

GEORGIA-BASED SPECIAL EDUCATION AND GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS'
ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: UNDERSTANDING THE
INFLUENTIAL FACTORS

by

NANCY KIMBERLY RESENDIZ CHAVEZ

(Under the Direction of Ashley J. Harrison)

ABSTRACT

This study examines the attitudes and understanding of special and general education teachers in Georgia toward English Language Learners (ELLs) and the factors influencing these. Survey data from 1,022 teachers were analyzed. An independent samples T-test found no significant differences in attitudes or understanding of ELL instruction between special and general education teachers. Additionally, sociodemographic factors did not predict attitudes or understanding of ELLs. However, years of teaching experience showed a significant negative impact on attitudes, with more experienced teachers displaying less positive attitudes toward ELLs. Middle school teachers were found to have lower understanding of ELL instruction compared to elementary and high school teachers, indicating a need for more tailored professional development. These findings suggest that future research should focus on enhancing professional development to support experienced and middle school educators in fostering more positive attitudes and understanding of ELLs.

INDEX WORDS: english language learners (ELL), special education, teacher attitudes,
 understanding of ELL instruction, professional development

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NANCY KIMBERLY RESENDIZ CHAVEZ

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NANCY KIMBERLY RESENDIZ CHAVEZ

Major Professor:	Ashley J. Harrison
Committee:	Sycarah Fisher
	Paula J. Mellom
	Chitra Pidaparti

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents (Nancy and Oscar) and brother (Oscar), for all of their support and sacrifices throughout my educational journey.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion

Importance of Inclusion

Experts define inclusion in schools as the process of identifying and removing barriers to full participation in education for all students, regardless of their abilities, ethnicity, gender, or other characteristics (Slee, 2011; Lindsay, 2018). Inclusive education has been shown to have a variety of benefits for students, including improved academic and social outcomes, increased self-esteem, and reduced stigmatization (Rose & Meyer, 2002; UNESCO, 2009). Additionally, inclusive education helps to promote social justice and equity by ensuring that all students have access to the same opportunities and resources (Kunc, 2011; Skrtic, 1991). By creating a diverse and inclusive learning environment, inclusive education fosters empathy, understanding, and acceptance among students, and helps to break down stereotypes and prejudices (Lindsay, 2018; Salend & Duhaney, 2017). The benefits of inclusion are widely acknowledged in the current literature. According to Gatt et. al (2011), inclusion promotes positive attitudes towards diversity and creates a sense of community among students. Inclusion has also been shown to be related to increased opportunities for academic and social growth for all students, regardless of their abilities. Ultimately, inclusive education is an essential component of an inclusive society that values diversity and respects the rights and dignity of all individuals (Kauffman, 2002; Slee, 2011). However, there are several factors that impact the successful implementation of inclusion (Katz, & Mirenda, 2002).

Inclusion for ELL students

In the 2018-2019 school year, there were approximately 5 million students classified as English Language Learners (ELL) in the United States public schools, representing 9.6% of the total student population (NCES, 2021). Given this significant representation, it is essential to ensure that ELL students are supported and included in their classrooms. Educators must establish a learning environment that makes every student feel valued and supported, regardless of their background or abilities. For ELL students, research shows that access to high-quality instructional materials and support through programs such as English as a Second Language (ESL) or dual-immersion is beneficial when promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity and creating a secure and welcoming classroom environment that acknowledges the unique contributions of ELL students (Mavrogordato, 2021). Research suggests that inclusion and support for ELL students are critical components of a successful education system that promotes equity and ensures that all students have the opportunity to reach their full potential (OECD, 2012).

Inclusion for ELL students in Georgia. Georgia's educational system faces many challenges, including meeting the needs of a growing population of ELLs. The National Center for Education Statistics, ranks Georgia eighth in the United States for the number of ELLs enrolled in its schools (2017). Moreover, the state's ELL programs have seen a remarkable increase in enrollment, rising by 61% between 2011 to 2019 (Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, n.d.). Inclusive education policies must be put in place to ensure that ELL students receive adequate support in their language acquisition journey. Providing quality language instruction, teacher training, and culturally responsive materials can help ELL students achieve

academic success while feeling valued and respected in their new learning environment (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010).

Facilitators and Barriers to Inclusion

Broad Facilitators/Barriers

Successful inclusion in schools is influenced by a broad range of facilitators and barriers that can either support or hinder the effective integration of students with disabilities (Lindsay, 2018). Essential facilitators include collaboration between general and special educators, adequate resource allocation, and support structures that enable educators to adapt instruction and provide necessary accommodations effectively (Avramidis, & Norwich, 2002; Avramidis & Kalyve, 2007). Further, the type, severity, and other aspects of a student's disability can affect their participation in inclusive settings, with those having mild disabilities often experiencing better outcomes (Cassady, 2011; Mastropieri et al., 2019). Barriers to successful inclusion in education vary widely, ranging from insufficient funding to a lack of administrative support. However, teacher characteristics are often identified as key factors influencing the success of inclusion efforts. These characteristics include attitudes, knowledge, training, and the level of support teachers receive. Understanding the specific contexts in which these barriers most significantly impact educational inclusion is essential for developing effective interventions.

