

## Culturally Responsive Evidence-based Practices with English Language Learners with Learning Disabilities: A Qualitative Case Study

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### Abstract

This study describes the instruction of one special education teacher with English Language Learners (ELLs) with learning disabilities in an urban elementary school setting. This study was situated in a culturally responsive, evidence-based teaching framework. In investigating this instruction with ELLs, this study focused on how one teacher's knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy and evidence-based practices impacted her special education instruction. Findings resulted in three major themes that were aligned with the literature in this area: *The Garment of Diversity*, *Culture Matters in Special Education*, and *Their Collaborative Spirit*. The results indicated that the success of special education with ELLs at the elementary education level may be dependent on how well the teacher integrates culturally responsive and evidence-based instruction with ELLs' sociocultural needs.

*Keywords: bilingual special education; culturally responsive teaching; evidence-based practices; English Language Learners; learning disabilities; case study; Common Core standards*

### Resumen

Este estudio describe la enseñanza de una maestra de educación especial y sus aprendientes de inglés (ELLs) con discapacidades de aprendizaje en una primaria urbana. Este estudio se situó en un marco de enseñanza culturalmente relevante y basada en la evidencia. Al investigar la instrucción de la maestra con ELLs, este estudio se enfocó en cómo su conocimiento de pedagogía culturalmente sensible y de las prácticas basadas en la evidencia impactaron su instrucción de educación especial. Los resultados dieron lugar a tres temas principales que se alinearon con la literatura en este campo: *La Túnica de la Diversidad*, *La Cultura Importa en la Educación Especial*, y *Su Espíritu Colaborativo*. Los resultados indicaron que el éxito de la educación especial con ELLs en el nivel de primaria puede depender de cuán bien el maestro integre la instrucción culturalmente sensible y basada en la evidencia con las necesidades socioculturales de ELLs.

*Palabras clave: educación especial bilingüe; la enseñanza culturalmente sensible; prácticas basadas en la evidencia; aprendientes de inglés, discapacidades de aprendizaje, estudio de caso, estándares de Common Core*

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## Introduction

Although considerable research in U.S. public education over the past few decades has created a sound literature base on evidence-based reading practices (e.g., decoding, vocabulary and reading strategies), little of this research has focused on instruction for English Language Learners (ELLs) that integrates evidence-based reading practices with culturally and linguistically responsive instructional practices (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2013). One reason that research in this area has been traditionally slow in developing is due to the political controversy (e.g., bilingual vs. English-only) over the types of reading education ELLs should receive. As an example, in the 1990's the political tide turned against bilingual education with many states like California, Arizona, Massachusetts, and others enacting policies that worked against bilingual education (Slavin & Cheung, 2005). Because of this, teachers face a fundamental challenge in promoting reading development in two separate, but related and complex domains—cultural and linguistic support and reading instruction. For example, the literature suggests that teachers may lack an understanding of how to effectively apply basic reading skills, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary, to ELLs, as these components may not match with these learners' cultural and learning backgrounds (Orosco & Abdulrahim, in press; Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Orosco, 2010). Also, many ELLs encounter public schooling as distinct from their own cultural and linguistic experiences, and because of this, these personal sheexperiences may conflict with current evidenced-based practices applied in classrooms (Cummins, 2007). In this vein, ELL students placed in special education (e.g., learning disabilities (LD) category) are often the poorest readers in terms of decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension (Orosco & Abdulrahim, in press; Orosco & O'Connor, 2014; Orosco & O'Connor, 2011; Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Suggestions for addressing this reading achievement gap has been teaching ELL with LD to use evidence-based reading skills to improve their reading comprehension (August & Shanahan, 2006). This special education research is emerging but remains fairly modest. Therefore, special education teachers do not know with confidence, whether and under what instructional conditions ELLs with LD can make progress in their literacy development (e.g., Orosco & O'Connor, 2014).

While it is important to understand how teachers apply emerging research in reading with ELLs with LD, it is equally important to understand the contexts in which teachers teach and students learn. This requires understanding the complex historical, cultural, and political forces that influence students' learning behaviors (Artiles et al., 2011). As an example, for many ELLs, their individual preferences for learning are shaped by their cultural and linguistic experiences at home. However, at school, the benefits of utilizing these learning preferences in instruction may be undervalued. When teachers become familiar with cultural and home-preferred ways of learning, they can begin to explicitly connect home, community, and school literacy practices (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). Intercultural communication skills can serve as the basis for bridging the gap that exists between ELLs' home discourses and learning backgrounds and those applied at school (Cazden, 2001).

In summary, although research aimed at improving special education instruction for ELLs has grown within the past decade, to date there is little research examining how special education teachers use ELLs' cultural and linguistic knowledge to enhance reading instruction. The emerging research in this area indicates that culturally responsive teachers incorporate classroom materials, passages, and texts with evidence-base practices that are culturally relevant

and comprehensible to English Language Learners. A lingering question for the field, then, is: *What does culturally responsive literacy instruction look like for ELLs within special education?* Qualitative case study research excels at answering a question like this as it can provide descriptive research to understanding how special education teachers incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy with evidence-based practices. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to provide a description of the culturally responsive instructional approaches in literacy of one elementary special education teacher who was identified as a highly effective teacher of ELLs with LD.

### Context of the study

Although classroom research in literacy development with ELLs in special education is sparse, one theme that has emerged from the literature is the importance of providing a nurturing, supportive environment with interactive teaching approaches (i.e., direct and explicit instruction) that focus on integrating students' cultural and linguistic knowledge with literacy content (August & Shanahan, 2006; August & Hakuta, 1997; Gersten et al. 2007; Herrera et al. 2014). In one qualitative case study, Orosco & O'Connor (2014) described the culturally responsive instruction of one bilingual special education teacher that focused on explicit teaching of core reading principles (e.g., decoding, vocabulary, comprehension) with oral language development and motivation using culturally relevant materials with Latino ELLs that fostered native and English language reading development. Students were encouraged to discuss reading concepts in English and Spanish, and relate these concepts to their own personal experiences. Classroom observations indicated that students' oral language development and reading comprehension improved, due at least in part to the teacher's use of students' cultural and linguistic experiences in learning.

