GROUPING STRATEGIES WITH ELL STUDENTS

The impact on the social and emotional development of English Language Learner students through the use of grouping strategies

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A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements
For the degree of Master of Teaching
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Abstract

The present research study had two main purposes. The first was to identify different teachers’ methods and strategies used in the classroom to support ELL students. Using qualitative research methods, I conducted semi-structured interviews to gain insight into current teachers’ attitudes, teaching, beliefs and concerns of incorporating grouping strategies into their classrooms. Participants included two interviewees who were both professionals in the field of education, as they had taught ELL students during their extensive years of teaching. The second focus was to investigate the impact these teachers perceive that the grouping strategies has on the social and emotional development of their ELL students.

An in-depth literature review and two face-to-face, open-ended interviews brought forth data that highlighted four key themes including: 1) A great amount of responsibility falls in the hands of teachers and their beliefs and values towards using grouping strategies to help students develop; 2) Being aware of the grouping format allowed the participants to provide what they believed to be most important for their ELL students; 3) Multiple factors that can lead ELL students into groups that would more likely result in successful outcomes; and 4) The importance of creating strong relationships with the students and families in order to help them prosper in any classroom environment. These themes were amalgamated and integrated into a discussion of the findings.

Key Words: English language learners, grouping strategies, social and emotional development
Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge and thank those who have helped shape my ideas and have truly guided me with knowledge and wisdom during this research process. I would like to express my most sincere thanks to my supervisor, Katherine Rehner, for her kindness, ongoing support, and invaluable insights. She has guided my research at every stage of this project, provided thorough feedback that has been crucial, and she has been a great source of inspiration and for that, I am thankful.

I would like to thank both my research participants, as their passion to advocate about teacher participation pertaining to English Language learners and their development has provided insight and understanding for those who read this research and myself. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to hear their experiences, which has provided me a wealth of invaluable knowledge.

Thanks needs to be extended to the Primary/Junior 141 class of 2015, to the friends that quickly became family. Thank you all for the constant support, engorgement, inspiration, and laughter. Each individual’s passion for the profession and positivity throughout the two years has had a significant impact on my professional and personal growth. I could not have asked for a better group of people to spend the past two years with.

Finally, a very special thanks to my family; Mom, Dad, Brother and Waqar, for their endless amount of love, support, and encouragement. A special thanks to my lovely sister Maha, as her presence, moral support, and faith in me has guided my work enormously. You all mean the world to me and thank you just does not seem enough.
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the Research Study

As far back as the mid-1800s, the only form of grouping used in the classroom as dictated in the education system were heterogeneous grouping (Sabharwal, 2009). In other words, it was expected that the teachers would educate students of all ages together in one classroom as a whole. This all changed in the middle of the 19th century, when Horace Mann decided it was time to revolutionize how students were grouped in school classrooms. He suggested that instead of heterogeneous groups, students should be grouped based on their age and level of ability. These terms can refer to various types of groups, from the largest organization of school groups to mid-sized organization of classes within grades, to the micro-level of working groups within a class. For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on exploring how teachers are implementing working groups within their own classrooms. At this time, most classrooms were still teacher directed, and students rarely had the opportunity to learn from or interact with peers in the early learning and developmental stages. It was not until the late 19th and early 20th century when attention to the lack of programs that focused and attended to the diverse learning needs of students, including English learners was recognized (Sabharwal, 2009).

1.2 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the perspectives teachers have on implementing grouping strategies for ELL students and the impact it has on their social and emotional development.
As of January 2013, over 25% of students in Ontario have been identified as English Language Learners (ELL) (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). And those same students happen to be underachieving with both their English-speaking counterparts and even more with recent immigrant students. In my own experience as a student and teacher, I have identified with and been committed to responding to the needs of English Language Learners (ELL), and I have pondered the impacts that grouping strategies used in the classroom have on the development of English Language Learners (ELL). Classrooms that afford minimal opportunity for student interaction between peers and classmates may have a harmful impact on the social and emotional development for ELL students when learning a second language and entering a new classroom. More specifically, I am curious about how various grouping strategies used by teachers within the classroom impacts ELL student development. In view of these questions, the purpose of my research study is to learn from a small sample of teachers on how and why they implement grouping strategies, and to learn from them what impact they perceive these strategies having on ELL student development.

Given that ELL students are increasingly integrated into mainstream classrooms in Ontario, this research will have implications for all educators and not just ELL teachers.

1.3 Research Topic/Questions

Through this research, the central question that I will be exploring is, “How are a sample of teachers using in-class grouping strategies? What impact do these teachers perceive these grouping strategies having on the social and emotional development of their ELL students?
Sub-Questions:

- What do these teachers believe about how their in class pedagogical classes impact ELL students’ social and emotional well-being?
- What range of in-class grouping strategies do these teachers employ and why?
- What indicators of social and emotional well-being do teachers look for in their ELLs and what impact on such well being do teachers perceive their in-class grouping strategies to have for their ELLs?

This project aims to promote awareness surrounding the essentiality of using grouping strategies within the elementary school classroom and how this can help the social and emotional development of ELL students.

1.4 Deficiencies

There are gaps in the literature that hinder a more holistic understanding of the range of factors impacting ELL student achievement. Minimal research attention has been directed towards the social development possibilities that might arise from grouping strategies in the ELL classroom. It is important that we hear more from teachers on the frontlines of this work.

1.5 Background of the Researcher

As someone who has experienced feeling excluded from classroom learning due to a lack of interaction with my peers since my first language was not English, I have developed a strong interest in learning how I can better support my future ELL students through grouping strategies. This topic matters to me specifically on a personal level, as I was born and raised in Saudi Arabia and moved to Canada at the age of seven. Given that my family immigrated to Canada together, I did not have the support from my family to assist me with the new language, and so that only left school as my sole exposure to learn
English. I recall being taken away from my classroom and peers every day for a month, to work one-on-one with an ELL instructor. Although the instructor and her teaching were extremely helpful, I always felt awkward and anxious when the time would come for me to head back to my class. If learning a completely new language was not intimidating enough, it was made even more difficult due to the isolation from my classmates and the focus of just learning from one instructor. I was used to working with just one instructor and then to have to go back in the classroom with about 30 other students was very frightening. The lack of group work and collaboration limited my learning, and I experienced anxiety and fear towards both the language and my classmates. This topic is very personal and I have become very sensitive to assisting ELL students in the classroom.

1.6 Overview

To begin to respond to these questions, I will conduct a qualitative research study by using purposeful sampling to interview three teachers regarding their beliefs and practices concerning grouping strategies and their effects on the social and emotional development of ELL students. In Chapter 2 I review the literature on grouping strategies and in chapter 3, I describe the methodology and procedures I will be using in this study including information about the participants, data collection instruments, and limitations of the study. In Chapter 4 I describe the research participants and report the data as it addresses the research questions. I conclude the research paper in Chapter 5 by discussing what I learned by articulating recommendations for theory and my own practice in the teaching profession.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions

ELL refers to those students who are striving to become competent speakers, readers and writers of the English language since they do not have an English language background (Banks, 2012). These students are either immigrants from somewhere around the world, Canadian born, or have ancestors who settled in Canada years ago. The prevalence of ELL students in Canadian classrooms presents a challenge for Ministries of Education, school boards, and teachers to offer ELL students an appropriately responsive yet challenging curriculum, while also providing the necessary sociocultural, developmental, and cognitive support (Banks, 2012).