An understanding of evidence based instructional strategies specific to inclusive settings is crucial for the success of inclusion. Teachers must be equipped with a variety of instruction methods that allow them to meet the diverse needs of all students, including those with disabilities. The effectiveness of inclusion sometimes lies on the ability of educators to implement teaching methods that are both flexible and responsive to varied learning styles (Tomlinson, 2001; Florian, 2008). Ongoing training and professional development in inclusive

pedagogy empowers teachers to make informed decisions that support all students' educational growth. Such professional development should continue to reflect the latest research and best practices in education to ensure that teachers are equipped with the most effective tools and knowledge to manage their inclusive classrooms (Asterhan & Lefstein, 2024).

Attitudes

Attitudes play a critical role in the success of inclusive practices. Teachers who hold positive attitudes towards inclusion and possess the necessary knowledge and skills are better equipped to create supportive and inclusive classroom environments (Salend, 2011). Effective communication and collaboration among teachers, families, and other professionals further enhance these environments (Zagona, et. al., 2017). However, negative attitudes towards disability among school staff and peers can significantly undermine inclusion efforts. Therefore, promoting positive attitudes and beliefs about disability and inclusion is paramount in fostering an inclusive and welcoming school atmosphere (Avramidis, et al., 2000). This requires a commitment to equity, access, and social justice, along with a concerted effort to address systemic barriers and promote evidence-based practices (Booth & Ainscow, 2016; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; David, & Kuyini, 2012; Woodcock & Woolfson, 2019).

Attitudes Toward Bilingualism/ELL

Research indicates that negative attitudes towards bilingualism can significantly impact the language development and academic achievement of bilingual children (Diaz, 1983). Research has noted that detrimental views on bilingualism could lead to poor educational outcomes, reduce educational opportunities, and reduce academic performance, creating a decreased sense of belonging among bilingual students (Diaz, 1983; Ong, 2021).

Prior research on teacher attitudes has shown that these play a significant role in shaping instructional practices for ELL students and can therefore help identify areas of need for professional development and training (Castaneda, 2020; Nishimura, 2014). The attitudes of teachers towards ELLs play a crucial role in shaping their instructional practices and the educational experiences of ELL students. Studies have shown that negative attitudes towards ELLs can result in lower expectations and reduced engagement, limiting educational opportunities for these students (Deussen et al., 2008). For instance, pre-service teachers who perceived language learning as easy, tended to have more negative attitudes towards ELLs (Dixon et al., 2016). Positive attitudes towards inclusion significantly contribute to creating supportive and inclusive educational environments that enhance both academic and social outcomes for students (Ahmed et al., 2022; Triviño-Amigo et al., 2022).

These findings suggest a critical need for evidence-based training in language learning processes to counteract these biases. Public policy interventions designed to foster positive attitudes toward bilingualism have shown promising results in changing perceptions (Kim et al., 2021). These interventions successfully influenced pre-service teachers' attitudes but have not been extensively tested on in-service teachers, highlighting a gap in understanding the effectiveness of these strategies on practicing educators.

Gaps in the Literature

While there is substantial research on the attitudes of pre-service teachers towards ELLs and bilingualism, less is known about the attitudes of in-service teachers and how these attitudes impact their teaching practices and the inclusivity of their classrooms. Most existing studies focus on pre-service scenarios, leaving a notable gap regarding in-service educators who are actively shaping the learning environment for ELL students. This suggests a need for

research that examines how in-service teachers' attitudes towards ELLs affect their educational practices and the inclusiveness of their classrooms. It is also essential to understand what types of characteristics relate to positive and negative attitudes. For example, another significant gap in the literature is the lack of studies comparing the attitudes towards ELL students between special education and general education teachers. Identifying whether these two groups differ significantly in their perceptions and instructional approaches can provide critical insights into tailoring professional development and interventions. Less research has examined other specific teacher characteristics and sociodemographic factors that relate to attitudes.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing targeted interventions that promote equity and inclusion within schools, thereby fostering environments that support the academic success and well-being of ELL students (Ziegenfuss et al., 2014). Such research would not only fill a significant gap in the current literature but also provide a strong foundation for policy and practice changes that could fundamentally improve education for ELL students. First it is important to identify which specific groups of teachers and what particular school contexts exhibit the most negative attitudes towards ELLs. Identifying these key areas will enable targeted support where it is most needed, ensuring that interventions are both effective and efficiently allocated to improve outcomes for bilingual students.

Variables Related to Teacher Attitudes

Teacher Sociodemographic Characteristics

First Language (English vs Non-English). A teacher's first language could also play a role in shaping their attitudes towards ELLs. Teachers whose first language is English may have different perceptions and approaches to multilingual education compared to teachers whose first language is not English. Educators with a native background in a language other than English

may inherently possess greater empathy and understanding of the linguistic challenges faced by ELLs, potentially fostering more inclusive attitudes and practices. This intrinsic understanding can enhance their ability to relate to the cultural and linguistic hurdles ELL students must overcome. On the other hand, teachers whose first language is English might not naturally recognize these challenges, which could result in less effective communication and support for ELLs without targeted training and exposure to multilingual teaching strategies.

