

## **South Texas Urban Administrator Perceptions of Best Practices for ELL Literacy**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative, multi-case study was to explore the perceptions of administrators in an urban border district in deep South Texas. This study gleaned the perceptions of administrators with regard to best practices in early literacy success in underrepresented groups of students, namely English Language Learners (ELLs), in an urban border district in a deep South Texas. The researcher, as the human instrument, focused on a variety of data collection sources from administrators' responses to questions, field notes, audiotaped interview sessions, and observation notes. Four key themes emerged from the data contextualized in an overwhelming sense of urgency on the part of the administrators. The findings from this study have the potential of leveraging educational decisions for educators, policymakers, and practitioners who may be concerned about improving the literacy achievement gap for ELLs by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

Keywords: ELL, reading, literacy

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## Introduction

Every student who does not complete high school costs our society an estimated \$260,000 in lost earnings thus reflecting a significant social economic impact (Freemon & Simonsen, 2015; Casey, 2010). Data consistently shows children who are not reading proficiently by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade have lower graduation rates and demonstrate less college preparedness (Smith, 2016). In a longitudinal study of 4,000 students, children who do not read proficiently by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade are four times more likely not to graduate on time which has tremendous implications for the most vulnerable students including those with low social economic status (SES) as well as underrepresented groups like English Language Learners (ELLs) (Bornfreund, Cook, Lieberman, & Lowenberg, 2015; Hernandez, 2011). Moreover, children who do not master basic reading skills by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade have a six times greater chance of not graduating on time. Not reading proficiently by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade increases students' likelihood of dropping out of high school (Morris, et al., 2017; Snow & Mathews, 2016; Hernandez, 2011; Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011).

Seventy percent of students who drop out of high school, and about 75% of all students recommended for special education services, report difficulty with reading (Fenty, Mulcahy, & Washburn, 2015; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012; Joshi, Binks, Hougen, Dahlgren, Ocker-Dean, & Smith, 2009). Students who drop out of school impose a financial burden on society (Connor, Alberto, Compton & O'Connor, 2014). Researchers estimate high school dropouts increase their chances of going to jail or prison when compared to a student who has earned a diploma (McGrath-Ellison, Owings, & Kaplan, 2017; Harlow, 2003). Learning to read on or above grade-level by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade is crucial because this marks the point when educators expect children to transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" more difficult material. This lays the foundation for all future learning. Not meeting this critical target

can have severe implications for a student's future success in school, work, their life, and for this nation.

### **ELL Students and Reading**

Despite numerous interventions geared towards addressing the achievement gap in reading, a large portion of students are not reading on or above grade-level by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Students who are non-ELLs continue to perform better on high-stakes accountability testing than ELLs. According to the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the gap between ELLs and non-ELLs was 37% in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Finding ways to meet the diverse needs of effective reading instruction for ELLs is difficult because of the lack of research on effective instructional strategies for teaching ELLs (Martínez, Harris, & McClain, 2014; Denton, 2012; Kearns et al., 2011; Crosson & Lesaux, 2009).

The importance of initial reading instruction in kindergarten should not be underestimated because it can provide a critical correlation to future learning (Wanzek, Roberts, & Otabia, 2014). For most students, formal reading instruction begins in kindergarten and provides an important link to students' early reading success. Of all the skills children need to be successful in their education, reading is one of the most critical because it sets the foundation for all other skills (Casey, 2010). However, findings indicate there are students who enter kindergarten already at risk of reading difficulties and that early literacy skills can be linked to future reading comprehension deficits (Wanzek, Roberts, & Otabia, 2014; Otaiba & Fuch, 2006).

Children who get off to a poor start in reading almost never catch up to their peers (Gersten, Newman-Gonchar, Haymond, & Dimino, 2017; Torgesen, 2004; Whitehurst, 2001). A major contributor to this problem is many children have not achieved reading proficiency before completing 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Primary (K-3<sup>rd</sup>) teachers undoubtedly place a high priority on the importance of being effective literacy teachers. However, producing students who can read is a difficult task, especially when a student is learning a second language. This presents challenges to both the teacher and the student. Consequently, the reading gap increases with students who are ELLs and limits the nation's potential of economic competitiveness (Martínez, Harris, & McClain, 2014).