Another finding in the literature is the effectiveness of strategy instruction that utilizes cooperative learning approaches (e.g., Avalos, Plasencia, Chavez, & Rascón, 2007). For example, Klingner and Vaughn (1996) used a collaborative reciprocal teaching strategy (Collaborative Strategic Reading) with 26 seventh- and eighth-grade ELLs with LD in helping students make sense of content-area texts. First, participants were provided with instruction that modeled four comprehension strategies (brainstorming and predicting, monitoring understanding, identifying main ideas, and generating questions and reviewing key ideas). Next, students engaged in further modeling by practicing the strategies in small, heterogeneous, peer-led groups. During this activity, the researchers provided guidance and feedback to students. Finally, after the training sessions, students continued their reading-related strategic discussion independent of teacher support and assisted one another cooperatively in comprehending word meaning, deriving main ideas, asking and answering questions, and relating this to their own cultural and linguistic capital. Where students had gaps in relevant knowledge, they were assisted and encouraged to generate questions for clarification in small-group collaboration with teacher-mediated instruction.

The ELL literature (e.g., August & Shanahan, 2006; August & Hakuta, 1997; Gersten et al., 2007) related to this study indicates that interactive reading approaches can have a powerful effect on the development of ELLs' reading comprehension skills if teachers provide them with: (a) instructional approaches that build on students' prior learning experiences; (b) differentiated instruction that is mediated through joint collaboration with other learners or more competent readers; and (c) culturally relevant texts and materials that relate to their background knowledge.

Although the literature about using culturally responsive methods to teach ELLs is emerging, the reality of many urban classrooms has unfortunately not changed (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Many public-school teachers are under-prepared (e.g., with relevant cultural and content awareness, experience, and training) to teach ELLs. Because of this, more research is needed to explore which culturally responsive literacy approaches are most effective and how best to support teachers in bridging ELLs' background experiences in their classrooms (Li, 2011).

## Conceptual Framework

This qualitative case study was grounded within a sociocultural framework (Vygotsky, 1978). From the sociocultural framework, teachers can develop an educational context that is grounded in the belief that ELLs be provided with high-quality evidence-based instruction that integrates these learners' cultural and linguistic experiences (Herrera et al. 2014). Within this framework, teachers provide ELLs with culturally mediated instruction to facilitate students' use of teaching commensurate with their language abilities and cultural values (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Social constructivism provides a powerful and generative framework that goes beyond *just plain good instruction* that omits students' cultural and linguistic experiences, and empowers students intellectually, socially, and emotionally by using social and cultural interactions and tools to impart higher-order knowledge, skills and positive learning attitudes (Au, 2011).

The development of ELLs' reading cognition is an actively reciprocated process between socially inherited knowledge that contains their cultural and linguistic capital, and the learning experiences they encounter in a new learning environment (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). As teachers become more culturally responsive, they begin to build interactive teaching environments that provide learning and active engagement opportunities that best mediate ELLs' everyday experiences with formal schooling experiences and discourses (Gutiérrez, 2008). Teachers can *fit instruction* to what students already know by providing opportunities for students to develop links to new ideas by making connections to their existing knowledge (Gay, 2010). In summary, a social constructivist framework can help special education teachers provide a match between instructional practices and norms of school to those behaviors and norms that ELLs have learned at home. In the current study, social constructivism serves as a lens for describing, interpreting, and understanding the literacy instruction of one elementary special education teacher.

## Purpose of the study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe the instructional practices of one special education teacher in depth through analysis of (a) observed classroom instructional practices and interactions with students identified as English language learners (ELLs) with learning disabilities (LD) and (b) her perspectives on teaching these students. A focus was placed on students in grades 3, 4, and 5, because these are the years in which the majority of Latino ELLs with LD are placed into special education (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higuera, 2005). This study contributed to the literature by presenting a qualitative, in-depth description of one special education teacher's culturally responsive instruction. The research was guided by the following questions:

1. What were the culturally and linguistically responsive methods used by the participant when providing reading instruction to Latino ELLs with LD?

2. In what ways did the participant's understandings, beliefs, judgments, and professional training impact special education instruction?
3. To what extent was instruction culturally and linguistically appropriate for meeting the learning needs of ELLs with LD?

## Method

The method of inquiry for this study was a qualitative case study (Stake, 2005), and followed the same approach as in previous studies (Orosco & O'Connor 2014; Orosco & Klingner, 2010). The qualitative case study approach occurs in a naturalistic setting in behaviors and actions that are void of any type of control and manipulation by the researcher. Within this paradigm, qualitative case studies can be a valuable descriptive tool that can provide an in-depth understanding about complex models, such as culturally responsive teaching. Qualitative case study analysis allowed the researcher to monitor and document, in depth, teaching movements in the classroom as the teacher instructed her ELLs with LD. In addition, the qualitative case study approach allowed the researcher to: (a) bind the case, by emphasizing detailed contextual analysis of the study; (b) select the contemporary phenomena, themes, or issues (i.e., the research questions to emphasize); (c) triangulate key observations for interpretations; and (d) develop conclusions from the findings.