Few studies have looked into the effects of a teacher's native language on attitudes or instruction. One study focused on examining only native English speaking teachers teaching a foreign language where they found that teachers were more likely to use English for practical reasons such as addressing questions, teaching grammar, and establishing solidarity with students, rather than from a lack of knowledge about the target language, which is more common among non-native instructors (Polio & Duff, 1994). Understanding how a teacher's first language influences teacher perceptions and practices can provide valuable insights into the development of professional development programs aimed at enhancing the inclusivity and effectiveness of teaching practices for linguistically diverse classrooms.

Amount of Languages Spoken (Monolingual or Bi/multilingual). Teachers who are bilingual or multilingual themselves may have a unique insight into the process of language acquisition and the challenges faced by ELL students. This personal experience can foster empathy, leading to more positive attitudes towards multilingual learners and a greater commitment to implementing inclusive teaching practices (Feng & Sass, 2013; Wright, 2020). Teachers with fluency in additional languages often possess more favorable attitudes toward multilingualism and ELLs. These educators tend to view bilingualism and multilingualism as assets rather than an obstacle in educational settings. Such positive perspectives are important

because they help create inclusive environments that respect and utilize students' linguistic backgrounds for academic success (Dixon et. al., 2016).

Research also indicated that teachers who are fluent in other languages are more likely to incorporate the native languages of their students into classroom practices (Dixon et. al., 2016; Burner & Carlsen, 2023). This integration often enhances students' engagement and learning outcomes, as students from multilingual backgrounds may feel more validated and understood when their languages are acknowledged in the classroom. Conversely, teachers who do not speak multiple languages may hold deficit views regarding ELLs, often perceiving them as less capable or more challenging to teach. Such attitudes can lead to biases that negatively impact ELLs' academic experiences and self-esteem (Dixon et. al., 2016). However, these monolingual teachers might not inherently understand these challenges but can still develop positive attitudes through professional development and exposure to multilingual environments (Deng, Kiramba, & Viesca, 2020). For this study, teachers were asked to identify their first language and any additional languages they are fluent in. This was later recorded to be a dichotomous variable of either monolingual or bi/multilingual speakers.

Education Level. Higher education often exposes teachers to a broader range of research and methodologies, potentially fostering more positive attitudes towards multilingual learners and a deeper appreciation for linguistic diversity in the classroom (Brien & Kelly, 2016). New training for teachers also emphasizes the need for additional training on how to serve students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the classrooms (Achamrah, 2022). This exposure to diverse educational theories and practices can significantly enhance a teacher's ability to implement effective teaching strategies that accommodate a wide range of learning styles and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, advanced degrees often include components that

focus on equity, inclusion, and multicultural education, which are crucial for developing sensitivity and competency in teaching in diverse environments.

Studies have shown that teachers with postgraduate education are more efficacious in inclusive settings than those with only graduate-level education (Baş, 2022). Previous research has indicated that graduate-level education may not adequately prepare teachers for the demands of inclusive education, leading to lower efficacy among these educators (Sadioğlu, 2011). Successful inclusive education outcomes require teachers to possess considerable expertise in teaching practice and evaluation (Moran, 2007). Research also emphasizes that without sufficient efficacy, teachers may struggle to effectively implement instructional strategies tailored to students with special learning needs (Tomlinson, 2005). However, existing literature often generalizes the impact of higher education without distinguishing between different types of training and academic disciplines. Therefore, there remains a need for further examination of the specific elements within higher education that most significantly contribute to teacher attitudes in diverse classrooms.

Teacher Experience & Other Contextual Factors

Title 1 vs Higher Resourced Schools. Title 1 schools, which receive federal funding due to a high percentage of low-income students, often face resource constraints that can affect the quality of education provided (Grybush, 2020). On the other hand, higher resourced schools have access to more funding, better facilities, and a wider range of educational opportunities. These disparities in resources can shape students' attitudes and perceptions of their own capabilities, the value of education, and their future prospects. Additionally, the limited resources in Title 1 schools not only affect student attitudes but also likely contribute to poorer teacher attitudes. Teachers in under-resourced schools may experience higher levels of stress and burnout due to

larger class sizes, inadequate supplies, and less support, which can negatively impact their attitudes towards teaching and their ability to implement effective educational strategies. This, in turn, can create a cycle where negative teacher attitudes further influence student perceptions about education, reinforcing a challenging educational environment.

Research has shown that the amount of resources available in schools can significantly impact their attitudes towards education (Greenwald & Laine, 1996). Studies indicate that disparities in funding and resources correlate with differences in student achievement and motivation, suggesting that well-resourced schools can provide a more conducive learning environment (Hanushek, 1997; Zecker, 2019). Consequently, while the connection between resources and educational attitudes is evident, further research examining if similar connections exist with more nuanced attitudes, like toward bilingualism, may provide deeper insights into these complex relations.