When assessing the usage of grouping strategies, the most prominent form of grouping that are used include homogenous and heterogeneous groups (Sabharwal, 2009). Homogenous groups are those where groups are organized based on their student, so that students of similar instructional levels are placed together (Lewis, 2014). On the other end of the spectrum is heterogeneous groups, which include students with a wide variety of instructional levels (Lewis, 2014).

2.2 Learning Theories

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural factors have been defined by Collier as the surrounding social and cultural factors that influence the student’s past, present, and future (Collier, 1995). According to Vygotsky, sociocultural theory explains the ways in which a second language learner acquires a new language (Vygotsky, 1978). His belief was that social interaction for students is the main key to learning. When English language learners interact with native speakers of the language, they are able to internalize their strategy of
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using language as a path to help develop their own language. Vygotsky argued that students can have an enriching experience learning a new language when they interact with knowledgeable others. But his most important finding was that children learn best by interacting with other children. This interaction helps children to share their opinions and concerns, which helps develop their language skills of the child. As Vygotsky has found that the mere communication and interaction can aid in learning a second language (Vygotsky, 1978), this becomes vital information for teaching in the classroom.

**Theory of Second Language Acquisition**

Stephen Krashen (1981) researched the topic of second language acquisition and found that whether it is the acquisition of a first or second language, acquisition only occurs when the comprehension of real messages occurs and when the acquirer is not defensive (Krashen, 1981). His studies demonstrated that the best context for acquiring a second language is in low anxiety situations, which are more likely to contain messages and information students really want to hear. His research showed that improvements in learning the language comes from providing communicative and comprehensible input, as opposed to forcing and correcting production (Sabharwal, 2009). Krashen also argues that native English speaking teachers are not the only resource for students to acquire a second language. While Krashen’s research found that individuals can learn English as a second language correctly by interacting with native English speakers (Krashen, 1981), he did not explore the most effective ways to do so. Just stating that ELL students should be grouped with native learners in not enough to identify what forms of groups work well to acquire a second language. Nor did he explore the positive impacts that such groups will have on the development of ELL students.
2.3 Group Size for Optimal Learning

Prior to creating any form of groups, the initial decision that must be taken by the teacher includes the optimum number of English learners per group (Rance-Roney, 2010). Research has found that a range of three to seven students is the ideal number. But it is also important to take into consideration the variety of students that may be in the classroom, and the different level of interaction that may be needed for students to effectively learn. There is one immense misconception that still exists regarding equal group sizes: that the size of groups needs to be equal (Rance-Roney, 2010). There could be an assortment of sizes to provide flexibility for students. For instance, a teacher may assign certain groups a maximum of three students and require each student to speak. Whereas a larger group of six to seven students will all be able to take turns speaking or presenting.

2.4 Effects of Grouping

Homogeneous Grouping

Homogenous grouping sorts students within the same grade level or class, which allows an ELL to be grouped with another ELL. Studies has shown that in such a situation, students feel more comfortable sharing their ideas and it gives them a chance to negotiate with each other more than they would with native English speakers (Sabharwal, 2009). According to Loveless (1998), homogenous grouping can be beneficial for high-ability students if they are presented with more challenging curriculum. He also added that homogenous grouping can also help in building a better self-concept in low-ability students.

In addition to the multiple positive effects of homogenous grouping there are also drawbacks. Oaskes, Gamoran, and Page, (1992), for example, found that homogenous
grouping can promote inequality, since it eliminates diversity that could possibly foster rich and creative conversations in the classroom.

**Heterogeneous Grouping**

In a heterogeneous setting, studies have shown that there can be meaningful interaction between second language learners and native language speakers, and through this interaction, second language acquisition occurs (Sabharwal, 2009) as new learners are able to acquire language through the interaction of more knowledgeable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). In light of Bandura’s theory, children prefer to imitate models of who is socially accepted. Thus, in a heterogeneous setting, native language speakers can be regarded as acceptable models for imitation by new learners.

Although heterogeneous group setting can be beneficial for low-ability students, it can discourage higher achievement in high-ability students (Sabharwal, 2009). It can also be harmful for the academic success of minority students, since they might be reluctant to openly express their ideas in the classroom. Studies also found that teachers lowered their standards and had poor quality of instruction when heterogeneous groups were used.

**2.5 Planning Group Membership**

Roughly 25 years ago, the use of interactional groups was constructed to encourage communication in a new language, which was based on the important role that socially situated communication has on the development of communicative ability. There are multiple options on how to plan group membership based on the objectives of the task (Rance-Roney, 2010).

**Oral Language Proficiency Grouping**

Traditionally, teachers would commonly form heterogeneous groups where higher level students were expected to work and support the new English learners (Rance-Roney,
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2010). But as expected, the English learners would likely stay quiet and do little talking, while the native English speakers took over the group work and conversation. Thus, proponents of this grouping strategy argue that in order to create equal opportunity and responsibility to speak, it is usually better to group students by similar proficiency within the classroom. (Rance-Roney, 2010)

**Personality Grouping**

Another form of grouping to implement in the classroom with English Language Learners could be based on student personality traits. This sort of grouping is based on the individual personalities of each student and whether they are classified as dominant or reserved individuals. Since learning a new language causes anxiety and stress for many students, they tend to be more reserved before mastering the new language. According to proponents of this strategy, it is more beneficial to group active and vigorous students together and allow them to have healthy arguments and fights with group work. On the contrary, the reserved and shy students might collaborate together in a much more casual manner. When teachers implement personality based grouping, it is vital that they also assign a group leader who demonstrates effective leadership skills for the other members. The positive leadership traits they display will be a demonstration of the skills the ELL needs to build on, so later they have the opportunity to take on the role of a group leader.

**Controlled Affiliation Grouping**

In general, when students have the freedom to choose their own groups, the groups may lack diversity due to their perceptions and similarities in viewpoints. So when students are to work with other classmates who they might not know well, it may result in more on-task learning, allows students to consider multiple viewpoints, and builds community among students. Despite this, friends grouped with friends may be effective
when dealing with an emotional or controversial topic. This provides for a safe place for voicing opinions and allows for free discussion due to higher level of trust among the group members.

**Shared First Language Grouping**

Grouping learners who do not share a native language together will be extremely beneficial in their learning, since this promotes maximum communication in English. Since none of the members share a common language among themselves, they have no other choice but to resort to English as the only medium of conversation when completing a task.

**Academic Orientation Grouping**

In some cases, there may be certain class members who are less academically prepared than others. A mixture of students may permit the stronger student in the group to scaffold the less strong group members. For instance, when the teacher introduces more complicated academic content, all group members can learn the content because the learner with a strong academic background will provide that required knowledge on the content to focus on language development.

2.6 Criteria for Effective Grouping Strategies

The critical approach to planning for groups is for teachers to focus on that the main outcomes are expected from the learners (Rance-Roney, 2010). The instruction and grouping strategies used must be able to achieve multiple desired learner outcomes.