### Setting and participants

La Esmeralda (LE) elementary school is part of a large southwestern urban school district. This school's population consists of 820 students (93% Hispanic, 66% of whom are Latino English Language Learners; 4% White; 1% African American; 1% Asian, and 1% other). The school is considered a high-poverty school, with approximately 93% of its population in the free and reduced lunch program. The term Latino English Language Learner is used because the student population was identified as coming from families of Latin American descent (e.g., Mexican, Mexican American), and these students were acquiring English as a second language. LE houses a K-5 ESL program. Pseudonyms are used for all people, places, and programs referenced in this article.

The first author had previously identified three potential participants for this qualitative case study via LE school district leadership (e.g., assistant superintendent of learning and bilingual education coordinator). LE school district leadership had been attending a culturally responsive special education seminar that the first author was presenting at a state bilingual education conference. The first author suggested during his presentation that there needed to be more of a research emphasis on observing quality culturally responsive special education instruction. After the conference, LE school district leadership made three recommendations based on mutually agreed criteria between the first author and the leadership team. The teacher, Mrs. Estrella, was the top candidate and was selected based on the following criteria:

- a) she had displayed strong teaching skills based on school leadership evaluations and annual increases in student reading achievement;
- b) she was implementing special education instruction applying ESL/Bilingual methods;

- c) she had received professional and graduate training (Master of Arts) in Special Education and was a state certified Bilingual, Cross-cultural, Language and Academic Development (BCLAD) Special Education Teacher;
- d) she was bilingual in English/Spanish; and
- e) she had taught low SES Latino English Language Learners for 11 years.

Mrs. Estrella is a resource specialist in a partial inclusion program at LE. Within her resource room, her instructional sessions were provided in small groups (4-5 students with similar Individual Educational Plan [IEP] learning needs) and lasted between 30-45 minutes per session depending on the content and grade level(s) she was teaching and time allocation required by students' IEPs. All her students were Latino ELLs. Mrs. Estrella indicated that all of her 19 students were on an IEP for a learning disability related to language and reading deficits. It is important to note that the focus of this study was on instruction and not students per se, and therefore, because of privacy concerns it was difficult to access individual IEP information about their specific diagnosis of learning disabilities. However, Mrs. Estrella did let the researcher know that during the identification process, all her students experienced the following learning challenges: (a) they continued to experience significant reading comprehension challenges in comparison to their general education peers, even when provided with additional weekly intervention that focused on decoding, vocabulary, oral language, and reading comprehension development during Kindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade; (b) students had performed in the lower 25<sup>th</sup> percentile (standard score of 90) on norm-referenced reading assessments (e.g., letter word identification, word attack and comprehension tests); and (c) parents had a concern that their student was not learning to read with typical progression. Therefore, students in the study received special education because of a diagnosis of learning disabilities. Teaching recommendations found in the IEP, made by Mrs. Estrella, were to focus on decoding, oral language, vocabulary, and reading comprehension development with a greater emphasis on culturally responsive instruction (a further description of this is provided under the instructional approach section in the findings).

### Data collection and analysis

Data used for the study came from classroom observation, teacher interview, and existing artifacts/documents.

**Observations.** A qualitative classroom observational method was employed as the primary means of measuring classroom behaviors. The classroom teacher was observed 15 times (1 hour per observation) over a period of 1 year (fall, winter, spring) by a two-member bilingual research team. All classroom observations were conducted together by the two-member team. Both classroom observers had received graduate level ESL/bilingual reading pedagogy training, and the first author had received his PhD in bilingual special education. The purpose of these observations was not only to describe reading instruction, but also to develop an understanding of the education context in which the teacher functioned with ELLs. Descriptive field notes were taken to capture how instruction was being implemented and in what context it functioned, what reading methods were being used, and how ELLs' cultural and linguistic knowledge was being accounted for during the instructional process. Through descriptive notes, the observers: (a) recorded what was seen and heard, such as instructional engagement activities; (b) described the physical environment; and (c) documented the influence of social



factors that facilitated or hindered instruction. Using analytical notes, the researcher recorded impressions and questions or issues that needed further investigating.

**Interviews.** A pre- and post-interview (30 minutes each) was conducted with the participant. Interview data provided the opportunity to better understand the participant's perspectives about culturally responsive literacy instruction for her ELLs with LD. This helped provide an understanding of the underlying meaning of her instructional behaviors observed in the classroom (Seidman, 2012). The interviews were guided by a protocol of questions (Appendix A and B). Classroom conversations focused on asking about the teacher's perceptions of classroom instruction that were observed by prompting the participant to share her instructional experiences during that lesson. The interviews and discussions explicated the participant's thinking about instruction (i.e., prompted the participant to share her instructional experiences, educational, and professional development), but also established the conditions for her teaching reflections (i.e., this dialogue not only allowed her to describe her instructional methods but also allowed us to confirm research data collected). As an example of this validity, during one conversation she commented how she went about teaching reading comprehension. "Teaching my students strategies for connecting with reading passages is an important first step in reframing the reading process from a passive to an active process. For many of my students, general education reading has become a pointless exercise because they are reading without a purpose and thus are not motivated to monitor their comprehension. They will tell you they have finished reading, and yet when asked of them what they read about, their response is "No se (I don't know)!" accompanied by shrugging of shoulders." Statements like this were verified by classroom observations of her instruction. That is, the participant was consistently observed providing explicit instruction, in which she broke down teaching tasks into small steps, constantly probing, providing modeling, administering frequent feedback, and asking questions to confirm that ELLs understood her instruction and what they were reading.

**Artifacts and documents.** Documents related to instruction were reviewed, such as literacy curricula, school demographics, and professional development documents. Document analysis of classroom materials, literacy lesson plans, and student work provided the evidence to support this study. A specific focus was put on the analysis of instructional materials and classroom observations to see if they coincided with the participant documented interviews and discussions.

