biases but actively working towards dismantling them through education, exposure to diverse perspectives, and ongoing self-reflection.

The findings emphasize the positive impact of equity initiatives such as *Courageous Conversations* and equity transformation cycles. Administrators should consider implementing or expanding such initiatives within their schools or districts. Engaging in empathetic interviews with students and families can enhance administrators' understanding of individual needs and contribute to more informed decision-making.

Effective communication with ELL students and their families is critical. Administrators should prioritize strategies that bridge language barriers and facilitate meaningful connections. This includes investing in bilingual support staff, leveraging technology for multilingual communication, and implementing initiatives that create a welcoming and inclusive environment for families. Understanding the unique challenges families face can inform tailored communication approaches.

The commitment to inclusive practices is a recurring theme in the study. Administrators should advocate for and implement inclusionary models that break down silos and avoid isolating ELL students with disabilities. It is critical for administrators to educate their staff on the benefits of including students with disabilities in the general education setting as much as possible in order to increase staff buy-in and staff commitment to an inclusive school environment. This involves promoting a shift from the traditional "pull-out" model to the more inclusive "push-in" model. Ongoing training for staff, collaboration with ESL teachers, and a focus on shared responsibility for student learning are key components of this approach.

The study highlights challenges in the identification of learning differences and disabilities among ELL students. Administrators should explore ways to clarify and outline the identification process to prevent delays in providing necessary resources. Administrators should ensure there is a clear evaluation process, with the right experts at the table to avoid overidentifying or misidentifying students. This may involve revising assessment methods, including language dominance and language proficiency assessments, implementing culturally

sensitive evaluation tools, and ensuring that the identification process considers the intersectionality of language and disability.

Administrators should actively promote the integration of culturally responsive curriculum within their schools. This includes ensuring that curriculum materials reflect the diversity of the student body, incorporating multiple entry points to accommodate diverse learners, and providing built-in scaffolds to support both teachers and students. Cultivating an environment where students see themselves represented positively in the curriculum can enhance engagement and academic success.

Administrators should prioritize building and maintaining a strong, supportive school team. This involves investing in professional development, hiring quality personnel, and placing individuals in roles that align with the values of the school. Additionally, administrators must recognize the importance of building strong relationships with both students and their families. Creating a safe and trusting environment is foundational for academic success for all students, especially ELL students with disabilities.

In conclusion, these implications highlight the transformative role administrators can play in creating equitable educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities. By fostering positive perceptions, addressing biases, implementing inclusive practices, and prioritizing effective communication, administrators can contribute to a more inclusive, supportive, and successful learning environment for all students.

Recommendations

While this study has provided valuable insights into administrators' perceptions and their impact on equitable educational experiences for ELL students with disabilities, there remain avenues for further research to deepen our understanding and inform actionable strategies to improve the educational experience for ELL students with disabilities. There are several areas to consider for future research on administrators and ELL students with disabilities.

First, conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of equity initiatives, such as *Courageous Conversations* and equity transformation cycles, would be beneficial. Understanding how sustained efforts influence administrators' perceptions and subsequently impact the academic outcomes and experiences of ELL students with disabilities over time could provide valuable insights.

Second, given the acknowledgment of biases and racism by participants, further research could delve deeper into understanding the nature and sources of these biases. Exploring the effectiveness of specific anti-bias training programs or interventions in reducing bias and promoting cultural competence among administrators could be a focal point.

Third, investigating effective strategies to enhance communication and connection between schools and families of ELL students with disabilities is crucial. Research could explore the role of cultural competency training for educators and administrators in facilitating more meaningful interactions with diverse families, as well as strategies to increase parent buy-in and collaboration.

Comparative studies across different school districts or regions could also provide insights into variations in the identification processes for ELL students with disabilities. Analyzing the effectiveness of different identification models and interventions in reducing misidentification or underidentification would contribute to the development of best practices and improve the evaluation process to accurately identify disabilities within this student population.

To enhance our understanding of culturally responsive curriculum, research could focus on assessing the impact of specific curriculum adaptation strategies on the academic achievement and engagement of ELL students with disabilities. This could include evaluating the effectiveness of built-in scaffolds, diverse entry points, and differentiated instruction within the curriculum.

One limitation of the study was the exclusion of rural school districts. Since the study targeted the eight school districts in each state with the largest number of ELL students, rural districts with smaller populations were naturally excluded. Future studies should include administrators from rural school districts to examine their perspectives and the unique challenges that rural districts encounter. Additionally, the pool of participants was limited to only two administrators with a background in special education and there were only three administrators at the secondary level. Future studies should include more administrators at the secondary level and more administrators with special education experience to further investigate the varying perspectives of administrators in various contexts.

Lastly, investigating the impact of targeted professional development for administrators on fostering positive perceptions, dismantling biases, and promoting equitable practices is essential. This could involve assessing the effectiveness of existing training programs and identifying areas for improvement, as well as exploring the training that preservice administrators receive in graduate school.

References

Accardo, A. L., Xin, J. F., & Shuff, M. (2020). Special education teacher preparation and family collaboration. *School Community Journal*, *30*(2), 53–72.

Annamma, S., & Morrison, D. (2018). Identifying dysfunctional education ecologies: A discrit analysis of bias in the classroom. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *51*(2), 114–131.

