It’s Time to Recognize Canadian ELL Identities:
Valuing Growth and Identity Formation Through First Language Use

By
Matthew DeJong

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Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this qualitative research study was to gather teacher insights pertaining to the outcomes and feasibility of conducting Identity Texts with the English language learners in their classrooms. The main question that guided my research was: What are teachers’ perspectives on the feasibility and outcomes of multi-literacy projects (i.e. Identity Texts)? Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with three educators who currently work in TDSB schools. Findings suggest that conducting Identity Texts with ELLs has positive outcomes such as identity affirmation, literacy engagement, sharing and building relationships that promote more equitable spaces. In addition, the use of first languages was identified as a significant attribute of what makes Identity Texts successful. Findings also suggest that ELL students and ESL instructors both encounter challenges due to instances of marginalization, deficit thinking and stigma. The implications of these findings suggest that teachers need to be aware of the unique challenges and issues facing ELLs in schools and classrooms. Further recommendations include mandatory courses on ELL instruction in teacher programs so that teachers are better equip to incorporate these strategies and create more equitable spaces.

Key Words: English Language Learner (ELL), First Language Use, Identity Text, Equity, Multi-literacies
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1.0 Research Context and Problem

Canada is a country that prides itself in being an open and accepting mosaic of peoples that embraces multiculturalism. As a country, Canada has a longstanding commitment towards welcoming newcomers. In “About Ontario” (2015), the government reports that in the past 20 years, Canada has received an average of 250,000 new immigrants each year. Currently, there are over 200 languages spoken in Canadian homes. Ontario receives an average of 40% of newcomers to Canada. This has lead to Ontario’s current status as the most diverse province in Canada. The official language in Ontario is English, but French is also recognized and given some language rights in educational, governmental, and legal services. This implies that, with the exception of French, all children in Ontario are taught in English within the public education system (“About Ontario”, 2015). Despite the rich presence of linguistic diversity, some education professionals and language theorists have come to describe Ontario as a “linguistic graveyard”, as languages and literacies are being lost and forgotten within a language reductive educational program (Brubacher, 2011; Coelho, 2004).

As a result of the high number of newcomers coming to Ontario over several decades, the Ontario education system receives a high proportion of students who speak a first language other than English. According to Statistics Ontario (2013), English Language Learners (ELLs) made up about 25% of Ontario’s student population (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2013). These students are facing the added difficulties of entering schools where they have to learn a new language. ELLs face specific challenges within language acquisition: literacy achievement, socialization, isolation and an increasing degree of invisibility within Canadian born ELLs (McGloin, 2011). As result, many ELLs are underperforming on achievement tests within literacy and higher-level academic English
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(McGloin, 2011). The varying consequences of this are largely negative. Researchers have reported both an over-representation of ELLs being labeled with learning disabilities and an increase in ELLs not being identified, especially for those born in Canada (Bernhard, Cummins, Campoy, Ada, Winsler, & Bleiker, 2006). As a province, Ontario is dedicated to providing equitable education for all its students (Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education, 2009). Currently, Ontario’s teachers are not feeling prepared to facilitate for the wide range of needs that exist in their classrooms, including the unique needs of ELLs (Kibler, 2013; Faez, 2012; De Jong, 2005).

Many teachers in Ontario have identified diversity in their classrooms as one of the most significant challenges in their profession (Dejong & Harper, 2005). More specifically, teachers have reported low levels of self-efficacy (one’s belief in their capacity to achieve good results within a specific area) when it comes to accommodating for the needs of ELLs in their classrooms (Faez, 2012; Kibler 2013; De Jong & Harper, 2005). To complicate the matter, while many ministry documents offer teaching strategies for teachers to better attend to these needs, most teachers still rely heavily on Just Good Teaching (JGT) practices in accommodating for ELLs (Dejong & Harper, 2005). JGT practices include activating prior knowledge, cooperative learning, process writing, as well as the use of graphic organizers and hands on activities to aid students in their learning (Dejong & Harper, 2005). A study by De Jong (2005) argues that JGT practices are not sufficient in supplying teachers with effective pedagogies in attending to the specific needs of ELLs.

In Ontario, there are few structural supports to assist teachers in instructing ELLs. Currently, there are no policies that specifically mandate teaching programs to offer courses on effective pedagogies for ELLs. Ontario public schools are functioning under an inclusionary approach, where for most the week ELLs are in regular classrooms. Most ELLs in Ontario are meeting with a professional ESL teacher once or twice per week. The current
ratio of ELL students to ESL instructors is 72:1 (People for Education, 2013). This disproportionate ratio demonstrates how little direct language instruction ELL students are receiving in the Ontario public school system. This means teachers are left to contend with most of the ELL’s language and educational needs. As Kibler (2013) discovered, many general education teachers do not feel prepared to take on the additional challenges of language instruction for the ELLs in their classrooms.

Fortunately, there is a plethora of research on how to best support ELL students in classrooms that is illustrated in several Ontario Ministry documents: Supporting ELLs with Limited Prior Schooling, Supporting ESL and ELD Grades 1-8 & 9-12, Many Roots, Many Voices, STEP Guide, Ontario Curriculum Documents, and Growing Success. These documents highlight good teaching practices and pedagogies for identifying, instructing and assessing ELLs. One practice that is mentioned in Many Roots, Many Voices that has demonstrated success within research is implementation of dual language Identity Texts and Multi-literacies resources and practices that include the use of students first languages (Cummins, 2006). These Multi-literacy projects are designed to access students’ funds of knowledge, and utilize their language skills, including the cultural capital of the both the students and their communities to support language learning and academic engagement (Bernhard, Cummins, Campoy, Ada, Winsler, & Bleiker, 2006). Multi-literacy projects often incorporate JGT strategies in that they involve activating students’ prior knowledge, cooperative learning, process writing, visuals, graphic organizers and hands on activities. Multi-literacy projects are unique in that they were designed specifically for ELLs and expand on JGT practices by including the use of first languages, scaffolding, family and community involvement, previous experiences, cultural traditions and values (Cummins, 2007). These multi-literacy projects have yielded some positive results including recognition of the ELL student’s knowledge, skills, language, culture, identity, and parental and
community engagement in the child’s learning (Ntelioglou, Fannin, Montanera, & Cummins, 2015).