**Data analysis.** Data were analyzed applying Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step (open, theoretical, and constant comparative) analysis process. This method combines inductive category coding with a comparison of all data over time, continually reassessing the data to confirm, elaborate, or reconfigure the meaning of codes and emerging themes. Each code is developed in consideration of the study's research questions guided by the literature and conceptual framework and then operationalized with a clear definition of which data fits or does not fit in a particular code (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005).

**Reliability and validity.** This study followed several strategies (e.g., observation, participant debriefing, member checking, thick description) to improve on the reliability and validity of the study (Merriam, 2002). Reliability in qualitative research is concerned with the consistency, stability, and repeatability of the data collected as well as the investigators' ability to collect and record information accurately (Merriam, 2002). Validity is concerned with the accuracy and truthfulness of the study's findings (Merriam, 2002). Triangulation of qualitative data sources

were consistently compared and crosschecked with information derived at different times and by different means to improve the reliability and validity of the study (Merriam, 2002). As an example, during classroom meetings, the researchers and participant discussed findings, put forward ideas, and possible themes that emerged from the data being collected (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The interaction between the researchers and participant was ongoing and recursive so that there was a complete agreement of the study's findings. We believed that our diverse backgrounds, experiences, training, and views on instruction, ultimately allowed for a deeper and more thorough analysis of data collected by utilizing both our research and teaching skills.

## Findings

Analysis of data yielded three major interwoven themes: *The Great Garment of American Diversity*, *Culture Matters in Special Education*, and *Their Collaborative Spirit*. The portrait that emerged from this study was that Mrs. Estrella provided culturally responsive instruction, which promoted Latino ELLs' reading achievement. Standardized scores in language and literacy confirmed student progress—Mrs. Estrella's students made annual gains on the Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey Revised (WMLS-R; Woodcock, 2005) Passage Comprehension Test 7; average English composite score gain per LD student is given) in Grades 3 (9.53), 4 (8.73), and 5 (5.83).

### Instructional approach

Mrs. Estrella applied an interactive culturally responsive teaching approach that entailed collaboration with knowledgeable others in meaningful activities to produce literacy comprehension. That is, her instruction firmly resided within the pluralistic vision of instruction (Gay, 2010) that is emerging in special education classrooms with ELLs (Orosco & O'Connor, 2014). Mrs. Estrella stated that:

Culturally responsive instruction provides a much-needed social cultural process lacking in general education that not only builds a strong bridge between my students' cultural and linguistic experiences and classroom, but also improves their higher-level thinking because it improves how I interact with my students.

This instructional style included explicit instruction in teaching core-reading elements (e.g., phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and oral language) with peer-learning opportunities, cooperative learning, and gradual release of responsibility models in a discourse-rich environment. Her starting point for planning instruction was a research-based curriculum that provided a culturally relevant literature component. Mrs. Estrella's teaching purpose was to help students achieve grade-level common core standards matched to general education instruction. Because she serviced 19 ELLs with IEPs, the majority of her instruction was provided in small-group instruction via ESL/Bilingual methods to students who had similar learning needs during pullout or inclusion time.

### The Great Garment of American Diversity

If there is an enduring description of Mrs. Estrella's instruction, it was in the belief described by Cummins (2011) that, "students who feel their culture, linguistic, and racial identity validated in the classroom are much more likely to engage with literacy than those who perceive



their identity ignored or devalued” (p. 5). Mrs. Estrella felt that a critical part to ELLs’ literacy development and engagement was identity affirmation because they often experienced the devaluation of their cultural, linguistic, and racial identity in American schooling.

These children are always crossing across cultural, linguistic, and racial markers. It’s an exciting space to inhabit, and also a very challenging one, because it seems that many, if not most, educators still hang on to the notion that their lives have singular meanings in the melting pot sense. There is nothing singular or unitary about being Latino, they are part of *The Great Garment of American Diversity*. And because of this *Great Garment of American Diversity* (e.g., their cultural, linguistic, and racial identity), I believe that teachers should not choose conformity over diversity in literacy instruction.

That is, she felt it was important to use culturally relevant materials that presented familiar images and characters that related to their identity development, so as to provide them with the necessary enrichment to build reading stamina, deepen their understanding of story elements, and improve reading comprehension (Au, 2011).

In the following reading activity (Table 1), Mrs. Estrella uses explicit instruction and modeling with culturally relevant text (e.g., familial terms and similar background experiences) to improve the reading comprehension of a group of ELLs with LD. ELLs with LD are often the poorest readers in terms of comprehension. Reading comprehension means acquiring various forms of academic discourse (e.g., decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and the integration of background knowledge). ELLs typically need more support in this area, because the reading comprehension level of some texts may be too challenging for them. Mrs. Estrella understood this challenge by making an effort to incorporate comprehension strategy instruction in her teaching. First, she understood that ELLs remember and comprehend passages that are compatible with their background knowledge (e.g., culture, linguistic, or racial identity) or are considered more familiar. Providing culturally responsive materials is a strong way to activate background knowledge; this has been found to improve comprehension. Next, she asked students to think about what they already knew about the topic. She did this by making cultural connections utilizing their background knowledge and experiences, she taught and modeled reading comprehension strategies (e.g., questioning using a story structure) and checked for understanding. Questioning is a good way to help determine how well students understand a reading passage and can motivate students to become more involved with a lesson. Finally, she allowed them to collaborate to check for understanding (e.g., transfer of learning responsibility). For many students, learning to read involves more than just reading books; it requires collaborating with others in meaningful dialogue to produce comprehension.

Table 1. Culturally Responsive Teaching Artifact #1

Mrs. Estrella (Mrs. E)	[Students are seated around a kidney table with guided readers and writing notebooks.] Yesterday in Mrs. Abert’s class (general education teacher) she read aloud a book called <i>The Eyes of the Weaver</i> (Los Ojos del Tejedor) by Cristina Ortega. She told me that you did such a good job listening. Well, today I am going to continue to listen to you read, hear you talk about the book, and I want to know what you think about the story through a strategy called questioning. Do you remember what this book was about? [Pointing to the cover page of a picture of an old man working at his weaving machine.]
Lisa	I think it was about an abuelito (grandpa) who sewed with his daughter.
Mrs. E	Good. How did you know this?
Lisa	Because, I remembered that when I would go to Mexico my momma would sew with my abuelito.