### **Problem & Purpose of the Study**

There is a problem in the educational school system and despite numerous interventions geared towards addressing the achievement gap in reading, a large portion of students are not reading on or above grade-level by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Students who are non-ELLs continue to perform better on high-stakes accountability testing than ELLs. According to the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the gap between ELLs and non-ELLs was 37% in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Unfortunately, it is exceedingly difficult to find research for ELLs because, until recently, ELLs were excluded from discussions of equity. Consequently, finding ways to meet the diverse needs of effective reading instruction for ELLs is difficult because of the lack of research on effective instructional strategies for teaching ELLs (Martínez, Harris, & McClain, 2014; Denton, 2012; Kearns et al., 2011; Crossman & Lesaux, 2009).

This study will add to the body of knowledge by exploring the perceptions of administrators' in a border district in deep South Texas on identifying best practices in early literacy for ELLs who are at risk for reading difficulties. This study has the potential of leveraging educational decisions for educators, policymakers, and the practitioners' who may be concerned about improving the literacy achievement gap for ELLs by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

### **Methodology**

The qualitative data was obtained from face-to-face interviews with seven Hispanic administrators including two males and five females from a border district in deep South Texas. The researcher used purposive sampling and selected participants that helped illuminate the questions under study and added valuable information that would help identify “best practices” for early reading success with ELL students (Patton, 1990, p.169). Participants were selected from a wide range of female and male administrators in this border district who could potentially add valuable information in supporting the literacy gap in early literacy for ELL students. This purposive selection approach aligns with Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Packer (2018) who suggest sampling strategies that provide the broadest range of information possible because they concluded, that for the naturalistic approach, maximum variation sampling is most useful.

All respondents were initially contacted by email so that a time and a place could be established. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the respondent’s work place, a school setting. The context of the environment and the site selection allowed the researcher to make the respondents comfortable and more willing to share their experiences and perceptions. A list of questions was used as a guide and the respondents were made to feel comfortable answering the open-ended questions. The researcher used several types of probing strategies to stimulate the respondents to produce more information and allow the data to surface from their reflections and not the reflection of the interviewer. This method allowed the respondents to “open up” and allow new themes to arise naturally. As a result, both the researcher and respondents felt free to follow new leads (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2017; Bernard, 2002).

The researcher employed triangulation to ensure each piece of relevant data collected was validated by another interview with a second individual. Shenton (2004) attests individual viewpoints can be verified against others to construct a better picture. Member checks were also used to provide opportunities for the respondents to clarify, correct errors, or validate the data collected. Each respondent was sent an email that included the transcribed data from the interview to ensure they were able to react and provide further credibility to the research. An audit trail was developed during the inquiry to safeguard all records.

## Results

The multi-case study included perceptions from administrators with varied degrees of experience. The common thread among these administrators was that they led on elementary campuses that are successful with ELL students particularly in the area of literacy. This research included four female and three male administrators who lead large to mid-size elementary schools. The participants of the study had between eight years of administrative experience to sixteen years of experience for a combined total of over 84 years of administrative experience in an urban border district in deep South Texas (see Table 1). All the administrators interviewed, serve on an elementary campus from the same district, but are administrators in different campuses. Table 2 provides more detail on these administrators and their experience.

Table 1. *District experience among the administrators*

Participant Name	School Size	Administrative Experience
Joshua	544	12
Esther	655	8
Samuel	421	15
Elizabeth	920	9
Mary	569	16

Sarah	697	10
Nathan	450	14
Totals:		84 years leadership experience
		4,256 students

Table 2. *Summary description of administrators*

Respondent	Previous Educational Experience	Total Years in Education	Number of Students Served
Joshua	Taught P.E. and 5 <sup>th</sup> grade Currently an Elementary Principal	12	544
Esther	Taught 9 <sup>th</sup> – 11 <sup>th</sup> grade Social Studies Currently an Elementary Principal	8	655
Samuel	Taught Elementary, Middle School and High School Currently an Elementary Principal	15	421
Elizabeth	Taught 2 <sup>nd</sup> – 5 <sup>th</sup> grade Currently an Elementary Principal	9	920
Mary	Taught 1 <sup>st</sup> and 4 <sup>th</sup> grade Currently an Elementary Principal	16	569
Sarah	Taught Prek and 4 <sup>th</sup> Grade Currently an Elementary Principal	10	697
Nathan	Taught 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> , fourth and 5 <sup>th</sup> grade Currently an Elementary Principal	14	450