Auslander, L. (2018). Building culturally and linguistically responsive classrooms: A case study in teacher and counselor collaboration. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, *12*(3), 207–218.

Chiu, C. L., Sayman, D., Lusk, M. E., Kressler, B., & Cote, D. (2022). "Does this mean I am racist, distrust, or dislike people of color?" A DisCrit qualitative study of implicit bias among preservice and practicing special educators. *Issues in Teacher Education*, *31*(1), 6–34.

Cioè-Peña, M. (2021). Raciolinguistics and the education of emergent bilinguals labeled as disabled. *Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education*, *53*(3), 443–469.

Creswell, J. W., & Guetterman, T. C. (2019). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research (6th ed.)*. Pearson.

DeMatthews, D. E., & Knight, D. S. (2019). The Texas special education cap: Exploration into the statewide delay and denial of support to students with disabilities. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *27*(2).

Hafner, A. H., & Ortiz, F. W. (2021). Toward transformative teaching for English language learners: Critical texts in sheltered English immersion courses. *Curriculum & Teaching Dialogue*, *23*(1/2), 145–160.

Irizarry, S., & Williams, S. (2013). Lending student voice to Latino ELL migrant children's perspectives on learning. *Journal of Latinos & Education*, *12*(3), 171–185. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2013.765801

Jozwik, S., Cuenca-Carlino, Y., & Gardiner-Walsh, S. (2020). Special education teachers' preparedness for teaching emergent bilingual students with disabilities. *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners*, *20*(2), 38–53.

Karvonen, M., Clark, A. K., Carlson, C., Wells Moreaux, S., & Burnes, J. (2021). Approaches to identification and instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities who are English learners. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *46*(4), 223–239. https://doi.org/10.1177/15407969211040256

Kroesch, A. M., & Peeples, K. (2021). High school general education teachers' perceptions of students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings. *Physical Disabilities*, *40*(1), 26–41. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org.nnu.idm.oclc.org/10.14434/rapcc.v40i1.31756

Marshall, C., Rossman, G. B., & Blanco, G. L. (2022). *Designing qualitative research*. SAGE Publishing, Inc.

Munguia, C. (2017). Principals supporting teachers in providing language instruction to English learners in elementary school. *International Journal of Teacher Leadership*, *8*(1), 92–108.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). *English learners in public schools*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf.

Padron, Y. N., & Waxman, H. C. (2016). Investigating principals' knowledge and perceptions of second language programs for English language learners. *International Journal of Educational Leadership and Management*, *4*(2), 127–146.

Park, S. (2019). Disentangling language from disability: Teacher implementation of Tier 1 English language development policies for ELs with suspected disabilities. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *80*, 227–240. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.02.004

Rizzuto, C. (2017). Teachers' perceptions of ELL students: Do their attitudes shape their instruction? *Teacher Educator*, *52*(3), 182–202.

Roberts, M. B., & Guerra, F. (2017). Principals' perceptions of their knowledge in special education. *Current Issues in Education, 20*(1), 1–18.

Roberts, C. A., Ruppar, A. L., & Olson, A. J. (2018). Perceptions matter: Administrators' vision of instruction for students with severe disabilities. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *43*(1), 3–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796917743931

Saldaña, J. M. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Shim, J. M., & Shur, A. M. (2018). Learning from ELLs' perspectives: Mismatch between ELL and teacher perspectives on ELL learning experiences. *English Language Teaching*, *11*(1), 21–32.

Smith, E., & Larwin, K. H. (2021). Will they be welcomed in? The impact of K-12 teachers' and principals' perceptions of inclusion of students with disabilities. *Journal of Organizational and Educational Leadership*, *6*(3), 1–34.

Szymanski, A., & Lynch, M. (2020). Educator perceptions of English language learners. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, *31*(4), 436–450.

Thompson, K. D., Umansky, I. M., & Porter, L. (2020). Examining contexts of reception for newcomer students. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *19*(1), 10–35.

Umansky, I. M., Thompson, K. D., & Díaz, G. (2017). Using an ever–English learner framework to examine disproportionality in special education. *Exceptional Children*, *84*(1), 76–96. https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402917707470

Vintan, A., & Gallagher, T. L. (2019). Collaboration to support ESL education: Complexities of the integrated model. *TESL Canada Journal*, *36*(2), 68–90.

Von Esch, K. S. (2018). Teacher leaders as agents of change: Creating contexts for instructional improvement for English learner students. *Elementary School Journal*, *119*(1), 152–178.

Wanzek, J., Swanson, E., Vaughn, S., Roberts, G., & Fall, A.-M. (2016). English learner and non-English learner students with disabilities: Content acquisition and comprehension. *Exceptional Children*, *82*(4), 428–442.

Whitenack, D. A., Golloher, A. N., & Burciaga, R. (2019). Intersectional reculturing for all students: Preparation and practices for educational leaders. *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development*, *31*, 33–53.

Yamasaki, B. L., & Luk, G. (2018). Eligibility for special education in elementary school: The role of diverse language experiences. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, *49*(4), 889–901. https://doi.org/10.1044/2018_LSHSS-DYSLC-18-0006

Yough, M. (2019). Tapping the sources of self-efficacy: Promoting preservice teachers' sense of efficacy for instructing English language learners. *Teacher Educator*, *54*(3), 206–224.