**Expand chances for rehearsing, practising, and engaging in creative manipulation of the second language**

It becomes very important to create group assignments and tasks where it is mandatory for all learners to participate and contribute to the group as a whole. In these
cases, before they begin the task, it is important to verify that the necessary input has been provided to the learners in order for them to learn and benefit from the activities. They should then all have a chance to practice and rehearse the language individually prior to any group discussions or presentations. This provides time for the English learners to practice and become more comfortable with the content and language.

**Foster sense of community, belonging, and safety**

Grouping strategies can help foster a sense of community among students. Students can be assigned tasks, for example, that include opportunity to learn about each other’s personalities and cultures. Having this initial introduction can help students develop tolerance and understanding for ethnicities and cultures that have faced conflict. Teachers can then construct lessons and activities that will be personally meaningful for each English learner and thereby creating more opportunity for ELL students to become engaged in a challenging activity.

**Use functional language to accomplish a linguistic, academic, or managerial task**

It is also important that teachers should ensure they teach functional language that an English learner will greatly require, like how to properly and politely interrupt and disagree and how to interpret body language in classroom discussion. Keeping these specific functional languages as priority is essential in order to set the learners up for task completion.

My personal experience being an ELL student in the classroom during my youth has set the foundation for this research study, framed with the following question: “How are a sample of teachers using in-class grouping strategies? What impact do these teachers
perceive these grouping strategies having on the social and emotional development of their ELL students?
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Procedure

This study explores the impact that multiple grouping strategies have on the social and emotional development of ELL students in the classroom. In addition, this research sets out to shed light to the grouping strategies and techniques teachers use within their classroom to elicit the social and emotional development of their ELL students. The objective of this study is to discover how to better prepare educators in supporting their ELL students.

This particular body of research takes on a qualitative approach to collecting data. Firstly, a thorough and extensive review of the literature was completed surrounding the area of grouping strategies and their impacts on the development of ELL students. I studied scholarly journals and peer-reviewed articles, which were then organized based on the findings, themes and subthemes to unite the data surrounding this topic.

In this research process, I then conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with two teachers in the Durham area in Ontario, Canada. Both interviews were based on the same set of interview questions and responses were audio recorded and then transcribed in full. Through the transcription process, I read each transcript numerous times and examined the data. This process involved looking for themes and patterns across the two transcripts, as well as insights that shed light on my research questions. Five themes emerged from the data analysis process, and these will be explored in the following chapter.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

I conducted face-to-face interviews with two individuals in the education field. The instruments used for data collection in this research were semi-structured interviews,
in which researchers ask participants a series of predetermined but open-ended questions (Ayres, 2008). In contrast to structured or unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews provide more control for the researcher over the topics on the interview and require no fixed range of response for each interview question (Ayres, 2008).

Semi-structured interviews are very beneficial in research questions where the concepts and relationships among them are relatively implicit and understood (Ayres, 2008). They provide an opportunity for the researcher to ask follow up questions if the participant dwells and leads the question into another insightful direction. But this format of interviewing was conducted with attention, as I made sure to set aside any biases or assumptions. I took on the role of a facilitator or guide and did not rush the interview with abrupt questions.

I conducted approximately 45-minute semi-structured interviews with each participant and provided them with the interview questions a few minutes prior to conducting the actual interview. I felt it was necessary to provide the participants a short amount of time to scan the questions and briefly think back to their past experiences with ELL students to provide insightful examples for the interview. I believe this short period of time did not skew my results or alter their responses, but rather it allowed the participants to be at ease and allowed them to provide their experiences in detail. Please refer to Appendix B to view a draft of the list of interview questions.

3.3 Participants

I selected participants who I believe would be able to shine light on the topic of grouping strategies used among ELL students based on their insights and experiences. The concept of purposeful sampling is used when conducting qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). In order to find and select participants for this study, I will choose
individuals who “can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013). Both interviewees are professionals in the field of education in Durham, Ontario. They both have over 16 years of teaching experiences, in multiple capacities. The participants will remain anonymous through the use of labels of participant 1 and participant 2.

In order to collect data on how teachers can be better prepared to support ELL students in grouping environments, it was important to find participants who met the following criteria:

a) They must have taught for at least five years or more. I believe that at least five years in the education field will be a possible indicator the participants have multiple experiences with ELL learners.

b) They must be either primary or junior teachers, who have either also been ELL instructors or have had ELL students in their classroom. It is essential that the participants have interacted and have personal experiences with ELL learners, in order to facilitate my research.

**Participant 1**

Participant 1 has never been a classroom teacher, but her teaching experience of over 20 years has accumulated in a variety of other capacities. This includes everything from teaching workshops in pre-schools, elementary schools and universities, to being a faculty advisor at the University of Toronto, and even running her own private studio for students. Her teaching is always art centric, which focuses on inclusion and building community through movement. She has worked with many ELL students in a variety of environments, which makes her an ideal participant to help research my topic.
Participant 2

Participant 2 has been a teacher at her current school in Durham for her entire teaching career of over 16 years. The school currently has a large population of immigrant students, thus many are considered as English language learners. And while many students in the school are born in Canada, they are still considered as English Language Learners because they do not speak English at home. Thus, her experiences and teaching practices were able to greatly shine light on studying effective grouping strategies for ELL.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Following the collection of the data through two semi-structured interviews, the data was transcribed. Each of the interviews were recorded on an iPhone 6, using a phone program classed Voice Memos. The audio files were saved on a Mac laptop, so that they could be replayed as a point of reference during the research and transcribing process. Following the culmination of the interviews, transcriptions were recorded in the program Microsoft Office Word and saved to the laptop. During the process of analysis, the transcripts of the interview data were printed out as hard copies, read, and reread multiple times. These transcriptions were underlined using a colour coding system to help distinguish any commonalities, recurring themes, and differences in the participants’ responses. The data was then organized into a detained table format based on underlying themes, sub-themes, meaningful quotes, and important insights, using Microsoft Office Word. Thus, when formulation a cohesive data analysis, the information was all in one place and explicitly displayed in a comprehensible manner for a straightforward analysis of the data.
3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

This research will be conducted under the Master of Teaching Ethical Protocol, which was outlined by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, at the University of Toronto. It specifies that data will be collected by interviewing two to three knowledgeable educators, who are known to have expertise on the topic being researched. The interviewees will be contacted in advance of the interview to discuss and explain the procedure for the interview. Once the participants have agreed to participate in the interview, they will be provided with a letter of consent. When the participants agree to be interviewed and sign the consent form, a meeting will be scheduled to conduct the interview at the participants’ convenience. Participants will also be informed of the option to stop the interview at any time if they so desire. Please refer to Appendix A to view the consent letter to be provided for each participant.

3.6 Limitations

The greatest limitation for my research study would be the inability to conduct classroom observations while ELL students are being taught by their teachers. The basic framework of qualitative research resides on collecting data in its natural setting, which is sensitive to the people and places under study. However, as stated in the MT ethical protocol, I am unable to involve classroom pupils or observe a classroom. Observations in the classroom would have allowed me to have a visual sample of how teachers utilize grouping strategies to help ELL students develop socially and emotionally.