Mrs. E	Nice. Does anybody have a family member that sews? [All students reply to this question.] This book is about an abuelito who weaves with his granddaughter. The family lives in New Mexico. Weaving is like sewing but different. Do we know the difference between weaving and sewing? [No student reply.] Sewing is done with a single needle that has a small eye that thread is put through [modeling for them by having a picture of a needle and thread]. Weaving is like sewing. [Teacher takes out pieces of yarn and gives a few pieces to each] To weave is to take yarn and make it into a cloth by crossing over and under. You can do this by hand or by loom machine. A loom is a machine used for weaving. [Holding a few pieces of thick yarn, she crosses them over and under demonstrating them on how to weave into a cloth. She gives them a few minutes to practice this. She also shows them some examples of woven rugs she has brought from home.] Okay, now I want you to put your pieces of yarn in your pocket, and I would like you to read the pages 8-9 of the story quietly in your book, and think about what these two pages mean while you read. [After about 5 minutes she asks for a volunteer to read the pages aloud that were read silently.]
Mrs. E	Who would like to read first? [No hesitation, all four students eagerly volunteer.]
Begoña	[reading from book] "Your mother is right." Dad added. "This Ortega family has been making beautiful Chimayó weavings for seven generations. Just imagine, <i>imagínate</i> , since the time of your great, great, great, great, great grandfather! How do you feel about making it eight generations?" "Ok, I guess." What else could I say? My Grandpa's house in Chimayó was the place I loved best in all of New Mexico, and I loved to go there. But this time I was worried. Just this morning Mom told me it was my responsibility to make my bed. Now my parents were expecting me to become an eighth-generation weaver! "Listen, Cristina," Mom said. "Why don't you call Tía Elsie? Ask if our cousin Annalisa can stay with you and Grandpa." Calling Aunt Elsie was the best idea I'd heard yet! My cousin Annalisa was a brain and she could speak Spanish! My tía agreed to let Annalisa stay with Grandpa and me. She would meet us in Santa Fé and drive us to Grandpa's house in Chimayó. [End of reading.]
Mrs. E	Begoña, can you read the passage again? I really like how you read. [Begoña rereads the passage more fluently. The other three students get an opportunity to read also.] Great reading! Okay, we are going to finish up today's lesson and practice our questioning skills. However, first there is a word related to today's question I need to teach you. Does anybody know what the word generation means? [Writing this on the chart board.] [No student reply.] Generation means to be part of a group of people in a family thought of as being born around the same time. Like your abuelitos (grandparents) are from an older generation, your parents are from another generation, and you are from a newer one. Your family generation is usually classified with how far back you know your family. [On chart paper, she draws a ladder to symbolize the generation ladder of life. In each step of the ladder, she writes in numerical order 1) grandparents, 2) parents, and 3) you.] As an example, I know some of you live with your grandparents. So, we could say (counting) that you are a third-generation family member of your house. Generation can also relate to jobs. As an example, I am a second-generation teacher. My momma was a teacher, and then I became one. [Writing this on the board.] So, I am a second-generation teacher. Can someone give me an example? [Pause] [students are thinking; a hand goes up] Solomon would you like to give us an example?
Solomon	If I had my bisabuelos (great grandparents) living at home. My bisabuelos would go on top of my abuelos (grandparents)...so I am 4th generation.
Mrs. E	(Smiling) Yes, because your bisabuelos are older, they would be placed (or on top like you said) one step above the generation ladder from your abuelos. So, you are right, you would be 4th generation in your household or family that you know of. Now this is important, because you may want to carry on the traditions of your family. [The concept of tradition was covered in a previous class.] Take a few minutes to talk with a neighbor what generation means to you. [Mrs. Estrella calls on students to see if they understand. An example follows.]
Lourdes	My dad is a three-generation carpenter. My abuelo and bisabuelo were carpenters.
Mrs. E	[smiling] Yes, your dad is a third-generation carpenter. Great job! Does everyone get this idea of what a generation means? I know it will take some practice. [Students nod that they understand.] Do you know that after every page I read a book, I ask myself question(s) to see if I understood what I read? I question the text; it keeps me thinking about words and ideas in a book. Good readers ask questions as they read; it keeps them thinking about the words and ideas in the book by helping them connect