Years of Teaching Experience. The duration of a teacher's experience can critically shape their approach to education. With more years in the classroom, teachers often develop a deeper understanding of student diversity and the complexities of educational needs (Martin, 2006; Harthy et al., 2013). Veteran teachers, having navigated numerous challenges and changes over their careers, might exhibit more resilience and adaptability, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic classroom environment. However, increased experience does not automatically translate to positive changes; it can sometimes entrench outdated methods unless actively coupled with ongoing professional development (Avramidis & Kalyve, 2007). Thus, understanding the impact of teaching experience on attitudes towards ELLs and inclusion is important when designing effective teacher training and support programs.

Certification Area (General Education vs. Special Education). Special education teachers often face unique pressures, balancing the language development needs of ELLs with other educational requirements specific to disabilities. This is complicated further by a potential lack of specialized training in ELL methodologies that are adapted for students with disabilities. Additionally, there might be ingrained misconceptions about the capabilities of ELLs with disabilities, which can color a teacher's perception and effectiveness in addressing these students' needs. This distinction, between general education and special education teachers, is crucial for examining differential attitudes that may arise from the specific training, experiences, and challenges associated with each type of teaching.

Past research in bilingualism among children with autism spectrum disorder, found that bilingual families are often advised by educators against speaking multiple languages with their child; and, in the U.S., these families are also frequently told to use only English, since this is the language being used in most educational settings (Drysdalet. al., 2015; Baker 2013; Yu 2009, 2016). These recommendations given by practitioners, although well intended, do not align with the literature, which has suggested that learning two or more languages can be beneficial for children's language development and can help better integrate children into their respective cultures (Jegatheesan, 2011). Further research has focused on providing recommendations to counter this misleading advice including providing more opportunities for children to use and hear their native language and providing speech and language services in both languages (Lim et al. 2018; Paradis and Govindarajan 2018; Bird et al. 2016). These practices show the critical need for updated training and policies that recognize the benefits of multilingual learning environments, particularly for children with disabilities. It is essential that educators in special

education settings receive the support and resources necessary to implement inclusive, culturally competent teaching strategies that accommodate and celebrate linguistic diversity.

Path to Teacher Certification. Teacher certification path often significantly influences the preparedness and perspectives teachers bring into their classrooms. Traditional four-year certification programs typically offer a more structured and comprehensive curriculum that covers a broad range of pedagogical theories and practices, which may or may not include specific training for working with ELLs (Wright, 2020). Alternative certification pathways might focus more on practical, on-the-job training and may attract individuals from diverse professional backgrounds seeking a career change, but might lack in-depth pedagogical training. These program differences could potentially shape differing attitudes towards multilingual education, impacting educators' efficacy and inclusivity in handling the unique challenges faced by ELL students. Understanding these nuances can inform the development of more targeted and effective teacher preparation programs.

Existing research indicates that the path to teacher certification notably affects teachers' preparedness and classroom attitudes, particularly in areas such as classroom management and engagement with multilingual students (Malone, 2019). Studies have found that traditionally certified teachers tend to have more positive perceptions concerning pedagogical practices compared to their alternatively certified peers (Tournaki et. al., 2009, Linek et. al., 2012). This suggests that the structure and content of traditional programs might better prepare teachers in this area, potentially due to more comprehensive coursework and supervised practical experiences. However, this body of literature has some limitations and gaps. For instance, many studies tend to focus on specific regions or populations, such as larger cities, which limits the generalizability of findings across diverse educational contexts (Linek et. al., 2012). There is also

a need for more comprehensive research that addresses the experiences of teachers from alternative certification programs, particularly regarding their integration into the educational community and their ongoing professional development.

Grade levels Taught. The existing research reveals a significant difference in attitudes towards inclusion between elementary and secondary school teachers, with elementary teachers often exhibiting less positive views towards the inclusion of students with disabilities (Gaines & Barnes, 2017). This finding suggests that grade level might influence teachers' perceptions and their acceptance of inclusive practices. However, there's a noticeable gap in the literature concerning the impact of grade levels on attitudes towards ELLs. No studies have specifically explored how the grade level taught by teachers affects their attitudes towards ELLs, indicating an area for future research. This gap highlights the need for studies that examine whether the trends observed with inclusion of students with disabilities extend to attitudes towards multilingual and ELL students. Such research could inform targeted interventions and professional development tailored to teachers at different grade levels, thereby enhancing inclusivity and support for ELLs across educational settings.

Current Study

While research has explored the benefits and facilitators of inclusion in schools, significant gaps remain in understanding how various factors influence attitudes towards ELLs. This study aims to delve deeper into how the background and experiences of teachers shape their attitudes towards ELLs in both general and special education settings by exploring the following three research questions:

1. Do significant attitudinal or understanding differences exist between special education and general education teachers regarding ELLs?

2. Do sociodemographic factors (i.e., highest degree, first language, and mono or multilingualism) relate to attitudes towards ELLs and/or understanding of ELL instruction?
3. Do teacher experiences and school context (i.e., title 1 classification of the school of employment, grades taught, years teaching, years teaching ELLs, teacher certification path) relate to attitudes towards ELLs and/or understanding of ELL instruction?