While several studies have been done to examine the benefits of these projects, we still do not know how feasible these projects are for teachers. Many of the studies conducted on multi-literacy projects have been approached through the methodological approach of participatory research. This implies that the researchers have worked alongside classroom teachers as they collaboratively orchestrate and facilitate for the project. This means researchers have assisted teachers throughout the process, in gathering volunteers, calling parents, finding translators, as well as contributing their knowledge and expertise. Thus, we do not know if, given the demands of these projects, they are feasible for teachers to orchestrate on their own or how they have been accommodated to Ontario classrooms. Furthermore, we do not know if classroom teachers would feel prepared to orchestrate these projects on their own.

1.1 Research Purpose

In response to these considerations, the purpose of my research is to learn from a sample of teachers who have implemented Identity Text projects without the support of researchers in order to gather their perceptions of the projects’ feasibility, including existing challenges, accommodations and the outcomes of the projects. For the purposes of this research Identity Text projects is defined as multi-literacy and multimodal ‘texts’ that explore students’ identities and prior experiences for the purposes of affirming their identities, engaging in literacy, language learning, and sharing them with a broader audience (Cummins 2007).

1.2 Research Questions

The primary question guiding this research is: What are teachers’ perspectives on the feasibility and outcomes of multi-literacy projects (i.e. Identity Texts)?
Sub-questions include:

1. How do participating teachers enact multi-literacies projects, and what factors and resources support them in this work?

2. What challenges do these teachers encounter and what are some ways to overcome them?

3. What outcomes have teachers observed as a result of conducting multi-literacies projects?

1.3 Background of Researcher and Reflexive Positioning Statement

The topic of my research is of particular interest to me as I myself was an English Language Learner and I have personal experience with some of the barriers that ELLs encounter in English classrooms. As I reflect upon my educational experience I feel that two things stand out as being significant in terms of my development as a student:

1) Having had the experience of being in classrooms where students didn’t have much opportunity to share and explore our past experiences, multi-lingual skills, cultural capital, and areas of interest; I view this as a social justice issue as this stifling experience had harmful outcomes.

2) The few opportunities that I was given in school to write, reflect and share my past experiences, culture capital, and utilize my language skills produced meaningful opportunities for me to explore and share aspects of my own identity, reflect on my meta-narratives and resulted in increased academic motivation, deeper knowledge, self-reflection and an appreciation of self and of others in the classroom.

I was born in the Dominican Republic and my educational experiences varied significantly, especially during my primary years. During my early years, my family primarily spoke English at home. My closest friends also spoke English and so my social life was primarily communicated in English. My first years of formal education were in Spanish
at a private Spanish Catholic school. I attended this school from kindergarten through Grade One. I spent the first half of my Grade Two education at an English language school in the USA, and the second half at an international school back in the Dominican, where I was instructed in both English and Spanish. I remained in bilingual international schools until Grade Five when we moved back to the US as a family. In Michigan, I entered a small private English language school. At this school, my fellow classmates had cultural heritages from all over the world and a few of them shared Spanish as their first language.

These early transitions from English to Spanish, back to English and then into bilingual schools were not that difficult for me as a young child, but this final transition to an English based education in the US at Grade Five proved to be very challenging in both the social and academic spheres. When I arrived at this school I experienced various levels of culture shock on both a social and academic level. I struggled on a social level, as I was unfamiliar with many aspects of American culture, not to mention the subcultures of this diverse school, which made it difficult for me to make social connections. I struggled for many years to adapt, make friends and feel like an authentic self. Academically, I struggled in many areas of literacy, including: reading, writing, and the academic vocabulary used to teach both math and science. In the past, I had been a good student, but now I was struggling in nearly every subject. My literacy abilities and English comprehension skills were eventually tested and I was placed in an ESL class for a few months. I remember having negative feelings towards the dynamic of being pulled out of the classroom. I didn’t want to have this label and I didn’t feel I needed to be in this ESL group, as my participation in it challenged my own self-perceptions of being a good student.

Fortunately, by the end of my Grade Five year I had already made significant advancements in my academic standing. I benefited from receiving extra help from my parents at home, including strong literacy supports. The academic barriers that I faced were
mostly due to the different school systems I entered, with unique curriculums and approaches to learning. For example, when I moved to Michigan, I had to learn how to work under the “Chicago Math” system of learning, which had a very different emphasis and approach than my prior math studies. Similar transitions had to be made in reading, writing and science. I also had to adjust to new academic terminology as well as build a general knowledge of American history. My prior experiences transitioning from both Spanish and English predominant schools assisted me in this process of academic adaptation to the US system.

While this background gave me some academic confidence, I continued to struggle on a social level. Unfortunately, this transitional period overlapped with the more typical difficulties students face in middle school, as we enter puberty, face transient social expectations and continue to discover and mold our own identities.