	<p>this to what they already know. It makes them want to go back and reread the passage or read on. Asking questions helps them when they do not understand. When Begoña was reading this passage, I thought about the following questions. How do you think Cristina feels knowing that she is expected to become an eighth-generation weaver? I always write my questions down to see if I know anything about what I just read. [She writes this question on chart board paper.] To be worried means to feel uneasy about something. Please open your notebooks and write this question down. [Now modeling by reading the passage again aloud.] I come to this passage, [reading aloud] "This Ortega family has been making beautiful Chimayó weavings for seven generations. Just imagine, imagínate, since the time of your great, great, great, great, great grandfather! How do you feel about making it eight generations?" I ask myself the question, "How do you think Cristina feels knowing that she is expected to become an eighth-generation weaver?" I read on, "Ok, I guess." What else could I say? My Grandpa's house in Chimayó was the place I loved best in all of New Mexico, and I loved to go there. But this time I was worried. Just this morning Mom told me it was my responsibility to make my bed. Now my parents were expecting me to become an eighth-generation weaver!" The word responsibility means to do something important. I wonder if she feels nervous about the responsibility of becoming an eighth-generation weaver. Okay, so let's think about this. First, I want you to collaborate with a partner asking this question ["How do you think Cristina feels knowing that she is expected to become an eighth-generation weaver?"] and then thinking about it aloud. I want one student to ask the question, and the other student to discuss it. Next, please write your answer in your notebook so that we can share them. Finally, we will come back and talk about this questioning strategy. [Researcher observes two students, Begoña and George, working on the carpet.]</p>
George	[Asking Begoña] How do you think Cristina feels knowing that she is expected to become an eighth-generation weaver?
Begoña	Let me go back and reread. [Begoña pausing to think, not sure how to answer.] I was thinking that I would like to be like my mamma, who is a <i>sastre</i> (tailor). I would be a second-generation <i>sastre</i> . This is important because people need their clothes sewed. I worry about not being as good as my mom. She sews beautifully! I think Cristina worried that she may not be as good as her mom. [She writes this answer in her notebook.]
Begoña	[George's turn.] How do you think Cristina feels knowing that she is expected to become an eighth-generation weaver?
George	I would not like to be a cook like my dad. It's no fun. He works too hard. Maybe she does not want to be a weaver. [He writes his answer in his notebook.]
Mrs. E	[asking students to return to table for discussion.] Can someone share his or her thoughts about this question?
Begoña	I asked myself the question and thought about what I read. I then went back and reread the passage. [Now reading what she wrote in notebook.] Mrs. Estrella writes Begoña's thoughts under the question on chart board.
Mrs. E	Look at what Begoña did. She asked herself the question, thought about what she read, and then went back and reread the passage. Very good, Begoña! You need to keep asking yourself questions as you are reading. [She repeats this activity with the other students, who apply similar methods to think about the question and answer it. All students understand this activity.]

### Culture Matters in Special Education

Mrs. Estrella stated her belief that, "The field of LD and special education has never had a strong sense of culture consciousness." Because of this critical omission in special education, Mrs. Estrella emphasized the importance of drawing from students' cultural experiences in her instruction. Using culturally relevant materials that covered topics and events that Latino ELLs had experienced or had an interest in helped to support their specific learning needs. Moreover, they became motivated to participate in challenging discussion and activities contributed to their higher literacy achievement (Au, 2011). In the following excerpt, Mrs. Estrella used a culturally

familiar literacy activity that not only promoted instructional engagement, but also built upon the skills necessary for literacy by drawing from students' sociocultural knowledge. First, she provided students with evidence-based practices (e.g., read aloud, vocabulary development) that validated learners' sociocultural experiences. Next, she applied culturally responsive teaching methods that gave ELLs the opportunities to contextualize instructional reading knowledge by allowing students to filter this new knowledge through their own experiences. Finally, she provided writing instruction that activated students' engagement through the incorporation of their home and community-based social practices.

Table 2. Culturally Responsive Teaching Artifact #2

Mrs. E	[She pauses for everyone to sit down at the kidney table. Behind her is a dry-erase board.] Today, we are going to learn about Anthony Reynoso: Born to Rope [pointing to title page with a picture of a Mexican Charro with a rope in his hands.] What do you think the book is about?
Class	[All students enthusiastically raise their hand.] A Mexican Cowboy!
Mrs. E	How did you know it was about a Mexican Cowboy?
Henry	My dad takes us to el rodeo Mexicano when it comes.
Mrs. E	So, what do they do at this rodeo?
Lisette	I like watching the bull riders. The bulls are big and mean.
Manuel	I like the rope tricks. [Mrs. E gives all five students a chance to express their thoughts about the Mexican Rodeo.]
Mrs. E	Good, it seems that you all have been to a Mexican Rodeo. Today, I am going to read aloud Anthony Reynoso a cowboy who was born to rope. But first, I want to introduce an idea that we are going to read about. This idea is called tradition or traditions. [Writing this on the board.] I know everyone has traditions, but can someone describe to me what it is. [Teacher pause...no student reply.] Okay, let me give you an example. Every Sunday my mother and me get together to make tortillas at my house. We have been doing this for a long time. A tradition can be some type of celebration that you have been doing for a long time. [She passes along some pictures of her making tortillas with her mom, and writes making tortillas with my mom next to tradition.] Can someone give me a tradition that they celebrate? [All students answer this question, and she writes their ideas next to the word tradition.]
Mrs. E	[Reading aloud; manuscript has been shortened for length.] My Name is Anthony Reynoso. I'm named after my father, who is holding the white horse, and my grandfather, who is holding the dappled horse. We all rope and ride Mexican Rodeo Style on my grandfather's ranch outside of Phoenix, Arizona. As soon as I could stand, my dad gave me a rope. I had my own little hat and everything else I needed to dress as a Charro. That's what a Mexican cowboy is called. It's a good thing I started when I was little, because it takes years to learn to rope. In Mexico, the Rodeo is the national sport. The most famous charros there are like sports stars here. On weekdays, Dad runs his landscape business, Mom works in a public school, and I go to school. I wait for the bus with other kids at the corner of my block. I always come to school with my homework done. When I'm in class I forget about roping and riding. I don't think anyone in school knows about it except my best friends. It's different when I get home. I practice hard with Dad. He's a good teacher and shows me everything his father taught him. We spend a lot of time practicing for shows at schools, malls, and rodeos. We are experts at passing the rope. Our next big exhibition is in Sedona, about two hours away by car. After rope practice we shoot a few baskets. Dad's pretty good at that too! On Friday after school, Dad and I prepare our ropes for the show in Sedona. They've got to be just right. Everything is ready for tomorrow, so I can take a break and go through my basketball cards. I decide which ones I want to buy, sell, and trade. Collecting basketball cards is one of my favorite hobbies. It's Saturday! Time for the show in Sedona. I get a little nervous watching the other performers. I sure wouldn't want to get messed up in my own rope in front of all these people! After the Mexican hat dance, we're next! My dad goes first... and then it's my turn. While the mariachis play, I do my stuff. Even Dad can't spin the rope from his teeth like this! Then Dad and I rope together, just like we