Another limitation of my research study would be the type of sample being used to address the research topic. Due to the MT ethical protocol, I am limited to interviewing only educators for this research. I am unable to explore and uncover the diverse perspectives and experiences of the ELL students. I will not be able to examine whether
ELL students believe they are being well supported for social and emotional development through the use of grouping strategies.

3.7 Strengths of the Research Design

Despite the limitations mentioned above, this research design will be able to provide useful information on the use of grouping strategies with ELL students. The findings that will surface will be a reflection of the different perspectives of current educators in the field, which will allow an insight on grouping strategies that are effective and others that may not be for ELL students. It will also provide an opportunity for the teachers to validate their personal experiences and the meanings they make from it. And even though this research will not be studying or interviewing ELL students, it will provide an opportunity for other important questions to emerge and be explored in the future.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I analyze and interpret the findings based on the data collected from two face-to-face interviews with practicing educators. Prior to conducting the interviews, questions examining the strategies, methods, and obstacles surrounding the impacts of using grouping strategies for English Language learners in the classroom setting were developed. The intent was to gain insight into current teachers’ teaching, attitudes, beliefs, and concerns as educators, to ultimately provide depth and analysis to the literature previously discussed. After presenting the themes and key findings, the chapter concludes with an analysis of the results based on their relation to my overall research question and sub-questions.

4.2 Key Themes and Findings

The analysis of the interview data revealed four general themes and key findings, which were shared by the research participants as a result of their experiences, teachings, insights and values for education for the future. The overarching themes and key findings that have emerged are: (a) teachers’ responsibilities; (b) group types; (c) grouping effectiveness; and (d) development. Additionally, subthemes exist within each theme, which allows the focus of the findings to be narrowed and allows the differences in participant responses to be distinguished.

4.3 Teacher Responsibilities

Within the theme of teacher responsibilities, participant responses are further categorized into building classroom community, planning and instruction, and understanding students. I am starting to understand from the data sources that the focus is not just on the students and them becoming proficient in a language. It is not even just
finding how to put students into groups for optimum learning. The results highlight that it is beyond just the language. I have found that a great deal of responsibility is on the teacher and the grouping strategies they use to help student develop socially and emotionally.

**Building Classroom Community**

Both participants emphasized on how vital it is to make it a priority for teachers to create their own community in the classroom. For example, one participant commented on how building a community and strong connections allows students to become familiar of one another:

“I really like people to…I really believe in community building, I really believe in making connections with everyone in the class. Of having that opportunity and sometime you don’t know who it is you are going to enjoy working with, without having given yourself that opportunity. (Participant 1, Interview).

This quote from participant one shows that creating a positive environment in the classroom allows students to become comfortable and open with each other. And this opportunity can lead students to not only work with their peers who they never thought they would, but actually enjoy it as well. Participant 1’s implicit belief in what classroom community entails bears many similarities to Race-Roney’s (2010) understanding of the importance of fostering a sense of community in the classroom; by providing ELL students an opportunity to learn about each others’ personalities and cultures. This initial introduction can help them become tolerant of each other and be more willing to work with each other.

Participant 2 had a similar perspective on the first sub-theme. She revealed that:

“If they come in at the beginning where everyone within the class is still new to each other verses some other time where it’s a harder adjustment to come in, I think that would make a difference. The way the teacher creates their own community in the classroom, rules, level of inclusion and makes students feel welcome. I think that is a key
factor because again, I think we often with children say they’ll be fine, they’ll make friends or whatever. And I just find that teachers don’t really know what’s going on at the student level. They’re kind of doing their thing. Busy teaching things and forgetting that there’s this entire …” (Participant 2, Interview)

This quote shows that the community that is created in the classroom allows students to feel included and welcomed in their new environment. In this way, the two participants are demonstrating the importance of building an inclusive classroom community to bring students closer to one another. This allows ELL students to become more comfortable with their peers, which will allow them to work well with them in a group setting. This point in also highlighted in Krashen’s (1981) research, as his studies emphasized that the best context for acquiring a second language is in low anxiety situations. By creating a classroom environment that is comforting and safe, ELL students will be less likely to experience anxiety while working with peers.

**Planning/Instruction/Expectations**

The participants also commented on the execution of their instructions and expectations when creating groups with their ELL students.

“Yea, okay. Umm, well I think, you know the instructions of course. Like how well I gave instruction. How well have I prepared, umm what I am doing. Make sure the students I am working with really understand the purpose or what is happening. So one, we are getting into groups and how are we doing that. And then, what is actually going to be happening in that group. And again, like, if its something simple like counting off that’s one thing. It’s another thing if you’re doing groups and its jigsaw verses four corners or whatever right. It’s different. So I think the expectations have to be really really clear…” (Participant 1, Interview)

This quote from participant 1 shows that the way instructions are explained can impact the level of clarity for ELL students to be open to work with their peers. Sabharwal (2009) also shared a similar belief by stating that students are able to make improvements in learning the new language when provided communicative and comprehensible input from
When teachers provide instructions that are clear for their ELL students, they are then able to acquire the second language with fewer barriers.

Participant 2 had a slightly different perspective on this sub-theme:

“So depending on what I’m looking for. For DI, I’m looking at...can they present cohesively, have they completed the project, have they followed the criteria for the project. For literacy circles, I look for things like ummm...do they have it completed, have they read the book, are people in the group reading the book, or is one person running the whole thing. That’s by sitting in and listening to them during their literacy circles. Math grouping I’ll use tickets out or one where they do some other assignment, whether they’re working effectively or not.” (Participant 2, Interview)

This quote shows us that the expectations for the group activities impact the level of social activity for ELL students. In this way, the two participants are demonstrating that both the instructions and expectations allow ELL students to be aware of exactly what is expected of them in groups. This can eliminate any confusions or misunderstandings of what they are required to achieve with their group members.

Understanding their Students

The last sub-theme addresses the topic of teachers taking the time to understand their students. Participant 1 commented on this topic with the following ideas:

“The good thing too I think about grouping is that the more you see people work in different groups, the more you can see the strengths and weaknesses come out and that really helps you to understand your own groups better too. So it’s not just for them to work with different people, but it’s also for me to get a good sense of who they are and how they manage.” (Participant 1, Interview)

This quote really emphasizes how important it is to understand your students well, in order to be able to group your ELL students with other students who will help them build their social skills.

Participant 2 had a similar outlook on her responsibility to better understand her ELL students. She revealed that:
“So that may be different, where of course you want to make sure they’re in a group that is very inclusive, whether they’re going to get the support they need...you know, so they might be with a friend or that kind of thing.”  
(Participant 2, Interview)

This quote shows that participant 2 aims to know her students well enough to know who works well together and who may not. Both these participants believe that this knowledge and being aware of the students will allow them to provide the appropriate support to help their students develop.

4.4 Group Types

The theme of creating multiple group types presented further subthemes that were the level of comfort, individual needs, and use of academically advanced students. The participants highlighted on how they formed groups within the classroom. Being aware of the grouping format allowed the participants to provide what they believed to be most important for their ELL students. Whether it was to put them with students whom they share familiar experiences or allowing them to work with those they feel comfortable with, the motive with the grouping was in the best interest of the student.