As I reflect upon these years of my education, I can’t help but be critical of the ways students were included and effectively excluded in the classroom setting. As I mentioned, the American school I entered in Grade Five had a diverse student body. I was fortunate enough to have Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Mexicans, Guatemalans, a Brazilian, a Columbian, African Americans, Caucasians and Asians in my class. This school was locally praised for its celebrations of diversity and attention to social justice issues. Although it is true that we studied the civil rights movement, held special events on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and discussed race in the classroom, I always felt a sense of disconnection. As I look back I can now better name and understand the roots of this disjunction. These celebrations of race and diversity were always thematic and historic in nature. We read history books, found meaningful quotes and watched movies that dealt with race and civil rights issues. We learned ‘other’ people’s stories. Talked about their experiences of race, ethnicity and culture, but we never brought it home, we, the students in the classroom, seldom got to share our own experiences.
As students, we were given few opportunities to learn about each other in a guided and constructive manner. As a result, we often misunderstood each other, made fun of each other, and judged each other based on surface level observations and stereotypes. As a class, we resorted to larger cultural patterns of racism, gang culture, fistfights, and general distrust. The virtues we were learning in class in an abstract form were not being applied, as we were not given the opportunity to explore these concepts in reference to our personal narratives. Thus, in the classroom, students were forced into close physical proximity, but emotionally, spiritually and socially we were estranged, confused and isolated.

As a result of this experience, and as I now assume the role of a teacher candidate, I am passionate about building a truer sense of inclusivity, connectedness and community in which students from all backgrounds are seen as bearers of knowledge that can bring rich and meaningful experiences and tools to the classroom that we can all learn and benefit from. I strive to pursue this work in an anti-oppressive and antiracist framework. This passion is a critical response to my own experience and as a result, I have chosen to research and evaluate the ways ELL students can be included in classrooms in significant ways that disrupt our past structures of monolingual, Eurocentric, and ‘teacher as the knower’ education. This research has led me to discover how communities can be built through the appreciation of difference. More specifically, the use of Identity Texts and multi-literacies can help affirm plural belonging in classrooms by accessing students’ experiences, knowledge, family based cultural practices, as well as, their linguistic capital (Taylor, Bernhard, Garg, Cummins, 2008).

As someone who has experienced the difficulties of learning in a new language and is aware of the importance of feeling successful in school and included in the classroom, I have developed an interest in assisting other ELLs in their education by making sure their specific
needs are being met in classrooms. Furthermore, I believe ELLs hold the potential to bring rich perspectives and learning to classrooms if they are included and well facilitated for.

1.4 Preview of the Whole

To respond to the research questions, I have conducted a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview 3 primary to intermediate school teachers about their experiences with implementing multi-literacy projects. In Chapter 2, I review the literature in the areas of identifying ELLs, current policy, teacher preparation and the impact of multi-literacies. Next, in Chapter 3, I elaborate on the research design and methodology. In Chapter 4, I report my research findings and discuss their significance in light of the existing research literature, and in Chapter 5 I identify the implications of the research findings for my own teacher identity and practice, and for the educational research community more broadly. I also articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings, and point to areas for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I review the literature exploring the various instructional approaches and strategies for teaching English Language Learners (ELLs) in Ontario. More specifically I review the areas of identifying ELLs, Ontario policies, teacher preparation, varying philosophical approaches to education, expanding literacy, effective pedagogical strategies, and accessing community funds and resources. I start by reviewing the literature in ELL inclusion, current policies, teacher training and the studies done on teacher self-efficacy to consider existing conditions and pedagogies in instructing ELLs. Next, I review the research on the philosophical and literacy approaches used in Ontario to teach ELLs. From there, I consider current pedagogical strategies including the use of first languages, dual language Identity Text projects and the use of multi-literacies. Finally, I discuss the research on the role communities can play in providing skills, knowledge and supports in classrooms and schools.

2.1 Who are ELLs?

According to the 2011 Canadian census, there are over 200 languages spoken in Canadian homes. In the past 20 years, Canada has received an average of 250,000 immigrants per year (Ntelioglou et al., 2015). This amount of migration has contributed to urban spaces becoming increasingly linguistically diverse. In Canada, First Nation, Aboriginal and Métis peoples as well as our Francophone communities also contribute to our current linguistic diversity and ELL populations. These phenomena are all factors contributing to the current cultural and linguistic diversity that exists within Ontario’s student population. Addressing the linguistic and cultural diversity that exists within our classrooms is a challenge for many Ontario teachers (Faez, 2012). Thus, one of the first steps in the process of educating our
students is identifying their social and linguistic backgrounds (Ntelioglou, 2014; McGloin, 2011).

Currently an ELL student in Canada can fit into one of two categories: a Canadian-born student or a Newcomer from another country. All ELLs are students whose first language is a language other than English. Canadian-born ELLs could include students from; First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities, Francophone communities, as well as other communities that have maintained distinct cultural and linguistic traditions, including many 2nd and 3rd generation immigrant communities. Newcomers to Canada could include students who have arrived in Canada as immigrants seeking different opportunities, newcomers who have arrived as refugees, and temporary residents on short term visas. (Coelho, 2004; Excellence for all, 2007)

2.1.1 Defining ELL

English Language Learner is a term that encompasses a variety of different groups with varying backgrounds. ELL is an umbrella term that includes students from many different backgrounds, such as refugees, newcomers to Canada, Canadian-born citizens who speak a language at home other than English, and temporary residents.

The Ontario Guide for Supporting ELLs (2008) states:

English language learners are students in provincially funded English language schools whose first language is a language other than English, or is a variety of English that is significantly different from the variety used for instruction in Ontario’s schools, and who may require focused educational supports to assist them in attaining proficiency in English. (p. 5)

2.1.2 ELL gap

McGloin’s studies on ELL literacy development pointed towards a current gap in ELL students’ literacy achievements. This gap concerns students who enter schools with a
basic grasp of English language oral skills and who are perceived by teachers as having acquired English language fluency, when many of these students continue to struggle in other areas of literacy and academic English (McGloin, 2011). One subset of the population that has been especially impacted by this phenomenon is Canadian-born English language learners (McGloin, 2011). This has led some educators to reconsider how we perceive and identify ELLs (Cummins, 2007; Taylor, 2008; McGloin, 2011).