	practiced. It's hard to do with our wide Charro hats on. When my dad passes the rope to me and I spin it well, he says he has passed the A Mexican rodeo tradition on to me.
Ms. E	[Motioning students to the board.] Okay, let me stop reading, and I want you to work on a writing activity using this book. Today, we are going to write about some traditions that you know about your family. [Mrs. E gives an explicit explanation and then models her idea by writing the following sentences on the board, and reading them orally.] Every Sunday my mother and I get together to make tortillas at my house. We have been doing this for a long time. This is my tradition. [She posts pictures of making tortillas with her mother next to her sentence. Ms. E explains that they need to come up with an example like hers.] Does everyone understand? Can someone explain to me what he or she is going to write about?
Lupita	We are going to write about a tradition we do with family.
Mrs. E	Yes. I want you to write about a tradition in your family and then draw me a picture. [Handing out some writing paper. Ms. E circulates around and provides assistance as needed.] "Lisa, what are you writing about?"
Lisa	My family and me celebrate Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). We celebrate family members who have died. This is my tradition.
Mrs. E	What a soulful tradition—great job! Lupita writes 'my family and I go to misa (mass) every Sunday.' This is my tradition. David writes 'my dad and I go to the flea market every Sunday to buy stuff.' This is my tradition. [All five students' writings affirm that they understand the concept of tradition.]

### Their Collaborative Spirit

Mrs. Estrella clearly understood that the set of collaborative learning skills students brought from their community could provide a powerful communicative link in associating new information with prior knowledge during inclusion time. Her thoughts on this were as follows,

I connect their communicative skills that they have learned at home with skilled teaching to improve their reading knowledge; they are constantly interacting with others who are learning to read, encouraging each other to read, and teaching each other to read. Their collaborative spirit gives them a strong motivation to learn.

In the following inclusive reading excerpt (Table 3), Mrs. Estrella collaborated with a 4<sup>th</sup> grade general education teacher (Mrs. Fulmer) to help two of her ELLs with LD (Ramon and Olga) to participate successfully in grade level instruction. Prior to this lesson, she had met with Mrs. Fulmer to go over lesson plan modifications and supports for her ELLs with LD that centered on the general education curriculum and achieving grade-level common core standards. Mrs. Estrella used collaborative based learning to ensure that her ELLs with LD would stay engaged, motivated, and supported during general and special education instruction. She wanted her ELLs with LD (e.g., Ramon and Olga) and peers (e.g., Chris and Lucas) seated next to each other, so that the peers could provide scaffolding support with learning activities that promoted oral language development (e.g., explain unknown vocabulary, translate ideas and concepts in the native language, and assist with understanding directions). Ramon and Olga are sitting next to Chris and Lucas, who are the most advanced students in the classroom and have strong collaborative skills. Mrs. Fulmer first does a whole-class read aloud and then follows-up with a discussion question. The class is reading a culturally responsive story about *Tomás and the Library Lady* (Mora, 2000).



Table 3. Culturally Responsive Teaching Artifact #3

Mrs. Fulmer	Yesterday, we read the first part from this book (pointing to the cover page). If you recall, Tomás was a Mexican American child of migrant farm workers, who traveled seasonally between Texas and Iowa with family. In Iowa, his Grandfather, who told him stories in Spanish, encouraged his grandson to visit the local library to find new stories. Today we are going to find out what he did at the library. [Reading aloud; the passage is shortened for length.] "The next morning Tomás walked downtown. He looked at the big library. Its tall windows were like eyes glaring at him. Tomás walked around and around the big building. He saw children coming out carrying books. Slowly he started climbing up, up the steps. He counted them to himself in Spanish. Uno, dos, tres, cuatro... His mouth felt full of cotton. Tomás stood in front of the library doors. He pressed his nose against the glass and peeked in. The library was huge!"
Mrs. Fulmer	Okay let me stop there. We are now going into amigos time. We are going to focus on the following passage (written on chart board paper), Slowly he started climbing up, up the steps. He counted them to himself in Spanish. Uno, dos, tres, cuatro... His mouth felt full of cotton. I want you to use the following graphic organizer (handing it out to the students) with your amigo to come up with three ideas about this passage in answering the following question. What do these sentences tell you about how Tomás felt about going into the library? [Mrs. E begins to observe Ramon and Chris. I focus on the conversation Olga and Lucas are having.]
Lucas	[Lucas recognizes that Olga needs help and prompts her.] We need to focus on this passage. What do you think we should do first?
Olga	Oh, the passage that Mrs. Fulmer wrote.
Lucas	You are right! [Olga smiles; both students write this on paper.] What do you think we should do next?
Olga	[Feeling more confident.]. Write an idea in each box.
Lucas	Great idea! Let's do this, and as we write we can talk about them. Okay, I think you are a great leader and you should go first. If you need help, I can help you. Let's start with the first sentence.
Olga	I think he was scared of going into the library because he could not read the books.
Lucas	[repeating the sentence orally.] I think he was scared of going into the library because he could not read the books. Let's write this great idea in our first box.
Olga	It is your turn Lucas. You need to do the next sentence.
Lucas	I got a tough one; I do not know Spanish that good. Olga can you help me. You know Spanish [Olga pauses to think about this. Mrs. E gives her some probes in Spanish to understand the gist of the passage.]
Olga	Lucas have you ever been scared about something, and you are told to slow down and count out loud. Uno means one; dos means two; tres means three; and cuatro means four. He was counting in Spanish because he was scared to go into the library as he went up the stairs.
Lucas	Oh, I get it now. He was counting in Spanish, just like I would count in English if I were going into a building I was scared to go into. Olga you are smart, you know two languages. [Olga gleaming with pride.] [The students finish filling in the third box; Mrs. Fulmer transitions to follow up. Olga is one of the first students to raise her hand in expressing her thoughts about how Tomás felt about going into the library.]