**Familiarity/Comfort/Sharing Similar Experiences**

Participant 1 expressed the following idea related to the second theme:

“So I would do that with students as well, it doesn’t matter what age they, they are older students or younger because I just think we gravitate towards people we feel that we are most comfortable with for different reasons. Right, it could be racial, it could be gender, it could be ability...you know it could be anything. So that’s important.”  
(Participant 1, Interview)

This quote from participant 1 indicates that it is beneficial for ELL students to work with classmates who are most comfortable with in order to help their social development.

Another quote from by participant 1 that shined light to this subtheme was:

“Mostly they tend to stick together, mostly they tend to be cliquish, and they clique with other ELL students because I think it is comfortable. They’re coming from
the same...maybe not even the same language background, but they’re coming from a background where English is not their first language. So it’s difficult sometimes for them to make friends with other students that it’s normal...they don’t have to think about what they need to say because..” (Participant 2, Interview)

Participant 2 also made a point about putting ELL students together who may share similar experiences of having to learn English as a second language. These students are able to understand what goes into learning the new language, and thus may prefer working together in a social environment. Both participants commented on the importance of creating groups based on comfort, which echoes the findings of Vygotsky (1978) regarding the sociocultural theory. His findings demonstrated that the mere communication and interaction between students could aid in learning a second language. This becomes vital information for teaching in the classroom, as ELL students’ experience learning a new language can be enriched when they are given the opportunity to interact with familiar peers.

**Individual Needs**

Another sub-theme focuses on forming groups based on the individual needs of each student. Participant 1 voiced the following thought:

“And then I would think further in terms of, okay, who really needs specific support and why. And who might be a good match. Umm the thing that I really think about though is that when, Rachel, my daughter, umm, being a really good student was often paired with students who maybe struggled. I have a really close friend who has a son with the same thing happens. It gets really challenging for them when they are always the go to.” (Participant 1, Interview)

This quote from participant 1 leads to the idea that it is important to support and help develop each ELL student based on their specific needs.

Participant 2 also had a similar idea on meeting the needs of students:

“But I think the only way I can respond to the second part of this question would be it’s really individual and who you’re placed with makes a world of difference.
So the non-ELL students, it could be yes, I’m really excited because I’m with my friends. Or no I don’t like it because I’m doing a lot of the work or I just hate group work period. Or for an ELL student, it could be I’m really nervous because now I actually have to contribute. And when I’m doing it on my own, no one really knows.” (Participant 2, Interview)

This participant was also indicating that in order to help ELL students develop socially, it is necessary to first determine the dynamics and needs of each student and how they work with others.

**Uses of Academically Advanced Students**

The theme of grouping types also led into a third sub-theme of using academically advanced students as a form of resource. Participant 1 voiced her opinion by saying:

> “Umm the thing that I really think about though is that when, Rachel, my daughter, umm, being a really good student was often paired with students who maybe struggled. I have a really close friend who has a son with the same thing happens. It gets really challenging for them when they are always the go to. My daughter was always paired with this boy who gave her a lot of trouble, because he didn’t do too in school and he really struggled. So then, he was always then putting pressure on her to do the extra work. And she like I don’t want to be his partner. And they’re always like, oh Rachel’s a good quite student. So those are the things I would pay careful attention to as well within any groups. So I do think of that.” (Participant 1, Interview)

Being both a teacher and a parent, Participant 1 expressed her ideas on using the academically advanced students to help assist the ELL students in the classroom. This quote shows that teachers to refrain from using other students to constantly help their ELL peers.

Participant 2 also had a very similar perspective on this sub-theme:

> “Yes! And others going yes, group work because she’s going to do it all. And I know my son too, he’s very bright and he also likes to be in control. So if people are not pulling their weight, oh I’m just going to do it. So there’s that. For others I think its social time to be totally distracted.” (Participant 2, Interview)

This quote shows that participant 2 also believes that students should not have to become responsible or sole recourses to help out the ELL students in-group activities. There
should be other resources in place to help assist the ELL students in the classroom. Like both participants views on creating academically oriented groups, Rance-Roney (2010) also believed that students should be grouped with those they share similar proficiencies with. In order to avoid native English speakers being forced to take over the work load and create equal opportunity and responsibility, students should be grouped based on similar skills and abilities.

4.5 Successful Grouping

Another theme that emerged was aiming for successful grouping, which included the subthemes of teacher chosen groups, opportunity to have a voice, and allotted process time. The participants highlight the factors that can lead their ELL students into groups that would result in successful outcomes.

Teacher Chosen Groups

Participant 1 commented on how groups that are chosen by the teachers can lead to more successful group work and results.

“And so I think the teachers need to be so observant and aware at all times. And then really thinking through…like how do I help this student integrate. And again without making it seem like this child is…this child is different and needs this…so again using strategies that everyone benefits. Because it’s not just about that child…it’s everybody. So how do we do grouping strategies so that everybody benefits. How do we…ummm whatever lessons we’re teaching, the ways in which we are explaining the expectations, how does it benefit everybody. And again, it may be too that…at OISE you’re taught sometimes you have to create two lesson plans to be more modified for students who are either English language learners or really are struggling with lets say literacy. So you might have..okay so this is what you’re doing verses what the others are doing. It’s always about…it’s everything, all the pieces that come to play and thinking through all that. And I know it’s really hard and I’m no sayings this is perfect by any means. I think for me, I would always say the biggest thing is, one; the moment that child steps into the school, what’s happening. “ (Participant 1, Interview)

This quote shows that teachers need to be aware of students’ needs well enough to be able to group the ELL students with effective group members. This will allow more
opportunities for ELL students to work with peers who the teacher believes will help in building up their social and group work skills.

Participant 2 also had a similar perspective on this sub-theme:

“Very effective if you choose the groups. Ummm..not so effective when the students are allowed to choose the groups. Mainly because of their friendship agreement, that they want to pick their friends and then nothing gets done because they either fight with their friends or they want to gossip with their friends. So it works more effectively when it’s teacher based. But they do work effectively.” (Participant 2, Interview)

This quote also highlights on the importance of allowing for some groupings to be chosen by the teacher in order to create effective groups. Rance-Roney (2010) also expressed similar beliefs, stating that grouping students with classmates whom they may not know well, as it may be more productive, allow students to listen to multiple viewpoints, and also build community.

**Opportunity to have a Voice**

Rance-Roney (2010) focused on the importance of creating group assignments and tasks where it was mandatory for all learners to participate and contribute to the group as a whole. Likewise, both participants expressed their goal to create multiple opportunities for all ELL students to have chances to have a valid voice in their groups.

Participant 1 expressed the following perspective for the second sub-theme on providing students with a voice in their group:

“Yes, I think they need to be more intimate. And I also think too… because I’m all about relationships and I’m very much about student voice. If you have a group…like I would think..if you have a student who is an ELL student that…I’ve noticed in my classroom that they do tend to be quieter. Once I’ve identified them, I realized they tend to be quite. I think of would be important for them to be in a group where their voice can be heard. And so sometimes a group of 5 is too many. And so I would probably also think about, who are they in a group with because if they’re in a group with somebody who is very dominating, they’re going to get lost. So I want them to be in a group with people I know will be open to other’s ideas. So that also is really really key.” (Participant 1, Interview)
This quote really highlights on how important it is to provide opportunities in a group setting for ELL students to feel competent enough to voice their ideas and opinions.