2.1.3 Multiculturalism and transnationalism

In response to this gap, educators should consider how they are actively recognizing or failing to recognize the prevalence of linguistic diversity within our schools. As we have seen, Canadian culture includes many individuals and families with unique cultural traditions and languages that have complex identities that have been described as a transnational identity culture (Taylor, 2008). According to Taylor (2008), from a global perspective ELLs could be centered within the global majority, which puts into tension their current ‘minority’ status within Canada (Taylor, 2008). This illustrates how in a transient global society where many people move within multiple cultures and languages, educators need to be aware of the implications this has for student identities and for classroom instruction. In the following section I will look at how well Ontario’s current policies and teacher programs are meeting the needs of this population.

2.2 Policies and Teacher Programs

Many studies on teacher preparation and ELL achievement suggest that our teacher education programs lack the capacity to prepare teachers to address the linguistic needs and access the cultural capital that exists within our Ontario classrooms (Kibler, 2013; Faez, 2012; Yoon, 2007; DeJong 2005). Due to high levels of immigration, there is a huge need in Ontario for effective ELL programs and strategies and in accordance with Yoon’s research, these strategies must be paired with culturally relevant pedagogies. Yoon (2007) found that
when teachers are culturally sensitive and actively demonstrate the valuing of the students’ cultures, it resulted in prolonged student engagement, increased collaboration amongst students and it enabled a deeper level of appreciation within classrooms. According to several studies completed by Kibler (2013), De Jong & Harper (2005), and Faez (2012), there is a strong need for professional development amongst teachers in order to effectively prepare them to address the needs of ELLs. Research reveals that teachers are reporting low levels of self-efficacy in relation to supporting ELLs in Ontario classrooms (Faez, 2012). Furthermore, there is a lack of coherent policies in both teacher training and school ELL identification and support (Kibler, 2013; Faez, 2012; DeJong & Harper, 2005).

In 2005, De Jong & Harper completed research in the US that evaluated how well ELL students are being facilitated when teachers simply adhere to generally effective teaching strategies. Just Good Teaching (JGT) refers to the basic practices most teachers learn in their educational programs in order to teach and facilitate for their students. JGT practices include activating prior knowledge, utilizing cooperative learning, process writing, graphic organizers, and hands on activities (De Jong & Harper, 2005). Their investigation concludes that JGT practices did not suffice in accommodating to the needs of ELLs as they fail to account for the linguistic and cultural diversity that exists in many of our classrooms. What is recognized is a need for English to be taught through a guided approach where teachers are aware of the characteristics of second language development. According to DeJong and Harper (2005) “Until ELLs are explicitly included in all levels of educational policy and practice, we can expect them to remain outside the mainstream in educational achievement” (p. 118).

Studies based in Ontario have demonstrated that 60% of its English-language elementary schools and 54% of its secondary schools have ELL students (People for Education, 2012). The region has a pronounced commitment to multiculturalism, cultural
diversity and supporting multilingualism, yet studies reveal that teachers report feeling unprepared to support ELLs in their classrooms (Kibler, 2013; Faez, 2012; De Jong & Harper, 2005). In Ontario, we are functioning based on an inclusionary practice approach, but with little support as there are currently no mandated teacher courses or programs in either ELL or ESL pedagogies and integration (Faez, 2012).

Fortunately, for those teaching in Ontario, we do have access to some great resources online including ministry documents, such as Many Roots, Many Voices (2005), that can function as a practical guide for effective instruction for ELLs. These documents are well supported by research and cover a breadth of topics. Many Roots, Many Voices advocates for the celebration of cultural and linguistic differences in classrooms by way of including first languages, cultural experiences and knowledge, creating a safe and supportive environment, effective practices and the use of dual language projects (Many Roots, Many Voices, 2005).

Unfortunately, the lack of coherent policies on the program level in preparing teachers for ELL instruction and on the school board level in having a systematic identification process is actively perpetuating traditional perspectives about literacy, knowledge and skills, while at the same time completely neglecting a group of Canadian-born students whom aren’t being identified as ELLs (McGloin, 2011). These policy gaps are preventing us from full inclusion in the work to legitimize, acknowledge and effectively instruct ELLs. Instead of implementing multilingual and ELL specific pedagogies that have shown to have positive results for students, many teachers are falling back on traditional views of literacy, where literacy is restricted to the English language, ELLs are the ESL teacher’s responsibility, and perceptions of ELLs as lacking skills and knowledge (Cummins, 2006). Currently, there are no mandated programs in Ontario for teacher training in the specific field of ELL instruction based on Ontario College of Teachers regulations. There are programs for ESL instruction, but these involve additional courses beyond the mainstream teachers programs. Some teacher
training programs have chosen to include specific courses that focus on ELL instruction while others may address issues related to ELL inclusion in passing as they teach for differentiated instruction (Faez, 2012). Based on these current gaps in our policies, most teachers are left to develop strategies and supports for ELLs on their own. The current lack of structured supports systems has had a negative impact on teacher’s beliefs about their own capabilities in facilitating for ELLs (Faez, 2012).