## Discussion

This qualitative case study describes the culturally responsive literacy instruction of one bilingual special education teacher (Mrs. Estrella) with ELLs with LD in an urban elementary school. This study was situated within a social constructivist framework. In describing this teacher's instruction, a focus was placed on how well this teacher's knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy impacted her instruction. Findings resulted in three major themes (*The Great Garment of American Diversity, Culture Matters in Special Education, and Their Collaborative Spirit*) that were entwined to create a sociocultural literacy teaching experience. Mrs. Estrella's sociocultural instruction was in line with what the literature (e.g., Orosco & Abdulrahim, in press;

Orosco & O'Connor, 2014; Orosco, 2010) suggests that culturally responsive teaching approaches can provide practitioners with an important backdrop that focuses on providing ELLs with (a) direct and explicit instruction that provides modeling and oral language development with evidence based reading components that makes connections with prior learning experiences (e.g., asking ELLs what they already know, linking ELLs' personal experiences with reading content, and allowing ELLs to clarify understanding in their native language); (b) comprehension strategy instruction that provides questioning support that assists students in answering questions about reading passages, feedback to students regarding their answers, teaching students how to summarize to draw out the most important ideas in a text, and opportunities for students to ask and answer questions about challenges they encounter during reading; and (c) incorporating collaborative learning activities.

### Implications for policy, practice, and research

Implications drawn from this study follow.

**Policy.** Although federal special education policy (e.g., IDEA, 2004) provides reasons for schools to improve special education programming and prevent the underachievement of ELLs with LD, to date, it fails to provide specific direction on how schools can address ELLs' cultural and linguistic learning abilities. Schools need policy guidance on how to develop culturally responsive professional development models that not only address national reform efforts but also provide teachers with a culturally responsive knowledge base that allows them to draw on and build upon the social capital ELLs bring to school (Orosco & O'Connor, 2014). Additionally, schools need assistance with how to undertake these culturally responsive reform efforts within old infrastructure, practices, and routines that have been difficult to change (Artiles et al., 2011). Findings from this study provide evidence that special education teachers of ELLs with LD can provide meaningful instruction if provided with culturally responsive professional development that incorporates evidence-based practices (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008).

**Practice.** The education literature continues to indicate that many teachers feel inadequately prepared (e.g., with ELL reading pedagogy and reading content) to instruct ELLs with LD (Ortiz et al., 2011). Teachers are still too comfortable providing direct skills-based instruction void of connections with ELLs' cultural and linguistic experiences (Au, 2011; Gay, 2010). Culturally responsive development could provide a strong bridge to showing special education professionals how to match evidence-based instruction with ELLs' cultural and linguistic experiences. Findings from this study align with the emerging literature (e.g., Orosco & Abdulrahim, in press; Orosco & O'Connor, 2014; Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Orosco, 2010) indicating that special education teachers' instruction can be relevant for ELLs if teachers are given professional development and training (driven by a sound foundation in sociocultural theory, ESL pedagogy, and reading content) that emphasizes and incorporates the following instructional characteristics: (a) model for teachers how to build upon ELLs' cultural and linguistic experiences and incorporate this experience with evidence based skills instruction; (b) provide teachers with differentiated instructional methods to address ELLs' cultural and linguistic learning needs; and (c) ensure teachers understand the second language/bilingual acquisition process and how language impacts reading comprehension.

**Research.** Finally, the findings that emerge from this study contribute to the special education literature, but also leave many inquiries unanswered that need to be investigated through future qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research. The first and perhaps most

important examination that special education research must continue to investigate is: *What is happening in special education classrooms with ELLs?* (Moore, Klingner, & Harry, 2013). Descriptive research, like this qualitative case study, can be a valuable instrument because it allows researchers to describe in depth the instructional behaviors that are occurring within specific special education classrooms, and help us understand the attributes of effective teachers and characteristics of effective instruction. And as a result of this research, it can provide a detailed understanding of what instructional practices work or not and what classroom factors are impacting implementation. In summary, qualitative research can be a supplemental method to experimentation (i.e., intervention development) because it can illuminate important nuances in scientific knowledge, which helps to promote instructional behaviors that are effective with students (Shavelson & Towne, 2003).

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## Appendix A

### Teacher Interview Protocol (Pre)

- A. Background/Demographic Information
1. What grades(s) do you currently teach?
  2. How long have you been teaching?
  3. What degrees do you hold?
  4. What endorsements do you hold?
  5. Do you know any foreign languages other than English?
    - a. And if so what is your level of proficiency?
    - b. Do you use this foreign language in your classroom?
  6. How many students you have?
- B. General Questions About Literacy
1. Describe your teaching philosophy?
  2. What are the greatest challenges special education teachers encounter today?
  3. What challenges do you face in teaching English Language Learners with learning disabilities to read?
  4. Do you feel that you are adequately prepared to teach English Language Learners with learning disabilities to read? Please explain.



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## Appendix B

### Teacher Interview Protocol (Post)

- (1). How would you describe your overall culturally responsive teaching experience for English Language Learners with learning disabilities?
- (2). Do you like it? Explain.
- (3). Do you think your culturally responsive teaching can be successful in addressing English Language Learners with learning disabilities literacy needs? Explain.
- (4). Is there anything else about the culturally responsive teaching process that you would like to mention that you believe may be important in improving instruction with English Language Learners with learning disabilities?
- (5). What advice do you have for others who might want to start using a culturally responsive evidence-based teaching model for English Language Learners with learning disabilities?