Participant 2 had a similar perspective on this topic:

“Uhhh…3, maybe 4. I don’t like any bigger than that. Triads are usually the best, duos are hard because they’ll just talk to each other. In triads, usually the third person will get them back on track. 4 if you have to, if your numbers make it. 5 is way too many, they can break themselves off to smaller groups.” (Participant 1, Interview)

This quote also indicates that groups should be kept small and intimate, as a way to encourage ELL students to keep each other on track and feel like a part of the group.

**Allotted Process Time**

For the last sub-theme, Participant 1 expressed the following idea on the process time allotted to the students:

“We do a lot with circles, so I do talk a lot about restorative justice and I will break people into groups. And a lot of time I’ll say just get into to your own groups because you know…I figured that’s fine. It’s so interesting how some groups…you know you give them all questions and I really want you to pass the talking piece…and some groups are done in like a second. So I always have to go, if you’re done early, this is what you’ll do next. And this is how you’ll let me know you’re done. If you’re finished early, the talking piece…so show me the talking piece is no longer I use put it on the floor. So I have and indication who’s done when. So then I can go up to groups and say how much time do you need. Do you think 1 minute will be enough? So I can try to keep them on track. So there are things like that that I’m always thinking about, I think makes it work. Otherwise, you can see the interest totally out the window because it can’t be based on the fastest group and it can’t be based on the slowest group. So I am always thinking about all those little pieces, that’s taken time too.” (Participant 1, Interview)

This quote shows how much attention needs to be put on simply providing enough time for students to process the instructions and expectations of group activities. Only then is it fair to expect students to be able to work in a group setting.

Participant 2 had a very similar perspective on providing ample process and wait time for ELL students:
“So again, I would ask a question and I would say, I’m going to give you 10 seconds. And I would wait and a number of hands would, then more hands, more hands would go. And that would allow...I thought they needed that time to process. Sometimes it was easier to say I want you to turn to your elbow partner and I want you to share with them...again I just found that more processing was really important.” (Participant 2, Interview)

This quote also demonstrated the importance of process time and using that as a strategy for the students to be able to feel competent enough to participate.

4.6 Influences of Growth

Within the last theme of the influences for growth, participant responses lead into the subthemes of building relationships, family support and personality. One key understanding was in regards to the factors that have a strong influence on the ELL students’ growth. Both participants highlighted on the importance of creating strong relationships with the students and families in order to help students prosper in any classroom environment.

Personality Based

Participant 1 expressed the following thoughts on this sub-theme:

“Again, I think it’s really individual and I’m basing this answer off of some of my teaching experiences and also things I have been told by either teachers I know or by students who came to Canada and later as adults would say this has been my experience. But I think it really is individual in terms of how they were able to develop. I think for some students who are pretty outgoing, you know...who may have an extraverted personality, they may been able to come in and win others over. You know...find their way through groups because they have a certain level of confidence. I think in general students that are new and are trying to learn a new language. But I think for some, they’re very quite at first, very observant.” (Participant 1, Interview)

This quote demonstrates that the students’ individual personality can greatly help their social development. Students with certain personalities tend to have a higher level of confidence, which may result in a desire to socialize more than students who simply prefer not to. Rance-Roney (2010) also shared a similar belief by stating that it may be
more beneficial to group active and vigorous students together, while reserved and shy students should work together. Since learning a new language can cause anxiety and stress for many students, ELL students may be socially reserved before mastering the new language.

Participant 2 had similar thoughts on this sub-theme as well:

“Yes. And I think students that are more outgoing are more..they’re more accepted. With adults, it’s like the popular kids in school, they’re the ones that seem to get all the rewards, they’re not necessarily the nicest. But the outside observer kind of goes that …oh look, they’re joining things, they’re involved and really trying. But sometimes it’s really a personality. That they really need time, they hold back, they observe and are quieter. We can make the assumption that they don’t understand and they’re not interested, they’re not going to be fun and so. So I think that can really impact how a child is accepted by their peers. And I think how you come, like how old you are you know, if they come at a very young age and their first experience is quite negative and how that can impact their life. I think because..you know, kids can be mean. So I do think there is a lot…that’s why I think the school and the teacher have a huge responsibility to be so watchful for how they are being integrated into the classroom.” (Participant 2, Interview)

This quote also emphasizes the same point on personality types and the degree to which this factor impacts the students’ sociability.

**Building Relationships**

The next sub-theme that emerged focused on building relationships, as revealed by these comments from participant 1:

“Yes, the foundation. And knowing who that student is and knowing their history and knowing how they are going to be integrated. And then how the entire class is then going to work together so that, that child is nicely integrated. And that you’re always creating ways that everybody benefits from. So I would say those are things that make me think the most.”

“You know one thing that I think..that I do with my students is I check in. I’m big on checking in. I think it’s like…how are you feeling, how are things going. And again you may not get a totally honest answer, but I’m also really about building relationships where there’s a real trust. So I will work really hard to build trust with my students until they start to tell me what’s really going on. So that’s sort of a mission I’m always on. Like I had a student in practicum, her issue wasn’t with the language, her issue was with anxiety. I kept going that there’s something more
underneath it. It took me a while, a lot of emails, phone class, extra visits on her practicum to the point where she said I can finally trust you. And suddenly I feel like I know you and…”

“Yes, the doors open and that for me is so critical. It’s not enough to just do the how’s everything going, it’s how do I really get to know you. How do I really build so that you know I’ truly here. When I say how are you, you can honestly tell me. And we can together, if there is something that’s coming up, we can move through it and I can really support you in the way you need support. And I would do that with any age of a student, especially with a young student that is new. And again, those are baby steps.” (Participant 1, Interview)

Participant 1 repeatedly emphasized the value of creating strong relationships with ELL students, in order to build trust between the teacher and student. Having a trusting and supportive relationship with the students will help them open up and develop socially and emotionally.

Participant 2 had a similar perspective on this sub-theme:

“Emotional… just telling them it’s a safe place. We have a hard time with emotional. Because we don’t know what’s happening at home. But we try and make the school a safe place, that this is where you can take that risk and not be put down and go from there.” (Participant 1, Interview)

By creating a strong relationship and a safe classroom environment for the students, it will help them to create deeper emotional bonds with their peers and the teacher.

**Family Support**

The last sub-theme focused on the importance of the presence of family support for the ELL students. Participant 1 had the following ideas on this sub-theme:

“So I think for me it’s like anything, you need from the very beginning to know your students, right from the start. And have relationships with the parents. Like where are you coming from, what’s the history of your child. Not even just the language, but who are they. Tell me how is it that I can make a connection, again I’m all about relationships. I think it’s about making a connection, having a relationship with the student from the very beginning, besides even just the assessment and all their particular needs.” (Participant 1, Interview)
This quote shows that building a strong foundation with parents allows teachers to have a better connection with the students. It provides a path to have a better understanding of the student’s background and history.

Participant 2 also had a very similar thought on the importance of family support:

“So first of all, there has to be family support. Whether the parents speak English or not, they still have to be able to set aside a time for the kids to do their homework. It depends on their ability to want to learn, do they find it frustrating. So you have to level it, you have to make sure you’re at their level in order to help them move their way through. Otherwise, you’re just frustrating them. And once a child is frustrated, it’s gone. There is no further working with them once they’re at the frustrated level.” (Participant 2, Interview)

This quote points to the importance of family support, and its ability to help students through the tough transition of learning a new language and working with new students.