2.3 Teacher’s Reported Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a person’s self-reported “belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context” (Faez, 2012, p. 9). Studies have shown that a teacher’s self-efficacy beliefs have a fundamental impact on their teaching practices. Self-efficacy has been used in many studies to evaluate teachers’ sense of preparedness in addressing the needs of ELL students in their classrooms (Faez, 2012; Kibler, 2013; Dejong & Harper, 2005) In studies completed by Faez (2012), Kibler (2013) and DeJong & Harper (2005), they revealed that most teachers do not feel prepared to address the diverse needs of ELL students. In Ontario, 73% of teachers identified diverse student body as their greatest challenge in their classrooms (Faez, 2012).

In Faez’s study, levels of empathy and self-efficacy were rated by teacher candidates who had both Canadian and foreign educational experiences. The results show that despite their diverse backgrounds and increased levels of empathy towards ELLs, foreign educated teachers still reported low levels of self-efficacy related to ELL inclusion and direct instruction. This study concludes that educational institutions need to address this need by providing courses that specifically target the needs of ELLs in classrooms. The teachers with the highest levels of reported self-efficacy were the ones whom had recently gone through ESL programs themselves. Knowledge and use of English grammar was brought up as a
major theme and was viewed as an asset when instructing ELLs (Faez, 2012). This conclusion aligns itself with DeJong’s research on JGT, as it found that a teacher’s awareness of the characteristics of second language development improves the quality of their instruction (Dejong & Harper, 2005).

Adding to this research, Bernhard et al. (2006) reported that Canada has a high percentage of language minority children with reading difficulties. According to this study, ELLs were struggling in maintaining literacy engagement and achieving higher literacy levels. In addition to this, an uncharacteristically high percentage of ELLs were being labeled with learning disabilities. As a result, ELLs are often being removed from classrooms and put in sterile environments with fewer demands and less exposure to English literacy skills (Ntelioglou et al., 2014; Bernhard et al., 2006). These findings bring to the forefront how important it is that we start training teachers with the knowledge and strategies that are pertinent for identifying and instructing ELLs. To better understand how it is ELLs have landed in this situation and why these phenomena are occurring I will take a brief look at Canada’s educational history with respect to linguistic and cultural imperialism.

2.4 Socio-Historical Approaches

To further evaluate our current education system and examine how it is serving the needs of our current student it is helpful to frame the Canadian educational system within its socio-historical context. If we look at the history of “formal” Canadian education we can see that religious, cultural and linguistic assimilation has played a predominant role (Gaffield, 2013). The history of “formal” education in Canada is very Eurocentric, with its roots stemming from the French and British systems, bringing with them their preferences for catholic and protestant religious traditions, English and French as preferred languages and Eurocentric cultural traditions. Sadly, at certain points in history, formal systems of education in Canada have been used as a tool for cultural genocide. This was the case with French
missionary schools and Residential schools, when indigenous peoples in Canada were forced into schools where their culture and beliefs systems were undermined with the goal of “white-washing” children with Eurocentric religious beliefs, cultural systems and languages (Gaffield, 2013). Currently, Canada likes to view itself as a Mosaic, where people and cultures are honored, as people are free to hold and maintain their unique religious beliefs, traditions and languages, but a quick look some of our current educational policies and approaches reveals a very different narrative (Gaffield, 2013). As Cummins puts it, “It is hard to argue that we are teaching the whole child when school policy dictates that students leave their language and culture at the school house door” (Cummins, 2006, p.4).

2.5 Additive vs. Subtractive Language Systems

There are many studies that reveal both academic and health advantages for students that are either bilingual or multilingual (McGloin 2011; Coelho, 2004). Among ELLs, proficiency in first languages is associated with both improved advancement in second language learning and achievement in content areas of study, such as; math, social studies and science (Murphy, 2014). Currently, The Ontario College of Teachers mandates instruction to be predominantly in English, apart from French language schools, and specific instances when students need direct instruction in their first language. According to research facilitated by Coelho (2004), an additive bilingual approach to education is only effective when students have continual access to their first language. This is obviously problematic for many minority language speakers who are immersed in a majority language culture (Coelho, 2004). Based on the current landscape in Ontario, much of our school system is functioning within a subtractive language environment, which has the effect of impeding both 1st language and 2nd language development (Coelho, 2004). Unless we begin to reinforce 1st language literacy development in our school communities we will see rapid erosion of 1st language use and proficiency (Coelho, 2004). This effect can already be evidenced in the
current gap in English literacy achievement in Canadian-born second language learners (CBL2). Many CBL2s are currently functioning as minority language groups within an English majority culture that is resulting in language loss and lower literacy levels (McGloin, 2011).

Based on these findings and observations, Coelho (2004) advocates for an additive language approach, where students are enabled to work in their first language as well as their second language. The knowledge and skills used in acquiring the first language will eventually be used and transferred to the second language (Coelho, 2004). Cummins refers to this process as he describes his theory of a language “threshold hypothesis” which refers to the level of language development that must be reached before the students can begin to successfully transfer some of those literacy skills to their second language (Cummins, 2000). Coelho also describes this process and discusses that some of the possible benefits for these language learners is achieved by a meta-linguistic awareness, where learners are able to think about their own language skills and processes to better understand how the languages relate (Coelho, 2004). In light of this, Cummins (2006) has helped spearhead multi-lingual, multi-literacy projects within Ontario that challenge societal power structures that are working to marginalize students’ cultural and linguistic capital.

2.5.1 Multi-literacies

In Reach Every Student (2008), literacy is defined as:

The ability to use language and images in rich and varied forms to read, write, listen, view, represent, and think critically about ideas. It involves the capacity to access, manage, and evaluate information; to think imaginatively and analytically, and to communicate thoughts and ideas effectively. Literacy includes critical thinking and reasoning to solve problems and make decisions related to issues of fairness, equity, and social justice. Literacy connects individuals and communities, and is an essential
tool for personal growth and active participation in a cohesive, democratic society (p. 2).