By identifying differences in teacher attitudes, the study has the potential to help inform teacher training programs and professional development opportunities to better support teachers working with ELL students. Additionally, this study could provide insight on how to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment that would lead to increased success and well-being of ELL students.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Measures

Teacher Attitudes toward ELLs

The dependent variable used in this study is teacher attitudes towards ELLs. This was defined as a measure of the disposition, perspectives, and potentially implicit biases of teachers towards ELL students. It encompasses aspects such as the perceived challenges of teaching ELL students, beliefs about the benefits of bilingualism, and the perceived importance of integrating ELL students into general education classrooms. This study utilized the *Instructional Conversation Pre-institute Survey* developed by Paula Mellom, Ph.D., Rebecca Hixon, Ph.D., Jodi Weber Ed.S., and Amanda Ferster, Ph.D. This measure was initially designed to assess 3 constructs: teachers' attitudes towards ELLs, teachers' understanding about ELL students, and teachers' practice regarding inclusion in educational settings. However, due to overlapping content in the items measuring understanding and practice, these were merged into one 'Understanding' subscale. This previous research shows that the alpha's ranged from 0.67 to 0.79 (Fester, et. al., 2021). The measure took about 15-minutes to complete and used a 5-point Likert response scale: *Completely Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat Agree, Completely Agree*.

This measure has been primarily used prior to the start of the Center for Latino Achievement and Success in Education (CLASE) professional development institutes and was selected for this study due to the accessibility of previously collected data from past CLASE

professional development institutes, along with its content relevance and straightforward format that ensures it can be completed quickly. However, after data collection was completed, the internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of the attention subscale of the measure was determined to be 0.344 and the internal consistency for the understanding subscale was 0.431, indicating a low level of reliability and suggesting that the survey might not consistently reflect the constructs it aims to measure.

Teacher and Teaching Context Variables. Before beginning the *Instructional Conversation Pre-institute Survey*, teachers were asked to respond to questions addressing sociodemographic factors as well as teaching experience. The sociodemographic variables included highest degree, first language, and whether the teacher identified as mono- or multilingualism. The options for the highest degree variable included Associates, Bachelors, Masters, Education Specialist, and Doctoral. First language indicated whether a teacher's first language was English or any other language. The mono- or multilingual variable addressed whether teachers spoke one or multiple languages.

The teaching experience variables include title 1 classification of the school of employment, grades taught, years teaching, years teaching ELLs, teacher certification path. Teachers in this study were asked to provide their school district, and this information was later recorded to identify whether schools were Title 1 schools or another designation. The grades taught variable addressed what grades the teacher participant was teaching at the time they completed the survey. These grade levels were grouped as Early Childhood (Prek - K), Elementary (1st - 5th), Middle (6th - 8th), and High School (9th - 12th). These groupings are based on a study measuring teachers' attitudes and perceptions of inclusion in relation to grade level and years of experience where data showed no significant difference, but there was a trend

for K-2nd ($M = 63.26$, $SD = 14.91$) grade teachers having lower attitudes than those teaching 3-5th grade ($M = 69.70$, $SD = 11.53$) (Barnes & Gaines, 2015). Teacher certification path was defined as either a regular four-year degree path to teacher certification or any other path to certification (i.e. testing).

Participants and Recruitment

Sample Size Estimation

A power calculation was conducted to estimate the required sample size using the following parameters: linear multiple regression, fixed model, with a single regression coefficient. A preliminary estimate suggests a sample size of approximately 23 teachers in each group to detect moderate effect sizes with sufficient power (0.80). This estimate is based on effect sizes of 0.4, with an alpha value of 0.05 using G*power software (Faul et. al., 2007).

Sampling Strategies

This study used 2 different sampling strategies. First, participants whose data was collected due to their involvement with the CLASE professional development institute were included. Of note, only pre-institute data was used for this study, therefore, no teacher participants had attended professional development before survey completion. After examining the descriptive statistics of the initial CLASE data, it was determined that more special education teacher participants were needed to answer research question #1 and to achieve the sample size goal of $n = 23$ established through the power calculation. To collect data with additional participants, a request was submitted and accepted by the University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board prior to collecting additional teacher data. Special education teachers were specifically recruited using a non-probability sampling method through the Facebook platform, word of mouth, and targeted emails to listservs including possible participants. This additional

recruitment took about 6 months to complete. The non-probability method aimed to identify more teachers in this area, with the understanding that this approach may skew towards those with internet access and social media presence (Stern et. al., 2017).

Study Sample

The inclusion criteria were as follows: employed as a grade school teacher in the state of Georgia and involved in academic instruction, not other support teachers, at any point in time. These criteria were designed to capture a wide spectrum of attitudes towards ELLs but to specifically have a geographical focus on Georgia due to regional variations in teacher training and educational approaches. Participants in this study consist of $n = 129$ special education and $n = 893$ general education teachers in the state of Georgia.