Data collected from the administrator's interviews were transcribed, categorized by themes, and coded across several rounds (Saldaña, 2015). Two unanticipated, but not surprising, leadership themes including urgency and passion emerged. Within those two overarching leadership themes, four instructional themes emerged from the perceptions of the administrators in regards to early literacy success for underrepresented groups such as ELLs. These included:

- ensuring that a quality curriculum that included the five components of reading (phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary) was delivered,
- focusing on instructional challenges or barriers that hindered literacy,
- using a variety of instructional interventions when students showed signs of struggling to read,
- implementing consistent progress monitoring that included data disaggregation followed by differentiation of instruction as a means of formative assessment.

Figure 1 provides a graphic depiction of the themes.



Figure 1. *Themes contextualized in a sense of urgency and passion*

In an effort to meet these challenges, the seven administrators developed protocols that were unique to their student needs in an effort to address students who were struggling with literacy. The administrators interviewed claimed that if low SES and ELL students received effective classroom instruction, explicit instruction in vocabulary, and had established systemic protocols to monitor for growth, students who were showing signs of struggling with reading in Pre-K and Kindergarten could achieve long-term reading success. These findings are key and congruent with what other researchers have found. One of the most striking comments from Sam, one of the administrators, included

The teachers identify, then act and problem solve, to better assess the problem and find the right interventions. If there's little or no support from home and affects their learning, we don't take it as an excuse. We still make it a point ourselves to help and get the students where they need to be.

Yet another said administrator, Sarah, shared her views and claimed that the importance of literacy in Pre-K through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade is critical, "If students are not reading on grade level by the end of first grade, well then, it's very difficult. It's going to be very challenging for the students to catch up. We should not lose our focus in literacy in Pre-K." Her experience has taught her that many times, educators make the mistake of ignoring early literacy. There is a tendency to emphasize on third through fifth grade because of high stakes accountability, but this practice only complicates matters and causes a downward spiral making it almost impossible for children who are struggling to read to catch up to their peers. Sarah added, "It's more difficult for teachers at the higher grades to be able to catch them up and to focus on literacy [learning to read] because they're already focusing on reading to learn."

The emergent findings from this study revealed not only four key best practices for literacy instruction for ELL students, but the data also revealed key leadership attributes that were evidenced by these seven successful elementary administrators in a border district in deep South Texas.

The researcher found that a sense of urgency permeated many of the responses of the participants. This sense of urgency according to the data taken from the participants proved to be

key to their success in working with ELL students. Often the urgency was apparent in the participant's tone inasmuch as their words. For example, Joshua said,

One of the things that we've had to do is we've had to tell teachers, if you're not equipped, then we need to take you through some training. We still need to get the students where they need to be. I've always told them, and I've been pretty straight forward.

Both Esther and Nathan shared their commitment and passion because of their own pasts. Esther said, "I believe that no matter the challenges and obstacles, everyone can obtain an education and succeed. I am a living testament of this truth." Nathan added, "Someone long ago said to me: 'You will *never* make it because of where you come from! They were wrong.'"

Leadership attributes such as urgency and passion for the work (Slattery, 2016) emerged as key to these leaders' success. The passion for "other people's children" (Delpit, 2006), drove these administrators. Their unwillingness to be subtractive in their approaches (Valenzuela, 1999) were evident in their leadership.

### Significance

Five of the seven administrators overcame insurmountable odds to become respected public-school leaders. The interview participants had overcome almost every challenge that they personally faced including experiences as children of a single parent, or students who themselves were ELL, migrant, low SES, or had become pregnant, etc. Just one of these factors increases exponentially the probability that a person will not graduate from high school (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). Yet, here these administrators are, beacons of hope for multitudes of particularly ELL children who walk the halls of their schools every day.

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