Multi-literacy is a term that calls for an expanded approach to how we view literacy. Traditionally we have viewed literacy in our classrooms as linear, text-based, reading and writing, done in English. This limited view of literacy has been expanded upon since the 90’s to include the many modes in which we encounter literacy forms. Today, we acknowledge the existence of media-literacy, digital-literacy, visual-literacy, eco-literacy and many other forms. Cummins (2006) advocates for expanding our view of literacy even further through the inclusion of other languages, cultural-literacies (the knowledge of one’s own culture) and multicultural-literacy (the knowledge and appreciation of other cultures). Therefore, multi-literacy refers to a complex range of practices that are being implemented as effective strategies that support the management, creation and communication of knowledge within diverse, multilingual, globalized societies with access to technology (Cummins, 2006).

According to Cummins (2006):

If literacy pedagogy is to be effective, it must take account of, and build on the, multilingual competencies that students bring to school and also expand the traditional definitions of literacy beyond the linear text-based reading and writing of western schooling. (p. 4)

2.6 Effective Pedagogical Strategies

One way to create opportunities for growth and success in Ontario’s schools is to enable our teachers by developing concrete ways to facilitate meaningful engagement and learning in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Cummins (2007) states; “For English Language Learners (ELL), the integration of new learning with prior knowledge, involves connecting what students know in their first language to English” (p. 1). The implementation and use of dual language Identity Texts in classrooms contributes towards
the valuing of diversity in language, literacy, and the identity development of ELLs through teacher, peer, family support, and contributions. As Taylor (2008) says, “Dual Language Identity Texts, written in English and student’s L1, have been proposed as an inclusive pedagogical and language learning strategy which is both cognitively challenging and a form of student identity investment and recognition” (p. 270).


While children of minority culture and linguistic backgrounds are often affirmed in their cultural identity, the school and teachers generally ignore their home languages and literacies, vital ‘funds of knowledge’ that might contribute to academic learning. (p. 6)

2.6.1 Dual language identity text projects and early authorship programs

Dual language Identity Texts have been widely implemented across Canada as an effective strategy for ELL learning and Inclusion. Dual language Identity Texts typically involve reading, writing, illustrating, and presenting through digital medium, as students are enabled to share about different aspects of their lives in both their first language and in English. These tasks are meant to be cognitively challenging and are often include multi-modal and multi-literacy approaches. They usually include pictures and or illustrations collected by the students of their families, pets and experiences. Their literacy creations are then presented in class and shared online. This allows for a wide audience, including friends and family internationally, to access these pieces of work. Through this process ELL students are able to share their unique skills, give voice to their experiences and knowledge, and work with their parents and community members to collect, translate and share their stories (Cummins, 2006).

Taylor argues that dual language Identity Texts actively work to shift the power imbalance that often exists in our classrooms. Dual Language projects offer the opportunity
for ELLs to share their voice, history, knowledge and skills. They often speak to culturally relevant dimensions of an identity that is Trans-national. These projects not only serve to affirm student identities as linguistically talented and intellectually accomplished but as belonging to a widespread Canadian identity of Trans-nationalism that is now a global majority group (Taylor, 2008).

Early Authorships Programs (EAP), such as the dual language projects, are part of a movement to put value and recognition in home language maintenance and literacy development. The maintenance and sponsorships of bilingualism and multilingualism is seen as a both a social justice response to respecting cultures and a benefit in terms of long-term skills and access to employment opportunities. The incorporation of critical classroom pedagogies that help promote cultural capital, multilingualism and identity development where students are recognized, empowered and academically challenged are seen an appropriate and positive response to our current social landscape. (Taylor, 2008)

Street (2005) states:

In order to build upon the richness and complexity of learner’s prior knowledge, we need to treat ‘home background’ not as a deficit, but as affecting deep levels of identity and epistemology, and thereby the stance learners take with respect to new literacy practices of the educational setting. (p. 4)

2.6.2 Critical view of narratives

Many of the existing dual language projects are narrative in structure as students are encouraged to give accounts of their pasts, heritages, traditions and values. From a critical perspective, we must acknowledge and discuss the impact and appropriateness of this request. According to Pavlenko, “the telling of life stories in a new language may be a means of empowerment that makes it possible to express new selves and desires previously considered untellable” (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 314) Narratives are not just constructions by
independent individuals; they are embedded with social, cultural and historical conventions. Furthermore, the author is actively engaging in the relationship between his or her own story telling voice and the present interlocutor: an interviewer, a researcher, friends or an imagined audience. In this way, when we assign a narrative task, as teachers we must be aware of the fact that traditional narrative structures, such as historical autobiographies, may be stylistically in contrast to those of some minority cultures. As a result, teachers that consistently assign traditionally western narrative styles in their literacy instruction are actively privileging some participants over others. Furthermore, teachers should encourage their students to take a critical look at their own writing in order to assess its socio-historical influences; race, ethnicity, class, gender, and present cultural mythologies (Pavlenko, 2002).

2.7 Community Identities and Knowledge Funds

The identity text projects are facilitated through a constructivist pedagogical approach in that the students are viewed as bearers of knowledge, and that this knowledge is vital in the growth and development of that child’s learning. “Different individuals and sub-groups have very different understandings of, for example, friendship, fashion, sexuality and even knowledge itself, depending on their interests and circumstances. Factual knowledge, then, cannot be sharply separated from values” (Beck & Kosnik, 2006, p. 16) These projects require student and family participation, peer support, and utilizes previous experiences of students to build new knowledge and meaning.