Table 1 illustrates the general demographics of the sample for our study. The majority of participants come from Title 1 schools ($n = 781$, 76.4%). Additionally, a significant proportion of the sample ($n = 798$ teachers, 78.1%) followed non-traditional paths to certification. Most teachers held a Master's degree ($n = 456$, 44.6%), followed by those with Bachelor's degrees ($n = 372$, 36.4%). Special education teachers make up 12.6% of the sample ($n = 129$). Language proficiency in the sample is predominantly made up of teachers whose first language was English ($n = 944$, 92.4%), with a smaller segment being bi- or multilingual ($n = 122$, 11.9%). The teachers span various grade levels, predominantly in early childhood and elementary settings, with ($n = 500$, 48.9%) teaching from PreK to 5th grade. In terms of experience, teachers on average have been teaching for about 10.74 years, with approximately 6.67 years spent teaching ELLs.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Preliminary Results

Analysis using Skewness and Kurtosis was conducted on the attitudes dependent variable and results showed that the sample was normally distributed. Participants with any missing survey data were excluded from the analysis to maintain the integrity of the data set and ensure accurate and robust statistical results.

Comparing Teacher types

1. Do significant attitudinal differences exist between special education and general education teachers regarding ELLs?

To examine this first question an independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to examine differences between general educators and special educators in terms of both attitudes and understanding. Results revealed that general educators ($M = 3.16$; $SD = 0.27$) and special educators ($M = 3.15$; $SD = 0.26$) teachers did not differ significantly in terms of their attitudes towards ELL students, $t(1020) = -0.542$, $p = 0.588$. Similar results were observed for understanding towards ELL students, such that no significant differences were found between general education ($M = 3.33$; $SD = 0.24$) and special education ($M = 3.34$; $SD = 0.26$) teachers, $t(1020) = 0.293$, $p = 0.770$. In both attitudes and understanding, teachers showed generally neutral to slightly positive attitudes towards ELLs, which mean scores just above the neutral midpoint on a typical 1-5 scale, where 1 represents very negative attitudes and 5 very positive.

2. Do sociodemographic factors (e.i., highest degree, first language, and mono or multilingualism) relate to attitudes towards ELLs and/or understanding of ELL instruction?

In the analysis of the 'highest degree' variable, individuals with doctoral degrees served as the reference group, and were compared to those with associates, bachelors, masters, and educational specialists. The results indicate that the amount of education did not significantly predict attitudes (all p -values $> .06$). A one sided t -test was conducted and results showed that groups don't significantly differ in their attitudes based on their identified first language ($t = -1.8$, $p = .07$) or whether or not they are bi/multilingual ($t = -1.68$; $p = .10$). Table 5 presents regression results for sociodemographic factors and their effect on the understanding of ELL instruction. Similar to attitudes, none of the sociodemographic factors significantly predicted teachers' understanding of ELL instruction. (all p -values $> .11$).

3. Do teacher experiences and school context (i.e., title 1 classification of the school of employment, grades taught, years teaching, years teaching ELLs, teacher certification path) relate to attitudes towards ELLs and/or understanding of ELL instruction?

All teacher experience and school context variables were all examined for their relation to attitudes. Regression results for teacher experience factors affecting attitudes reveal that only years of teaching shows a significant negative effect on attitudes towards ELLs ($p = .008$). This suggests that more years of teaching experience may be associated with less positive attitudes. No other experience factors significantly predicted attitudes toward ELLs (all $p > .05$).

The regression results for understanding show that grades taught were significantly related to understanding of ELL instruction. More specifically, compared to the elementary reference group, teachers that taught middle school had lower understanding scores ($p = .019$).

Conversely, the high school group did not have significantly different scores from the elementary reference group. Years of teaching also shows a significant negative effect, similar to its impact on attitudes, which could indicate that the more years a teacher has in the profession, the more difficult it can become to integrate ELL strategies into their teaching practices ($p = .015$).

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The results from this study revealed some interesting points surrounding teacher attitudes towards ELLs in the state of Georgia. Interestingly, our findings concerning the impact of teaching experience highlight some nuanced dynamics. More years in teaching correlated with slightly less positive attitudes towards ELLs, possibly reflecting teachers' frustrations or challenges accumulating over time. This finding aligns with literature suggesting that longer teaching tenure might expose teachers to systemic inefficacies or resource constraints, potentially leading to cynicism or diminished enthusiasm (Martin, 2006; Harthy et al., 2013). Additionally, middle school teachers displayed a less comprehensive understanding of ELL instruction compared to high school teachers, which may indicate a gap in targeted professional development or resources for teachers at this educational stage (Rubinstein-Avila & Lee, 2014). This gap points to a need for administrative and policy interventions specifically tailored to the unique challenges of middle school education that enhance teacher training.

Notably, our analysis revealed no significant differences in the attitudes and understanding of ELLs between special education and general education teachers. This finding challenges the assumption that different educational backgrounds and teaching responsibilities would influence teachers' perceptions and effectiveness when working with multilingual students. The lack of significant differences in attitudes and understanding of ELLs between special education and general education teachers is surprising given previous research that shows the potential for specialized training to significantly impact teacher perceptions. Studies have

shown that specialized training can enhance teachers' abilities to adapt to diverse student needs, suggesting that differences in training between special and general education teachers might influence their attitudes towards ELLs (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Tomlinson, 1995; Tomlinson, 2003; Zigmond & Kloo, 2017). These results also showed a slight positive inclination but still close to a neutral stance, indicating that while neither group exhibits strong negative or positive biases, there remains room for improvement in attitudes and understanding.