**4.7 Summary**

In light of the above data, the following responses can be proposed to the research questions guiding the present study. As it has been illustrated throughout this chapter, both participants have had their own ideas and experiences using grouping strategies in their classroom to help ELL students develop socially and emotionally. Despite their distinctive experiences, multiple similar themes and sub-themes emerged throughout the interviews.

Based on my research question, much data has been presented that helps to inform and highlight on some in-class grouping strategies that are able to assist in the development of ELL students. The data revealed that a lot of the reasonability falls on the shoulders of the teacher, in terms of going the extra mile. Building an inviting, friendly, and safe classroom environment allows ELL students to become more comfortable with their peers and open up sooner. This also allows teachers to have a better understanding of
their ELL students, thus providing them an opportunity to create appropriate expectations for their learning.

Both participants presented a range of grouping strategies they employ in the classroom, based on their pedagogical choices. The types of groups that they create in their classroom are based on multiple factors, but always with the goal of assisting their ELL students. So whether they choose to put students together who are comfortable with each other, share similar experiences, based on individual needs or not with peers who are academically advanced, their main goal is to help them in a social environment.

Each participant shared their perspective of the indicators of students’ well being through grouping strategies and the influences of successful grouping and potential growth. It was highlighted that once again the teachers’ role in the group-based activities was critical for ELL students to be successful. Not only did they mention the need for teachers to deliver clear demonstrations and model the expectations, it is also key to provide students with multiple opportunities to have a voice in a group setting. They both also greatly highlighted what they believe has an influence on the growth of their students.

As mentioned, the themes and sub-themes have provided vital insights into my research question and have deepened my understanding of the impacts grouping strategies plays in supporting ELL students.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

In this final chapter, I will reflect on how this research project has deepened and enhanced my understanding as an educator and how this study has accompanied my growth as a researcher. I will also be outlining the implications from the key findings and the recommendations form the educators who aim to assist ELL students’ development within the classroom. Furthermore, this chapter will outline the limitations of the research study, as well as recommend areas in which further study can stem off from my research.

5.2 Implications/Recommendations

As the process for this research is coming to an end, left for discussion is the implications of my study and what advice my participants have for teachers who will evidently have ELL students in their classrooms. Their responses, ideas and thoughts brought forth information that I believe are applicable to not only first year teachers like myself, but for all educators regardless of their background experiences. During the interviews, both participants regarded: building classroom community and relationships; implementing grouping strategies that allow ELL students to be within their level of comfort and based on their individual needs; and engaging in effective planning and instructional practices.

With regards to the emphasis on building classroom community and relationships, both participants have noted its importance as the foundation for the class as a whole. The data that has been presented has highlighted that while trying to assist students through the language barrier, that is not the ultimate goal. While becoming proficient in the language and optimum group formation are important, it is beyond just the language. A lot of the onus and responsibility falls on the shoulders of the teacher and the grouping
strategies and practices they implement in the classroom to assist in students’ development. It became evident that teachers should make it a priority to create their own community in their classroom, allowing students to become comfortable and open with each other. Participant 1 echoes this belief by recognizing that “while some students were further behind than others, there is something about the whole community movement that actually made them a lot closer” (Participant 1, Interview). In achieving this, she identifies “the ways the teacher creates their own community in the classroom, rules, level of inclusion, and makes students feel welcome” (Participant 1, Interview). Participant 1 further supports her beliefs in the importance of building relationships with each student and providing opportunities for students to explore the idea of building an environment that is accepting of all students,

“I don’t need to get into my whole lessons, but there were a lot of things where it talked about inclusiveness and we would explore the issues with relationships and bullying through the body to really understand what it means to..what this idea of respect and community was. So some of the ideas were big and it was more about allowing dialogue to evolve so that students could really think through” (Participant 1, Interview)

Further to this, participant 2 reiterates the importance of fostering the creation and advancement of an engaging learning community and effective learning environment. “But we try and make the school a safe place, that this is where you can take that risk and not be put down and go from there” (Participant 2, Interview).

Thus, by fostering a warm, safe, supportive, and caring environment, it allows students to learn and grow in an atmosphere of mutual respect and support in the classroom. Students will be more likely to feel safe in expressing their ideas, concerns, and ask questions in any group setting. In order to instill cooperative learning groups, teachers should inspire respect and tolerance for each other. This can help to create and
maintain a smoothly functioning learning community. The importance placed on creating a positive classroom climate and building relationships with each other will help in the enhancement of individual and group development.

Secondly, the educators suggested implementing grouping strategies that allow *ELL students to be grouped within their level of comfort* and created based on their individual needs. Participant 1 states, “I think it is more about putting children together that work well together, that was the basis of it” (Participant 1, Interview). In this sense, when ELL students are placed in groups where they feel more comfortable, it positively influences their levels of interaction and engagement. Participant 2 furthers this notion by stating that ELL students tend to stick together since,

“they’re coming from the same…maybe not even the same language background, but they’re coming from a background where English is not their first language. So it’s difficult sometimes for them to make friends with other students that it’s normal…they don’t have to think about what they need to say because….they share similar experiences” (Participant 2, Interview).

This all relays back to the idea of comfort. It is as simple as the idea that individuals tend to gravitate towards people who they feel most comfortable with, for various reasons. Whether it is racial, gender, or ability, it could be anything. If ELL students are given opportunities throughout the school year to work with peers who share similar experiences, they will be able to use that level of comfort to help their social development for upcoming group based activities. Supporting this notion is Rance-Roney (2010) who suggests that grouping learners who do not share a native language together promotes maximum communication in English. Their shared feelings towards learning and communicating in English will allow ELL students to open up and become more comfortable with one another.
Participant 1 sums up the importance of creating groups based on comfort level and individual needs by stating, “And then I would think further in terms of, okay, who really needs specific support and why. And who might be a good match… it’s really individual and who you’re placed with makes a world of a difference.” (Participant 1, Interview). Groups who are formed based on the individual needs of each student allow teachers to provide the appropriate support to the individual and help develop each ELL student based on their specific needs. As a way to help ELL students develop in a social environment, educators have indicated that it is first necessary to determine the dynamics and needs of each student and whom they feel most comfortable with in a group setting. This will assist in building up the confidence and self-assurance that ELL students need to be able to work effectively and successfully in any group setting, with any classmate. The implications from this for teaching practices include allowing students to initially work with peers who they feel comfortable around, in order to help maximize a groups’ success and developing students’ skills in facilitating each others’ learning. The impact of the increased time working together with students sharing similar experiences will help develop their emotional responsiveness.

Lastly, and most importantly, the educators in this study encourage practicing and future teachers alike to engage in effective planning and instructional practices. The educators encourage being watchful on the execution of the instructions and expectations when creating groups with their ELL students. Participant 1 urges to the importance to planning for teachers, as she states,

“ And I think, planning is very key. You have to have a…I think you need to think everything through. For me intention is the bottom line. I don’t do anything when I teach just because. I’m a real planner. If I’m going to do grouping, then why specifically have I chosen to do grouping” (Participant 1, Interview)
Having that intention and purpose for each grouping activity will allow teachers to emphasis what they expect their ELL students to achieve during the group work. Whether the intention is to build up the ELL student’s self-confidence, or provide them an opportunity to take risks, or even allowing them chances to have a valid voice.