The perceived impact of Dual Language Identity Projects on the micro level is that students are able to feel empowered, share voice and learn from each other in a way that strengthens concepts of identity, understanding of others, and literacy skills. According to Wells, (1994) “As the learner appropriates the knowledge and procedures encountered in interaction with others, he or she transforms them, constructing his or her own personal version. But in the process he, or she is also transformed” (Wells, 1994, p. 8). In this way,
students are given some unique opportunities for growth, such as first language use and
development, peer collaboration, and opportunities to share about their cultural values,
families and formative life experiences (Cummins, 2006).

On a macro level, the impact of Identity Texts includes significant parental
involvement, recognition and valuing of cultures and values in the school community, and
participation from the global community through accessing these self-authored books online.
According to Dewey 1938, “All principles by themselves are abstract. They become concrete
only in the consequences, which result from their application…. Everything depends upon
the interpretation in the school and the home” (p.20). Through the use of Identity Text
projects, schools are given the opportunity of inviting parents and the community within its
walls. Schools are encouraged to keep these relationships going through hosting events that
honor and celebrate the cultures that exist in the community through authentic engagement
and collaboration. These connections can enrich the school with new knowledge,
understanding and further learning opportunities. Parents, relatives, and volunteers are seen
as essential collaborators in sharing their skills, funds of knowledge and personal values
(Taylor, 2008; Cummins, 2006).

The results of the research based on the implementation of Dual Language and Multi-
literacy projects indicate that they contribute towards parental engagement in the child’s
learning through collaborative work and access to multilingual and multimodal family
literacies. Parents also showed interest and investment in the students learning by sharing
stories about their own pasts and experiences. These stories contribute to the student’s own
understandings of culture, identity and heritage. Some parents told these stories in both
English and their home language, which contributes to their language and literacy
development. Students who participated in the project reported feeling more connected to
their parents and grandparents. Students were given the opportunity to contribute their own
personal experiences and have them be presented as legitimate knowledge, which instills a sense of power and authority. This growth in relationships and authority often leads to greater confidence and appreciation for collaborative contributions. Furthermore, the collaboration and dialogue instigated by this project often encouraged continued conversations on transnational identity, language and the importance of literacy (Taylor, 2008; Cummins, 2006).

2.8 Accessing Resources and Project Feasibility

There are many foreseeable obstacles for teachers hoping to implement these projects. First, the need for assistance and access to community resources such as parents, volunteers, and translators. Second, do these projects align well with curriculum expectations for the given grades and will the teachers be able to manage the time needed to complete these projects. Up until this point, these projects have been successful when they have been implemented with the help of the research team through participatory research. Thus, researches have helped secure the human resources necessary. What needs to be evaluated is the feasibility of these projects for teachers under more normal circumstances, such as when we remove the collaboration and participation of the researchers. The intention of this study is to gather professional opinions from teachers who have implemented dual language identity text projects through their own initiative and design. Some of the key questions that were posed to these teachers surround the feasibility of implementing these projects, what resources were gathered, the level of external involvement, and the perceived impact of these projects on the students and their extending communities.

2.9 Conclusion

Given the high number of ELLs in Ontario and the reports of low teacher self-efficacy coupled with the existing reductive nature of Ontario’s language policies where students can only be taught in English or French, Identity Text projects and first language use appear to be great initiatives that promote students’ learning and identity affirmation.
In this chapter, I have reviewed the literature exploring the various instructional approaches and strategies for teaching English Language Learners (ELLs) in Ontario. More specifically I review the areas of identifying ELLs, Ontario policies, teacher preparation, varying philosophical approaches to education, expanding literacy, effective pedagogical strategies, and community funds and resources. Through this analysis and the contributions of various researchers I have identified how Ontario is currently functioning within a linguistically reductive educational approach. We have seen how this approach has historical roots in a Eurocentric view of education as well as cultural and linguistic imperialism. We have identified gaps and inconsistencies in the areas of ELL inclusion, current policies, teacher training and the studies done on teacher self-efficacy. We then discovered several policies, pedagogies and resources that addressed these gaps and worked to recognize and value the ELLs within our schools. I then took a closer look at these practices, including the research done on Identity Texts in order to critically examine how they contribute to an additive and inclusive educational approach. Within this approach, we considered the current pedagogical strategies including the use of first language, dual language Identity Text projects and the use of multi-literacies as effective pedagogies for ELL students. Finally, I discussed the current research that has been done on Identity Texts and brought forth several questions pertaining to their feasibility, challenges in facilitation, possible accommodations and perceived outcomes.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction (Chapter Overview)

In this chapter, I explain the research methodology that I have chosen and highlight its strengths and limitations. I review the general approach, procedures, instruments of data collection, and identify the sampling criteria. I then explain the data analysis procedures and discuss the relevant ethical considerations for this study. Finally, I conclude the chapter by briefly summarizing the main methodological decisions and my rationale for these decisions given my research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

This study was conducted within a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews. In Chapter 1, I identified past experiences that have motivated my research inquiries. This is an important part of qualitative research as researchers are bringing their own past experiences and judgments into their research, which impacts our interpretations of events as well as our perceived structure of reality (Cooper & White, 2011). These inquiries are compiled in a literature review that functions to establish the context and significance of my research problem and questions. This study includes the use of semi-structured interviews with teachers. This “semi-structure” includes both specific and general questions that enable participants to explain and expand on their experiences and views related to my research topic.

On a broader spectrum, qualitative research can be characterized as a phenomenological approach to investigation that recognizes the value and impact of concepts, events and lived experiences (Saldaña, 2011). The goal of qualitative research is to gain understanding of how the social world is constructed (McLeod, 2013). The underlying beliefs that motivate qualitative research are that the world is full of complexity, and diverse perspectives and that truths are held as knowledges and constructed based on our own unique
experiences. Qualitative research seeks to understand and explore these truths in a way that sheds light to its unique positionality while at the same time seeks some degree of transferability (McLeod, 2013).