Similarly, despite the varied educational and professional backgrounds of the teachers surveyed, factors such as certification path, highest degree, and linguistic background did not significantly influence their attitudes or understanding of ELL instruction. This observation challenges the notion that intrinsic teacher qualities and formal educational experiences alone are sufficient to determine a teacher's effectiveness or their attitudes toward ELLs. For example, past research suggests that teachers who completed a traditional certification process possess a broader range of pedagogical strategies and a deeper understanding of student diversity, which enhance their effectiveness in multicultural classrooms (Wright, 2020). Moreover, linguistic background has been shown to impact teachers' abilities to empathize with and adapt teaching methods for ELLs, which can lead to more positive attitudes towards these students (Dixon et al., 2016). Additionally, previous findings show that teachers' educational and professional backgrounds significantly affect their teaching practices and perspectives towards ELLs (Rubinstein-Avila and Lee, 2014). Even factors traditionally thought to enhance understanding and empathy—such as being multilingual (Feng & Sass, 2013; Wright, 2020)—did not show a significant correlation with positive attitudes or increased understanding of ELL instruction.

The absence of expected correlations in this study might be attributed to limitations such as sample size or the specific contexts of the schools involved, which might not have been

diverse enough to demonstrate the expected trends. Further, the instruments used for measuring attitudes and understanding might not have been sensitive enough to capture subtle differences influenced by the sociodemographic factors, or there may have been a ceiling effect where the range of potential responses was too narrow to show variation. Addressing these limitations in future research could provide more definitive insights.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the methodology of this study provided robust insights into the attitudes of teachers across different demographics and contexts within Georgia, several limitations need consideration. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases such as social desirability or selective memory, which can affect the authenticity of the responses (Karp & Brockington, 2005). Additionally, the internal consistency of the survey, indicated by a lower Cronbach's alpha, suggests that the reliability of the survey is lower than published values of acceptability (Ponterotto & Ruckdeschel, 2007). Despite these concerns, the choice to use this measure was made due to the availability of prior data and the accessibility of the measure.

To address these issues, future research could incorporate multi-method approaches to improve data triangulation and validation, moving beyond reliance on self-reporting to include observational and case study methodologies that could provide a more nuanced understanding of teacher attitudes and practices (Desselle, 2005). Exploring additional constructs such as teacher motivation, job satisfaction, and personal beliefs about multiculturalism could have offered deeper insights into the factors influencing attitudes toward ELLs. These aspects might reveal underlying motivations that influence teacher attitudes more significantly than the demographic or educational factors considered in this study (Ahmed et. al., 2022). Understanding these

intrinsic qualities could help with designing more effective teacher training programs that address personal and professional attitudes towards diversity in education.

Participants from the preliminary data, which was collected through CLASE pre-institute data, were recruited from schools receiving Title III funding, aimed at districts that have seen an increase in ELL populations. This funding and targeting may have introduced a selection bias, potentially attracting teachers who are either more supportive or more challenged by the presence of ELL students, thus affecting the general attitudes and understanding observed. Such funding also focuses on improving language instruction, which could mean the participants might have been exposed to more professional development regarding ELLs than the average teacher, potentially skewing the positivity of the observed attitudes.

Regarding sample variability, the limited diversity within the sample—largely sourced from similar regional backgrounds and possibly similar training programs—might have constrained the breadth of these findings. Additionally, the overrepresentation of teachers from Title 1 schools, with a majority holding traditional certification paths and higher education degrees, may not reflect the diversity of educational backgrounds and training found across wider teaching populations. The sample also shows limited linguistic diversity, with a predominant number of English-first language teachers and fewer bilingual/multilingual teachers, which may not adequately represent the linguistic complexities and instructional needs present in more diverse linguistic settings. The concentration of teachers in early childhood and elementary grades, with fewer from middle and high school levels, could also skew results towards the practices and attitudes prevalent in lower grades, potentially overlooking the unique challenges and experiences of teachers in higher educational stages. While the study was theoretically powered to examine differences between special education and general education

teachers, a more balanced representation across different teaching specializations could have provided a better understanding of how specific training and exposure influence attitudes towards ELLs (Faul et. al., 2007). Further studies could enhance the generalizability of these findings by recruiting a broader demographic to ensure a diverse range of perspectives is captured. Of note, although the participants from the first recruitment phase were similar in that they all came from schools where there was growth in ELLs, there was a range in how participants were recruited; some self-selected to attend and some were required by school districts. Thus, we were not overly concerned about self selection bias.