Participant 2 believes that teachers must be able to model and demonstrate their expectations clearly in order to properly guide their ELL students to succeed in a group setting. Participant 1 believes,

“Demonstration was huge, I was always demonstrating before I started. So those things were really helpful with that group I found, more than anything. And we had a great time it was a lot of fun. And I did notice that students who weren’t normally working together in pairs, some students that I had been told were excluded, started to be brought into the fold a lot more” (Participant 1, Interview).

Even though there may be a language barrier with ELL students, they are able to use the teachers’ instructions and modeling as a way to help them progress through most group activities. Participant 2 also notes that, “I find a lot of ELL students are really good at modeling and mimicking. So they pick up by seeing and they just do what they see” (Participant 2, Interview). In this instance, both educators have noted that it becomes necessary for teachers to provide explicit instructions and modeling for any group activity, as it provides a pathway for students to follow to meet the expectations. The expectations for the group activities impact the level of social activity for ELL students. Providing clear instructions and expectations will allow ELL students to be aware of exactly what is expected of them in groups, which can eliminate any confusions or misunderstandings of what they are required to achieve with their group members.

5.3 Limitations

Although I believe that I have been able to provide considerable insight into the grouping strategies a sample of teachers are using and the impact they may have on ELL
students, some limitations have still manifested throughout this project. As mentioned in Chapter three, the possible limitations of this study include the inability to conduct classroom observations while ELL students are being taught and working in a group setting. The fundamental framework of qualitative research is based on collecting data in a natural setting, which is sensitive to the people and places under study. Being able to observe ELL students in the classroom would have allowed me to have a visual sample of how some teachers implement grouping strategies. But as stated in the MT ethical protocol, I was unable to involve classroom pupils or observe a classroom. Thus, I had to focus on collecting data through the two face-to-face, open-ended interviews of individuals who have experience teaching ELL students in an elementary school setting.

Additionally, the type of sample I was restricted to use to address this research topic was limited to only educators in the field. I was unable to explore and uncover the multiple perspectives and experiences of the ELL students. I was not able to examine whether ELL students believe they are being well supported for social and emotional development through the grouping strategies implemented by their teachers.

However, I believe that within these limitations, I have been able to attain the ultimate goal of my research study and hope that I have done the participants and the content justice.

5.4 Further study

Regardless of the fact that this study yielded multiple themes and sub-themes, the data also revealed other dimensions worthy of further research. In both interviews, the participants revealed that in trying to assist their ELL students, they would often group the students with peers who were academically advanced. They both commented on their past experiences using academically advanced students as a form of resource, and that teachers
should refrain from doing so. I wonder if other educators use the same strategies as previously mentioned, to assist ELL students develop socially. Participant 1 emphasized that while this strategy can be useful at times, some teachers use their academically advanced students as their sole resource to help the ELL students during group activities. What impacts can using academically advanced students as a resource to assist ELL students have on students consistently being asked to help?

Additionally, the participants in this study reiterated the importance of providing ELL students a safe environment in which they feel comfortable in approaching the content matter, taking risks, and working effectively with their peers. I think it may be interesting to look into the possible impacts the physical environment of the classroom and school could potentially have on fostering social and emotional development amongst ELL students. Are certain forms of environments more conducive to cultivating development than others? How may the physical layout of the classroom affect the social development of ELL students?

5.5 Conclusion

I genuinely believe that my greatest asset as an educator, both professionally and personally, is my ability to be able to relate to my students in many aspects of life. Every teacher has started as a student himself or herself. And knowing this allows me to have the fundamental experience and understanding of what it is like to be a student in a classroom. But having been an ELL student as well, I am able to understand the struggles, concerns, and hopes of a student who strives to overcome the language barrier and prosper is any group setting. Thus, pursuing this research has been a particularly meaningful adventure for me. Although four themes emerged from the data, the most important insight gained from this research is the increasingly important impact that
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Educators have on fostering development of their ELL students. Ultimately, the way in which educators define and perceive effective grouping strategies will guide their values and practices that are implemented and influence their students accordingly.

Each theme that has emerged from the data has provided invaluable guidance in regards to fostering development of ELL students in a group setting. Such themes and sub-themes have provided guidance in how I will approach teaching and learning from grouping based strategies in my future classrooms. With the importance of social and emotional development in an educational context becoming increasingly prominent, it is vital to understand that ELL students themselves perceive the integrations of group-based strategies in their classroom as exciting and beneficial. Also, educators need to be aware of their ELL students’ diverse learning needs when implementing general grouping strategies and practices into the classroom. In hopes of the social and emotional development of their students, educators place focus on cultivating independent individuals, those who can express themselves in a manner in which their voices and beliefs are clearly articulated in a group setting.

All educators’ beliefs regarding the impacts of grouping strategies on the social and emotional development of ELL students influences their practices within the classroom. Yet it must be noted that professional development opportunities should be harnessed in order for teachers to continue building on their own personal repertoire. As a teacher and researcher, I have developed a deeper understanding of the extreme importance of furthering and continuing my education on assisting the development of ELL students, as this will be vital for my future ELL students. Although my journey in my teacher education program is coming to a close, I intend on searching for resources and programs as well as professional development opportunities to further inform my
understanding. Hopefully, research such as this one and additional studies to come will continue to impact positive changes within teacher education programs and encourage them to place a larger focus on education of the development of ELL students in a group based environment.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Consent Letter

Date: 
Dear ______________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching student. I am studying grouping strategies with English Language Learners for the purposes of a graduate research paper in the course of Mary Lynn and under the supervision of Dr. Katherine Rehner. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of research methods. My data collection consists of an approximately 45 minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you, outside of school time.

The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or possibly a publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. I will provide a list of the interview questions a few minutes prior to the interview so you have a chance to review them. You may decline to answer any specific question. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,
Mehwish Mir
416 729 7863
Mehwishmir21@gmail.com
Instructor’s Name: Mary Lynn Tessaro
Email: marylynn.tessaro@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Mehwish Mir and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature:

Name: (printed) _______________________________________________

Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Protocol

Research Question: How are samples of teachers using in-class grouping strategies? What impact do these teachers perceive these grouping strategies having on the social and emotional development of their ELL students?

Research Questions:
1. For how many years have you been teaching?
2. When and how do you use grouping strategies in your own classroom?
3. How effective do you think group strategies are in the classroom?
4. What outcomes or criteria do you use to indicate the effectiveness of the grouping strategies you employ?
5. What past experience do you have working with ELL students?
6. Do you currently have ELL students in your class?
7. What are some possible factors that have an influence on a child’s acquisition of a second language?
8. How do you feel about the social and emotional development of your ELL students over the past years of teaching?
9. What indicators of social and emotional well-being do you look for in your ELL students?
10. What is the attitude that your ELL students have towards group work?
11. How do students respond when you begin a group activity? To what degree do your ELL and non-ELL students respond similarly or differently?
12. In your opinion, what is an ideal group size for ELL students?