Implications for Future Practice

The current study shows what variables relate to attitudes which helps identify those in particular need of support. Future research could explore longitudinal designs to assess how teachers' attitudes evolve with changes in educational policies or school resources. Specifically, it is beneficial to consider various scenarios and methodologies to further elaborate on how these changes might influence teacher attitudes over time. Longitudinal studies are particularly valuable because they allow researchers to observe the trajectory of attitudes over time and the effects of specific interventions or changes in the educational environment (White & Arzi, 2005). Some examples of longitudinal studies that could be employed include studies on the impact of policy change, where researchers could study how the introduction of policies promoting inclusive education affects teachers' attitudes toward students with special educational needs. Studies on resource allocation might examine how an increase in school resources, like access to new technology or more teaching assistants, influences teachers' attitudes towards technology integration or collaborative teaching (Zecker, 2019). Studies on professional development, where researchers could follow a cohort of teachers who participate in a series of professional

development programs focused on multicultural education could determine if sustained professional development leads to lasting changes in attitudes towards cultural diversity in the classroom.

Additionally, qualitative studies could provide deeper insights into the reasons behind teachers' attitudes and practices, offering a richer context for understanding how to effectively support educational inclusivity. For example, the homogeneity in sample selection noted in these studies may not adequately represent the diversity of teacher experiences and viewpoints, which is critical for understanding middle school teachers who face unique challenges at this educational stage (Walker, 2019). Engaging more seasoned teachers, who might be less inclined toward new teaching methodologies, in such studies could help identify persistent barriers and opportunities for fostering inclusivity, as these educators often exhibit more resistance to changes in pedagogical practices (Carley Rizzuto, 2020).

Moreover, professional development programs' effectiveness often reflects the biases of self-selected participants who are generally more interested in such opportunities. By including a broader and more representative sample, research could uncover how different training and exposure levels influence attitudes towards educational inclusivity (Reeves, 2017). This approach would help develop tailored interventions that cater to the specific needs and reservations of experienced educators, thus enhancing the overall effectiveness of professional development programs.

Ultimately, this research highlights that while teachers may come into the profession with varying degrees of preparedness and attitudes towards ELLs, it is the systemic and ongoing professional support that will most significantly influence their ability to provide inclusive and effective instruction. By addressing the gaps in teacher training and resources, particularly at the

middle school level and for those with extensive teaching tenure, educational stakeholders in Georgia can better equip teachers to meet the needs of a diverse student body, including ELLs.

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics of Teacher Variables by Certification Area*

	<i>N (%)</i>	<i>Special Education</i>	<i>General Education</i>
Title 1 Classification			
Title 1		104 (81)	677 (76)
Not Title 1		23 (18)	198 (22)
Teacher Certification Path			
Traditional Path		104 (81)	694 (78)
Non-Traditional Path		22 (17)	162 (18)
Highest Degree			
Associate's Degree		0 (0)	2 (1)
Bachelor's Degree		53 (41)	319 (36)
Master's Degree		65 (50)	391 (43)
Education Specialist		9 (7)	160 (18)
Doctorate		2 (2)	21 (2)
Certification Area			
Special Education		129 (100)	0 (0)
General Education		0 (0)	893 (100)
First Language			
Non-English		16 (12)	62 (7)
English		113 (88)	831 (93)
Monolingual or Bi/Multilingual			
Bilingual/Multilingual		22 (17)	100 (11)
Monolingual		107 (83)	793 (89)
Grades Taught			
Early Childhood & Elementary; PreK and K; 1st - 5th		59 (46)	441 (49)
Middle School (6th - 8th)		23 (18)	110 (12)
High School (9th - 12th)		11 (9)	79 (9)
<i>M (SD)</i>			
Years Teaching		9 (7)	11 (8)
Years Teaching ELLs		5 (5)	7 (6)

Table 2*Means, Standard Deviation, and Ranges of Teacher Variables by Certification Area*

	<i>Special Education</i>			<i>General Education</i>		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Attitudes	3.15	0.26	2.56 - 4.94	3.16	0.27	2.56 - 4.95
Understanding	3.34	0.26	2.55 - 4.95	3.33	0.24	2.55 - 4.95

Table 3*Regression Analysis of Sociodemographic Factors*

	<i>Regression Results for Teacher Sociodemographic Factors (Attitudes)</i>			<i>Regression Results for Teacher Sociodemographic Factors (Understanding)</i>		
	Std β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Std β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Certification Path	.020	.520	.603	.019	.478	.633
Highest Degree - Associates	-.043	-1.084	.279	-.042	-1.069	.285
Highest Degree - Bachelors	-.258	-1.811	.071	.014	.100	.921
Highest Degree - Masters	-.261	-1.807	.071	-.036	-.254	.800
Highest Degree - Ed. Specialist	-.181	-1.662	.097	.028	.258	.797
First Language	-.024	-.547	.585	.045	1.019	.308
Mono/Multilingualism	.082	1.864	.063	-.070	-1.592	.112

Table 4*Regression Analysis of Experience Factors*

	<i>Regression Results for Teacher Experience Factors (Attitudes)</i>			<i>Regression Results for Teacher Experience Factors (Understanding)</i>		
	Std β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Std β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Title 1						
Classification	-.027	-.707	.480	-.012	-.316	.752
Grades Taught (6th-8th)	.026	.673	.501	-.091	-2.347	.019
Grades Taught (9th-12th)	-.010	-.248	.804	-.074	-1.911	.056
Years Teaching	-.143	-2.662	.008	-.130	-2.441	.015
Years Teaching ELLs	.026	.526	.599	-.068	-1.401	.162

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