While quantitative research relies on a deductive, numerical and controlled environment in order to gain object and universal truths, qualitative research enlists inductive reasoning through the exploration of open-ended questions that elicit rich narrative accounts in which the full context brings light to instances of truth that may not be replicable or verifiable. In this regard, qualitative research is an appropriate approach for this study as it acknowledges the inner experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of the participants that provide for deep and meaningful understanding (McLeod, 2013). I have relied on the words and testimonies of the participating teachers to answer the “why’s” and “how’s” of the study at hand.

3.2 Instrument of Data Collection

The main instrument for data collection used in this study is the semi-structured interview protocol. Semi-structured interviews consist of both open and closed questions for the participants. The closed questions are important in determining the qualifications and matter of fit of the participants, while at the same time they function to introduce and specify the questions at hand. The open-ended questions allow the participants to have more freedom in the way they choose to respond. The strengths of this approach are that it enables the participant to respond through a guided exploration of their own thoughts in relation to their experiences and areas of expertise. The participants are treated as experts in their own responses and are not constrained, predetermined or restricted in any way other than their general topic. This method allows the participant to steer the discussion into areas that were not anticipated. The strength here is that we could discover new relationships and insights surrounding the topic. The limitations of this approach include time restraints and a need for
relevant discourse. In general, this approach is most useful when collecting evidence of patterns, categories, and understandings from human participants (Saldaña, 2011).

Another consideration is that semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to add questions, as the interview process is under way. This allows for other areas of interest and relevance to be explored that may not have been anticipated. Finally, questions have been found to be most productive when they contain open-ended probes that clarify feelings, thoughts, attitudes and experiences without fear of judgment (McLeod, 2013). These can include questions and directives and are aimed at extracting deep exploration of experiences (McLeod, 2013).

3.3 Participants

Finding the right participants to interview is a crucial part of the research process. For this study, I have determined a set of sample criteria that all participants must fulfill. These qualifications are critical to the pertinence and relevance of my research. Below, I address all the methodological considerations related to research participants.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The following criteria have been applied to all participants:

1. Teacher participants have facilitated or participated in conducting Identity Text projects or have demonstrated a strong commitment to implementing multi-literacies programming.

2. Teacher participants have had at least 3 years of experience within the field of education.

3. Teacher participants have a minimum of 2 years teaching experience in classrooms with a high number of ELLs.

4. Teacher participants have worked in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).
5. Teacher participants have shown leadership in introducing first language use in their classrooms and activities.

These criteria have been chosen for the following reasons. In order to answer my research question, participants must have experienced implementing multi-literacy projects. In order to establish a certain degree of professionalism and experiences that can be drawn from, the participants must have 3 years of teaching experience. The specific area of interest for my study is how these multi-literacy projects are affecting Canadian-born ELL students, and so I have included this experience as a specific criterion. Most of my data has been Ontario specific, and as I am located in Toronto, the participants were within the GTA. The more variance in age, gender and race adds potential for richer dialogue and impact (McLeod, 2013). Lastly, I have included one teacher as a participant with the previous experience of implementing Identity Texts as a part of participatory research. I have limited such participation to one candidate to account for the impact that past participatory research might have on my participants accounts as many participatory research studies benefit from additional resources in completing their studies such as classroom volunteers, coordinators, material resources and funding.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures/recruitment

There are a number of ways participants can be gathered for research. Sampling can include strategic, referred, random and/or serendipitous selection of participants (Saldaña, 2011). Since my research deals with a more specific subset of the population (teachers) and focuses on a specific topic (Identity Texts & first language use), I employed a combination of strategic and serendipitous recruitment strategies such as talking with the teachers I have contact with, emailing educators, and posting requests in schools. I have employed purposeful sampling in recruiting educators for this study to ensure they meet the specified criteria, and can speak knowledgably about their experiences with ELLs and Identity Texts.
The benefits of this approach are that the participants have a lot of experience to draw on. The limitations of this approach included difficulties in locating and recruiting such participants.

To recruit participants, I sought out educators attending professional development conferences hosted by school boards, such as the upcoming “Celebrating Linguistic Diversity Conference” which was held at OISE in conjunction with TDSB. Next, I contacted teachers that have posted resources online pertaining to their first language use in their classrooms, such as blogs. Then, I referred to previous research studies, such as Cummins research on Multi-literacy projects in Peel region, to explore further contacts. Finally, I approached all the teachers and professors that I knew and discussed my research topic in hopes that they would be able to recommend a suitable candidate. This last approach yielded the best results and I am extremely grateful to all those who assisted me in my search. All three participants received a list of the sample criteria and volunteered as participants for this research (McLeod, 2013).

As a pre-service teacher, I relied on the community of teachers that surrounded me. As I required a small sample of participants, I depended on convenience and targeted sampling strategies. In only asking for one hour of their time, I was able to find willing participants within my targeted field (McLeod, 2013). During my search for participants I was not able to find any general classroom teachers that had conducted Identity Texts, and therefore I must rely on the accounts of the following three participants that have implemented Identity Texts as ESL instructors. In Chapter 5 I will discuss the impact this limitation has had on my research findings. Lastly, throughout my search, I was dedicated towards treating all participants with continued care, transparency, and respect, with a collaborative spirit (McLeod, 2013).
3.3.3 Participant bios

Rebecca has a total of 14 years of experience as a teacher. She spent 2 years teaching at a high school in England and then the following 10 years teaching in the GTA of Ontario. Rebecca has taught as an ESL instructor for 10 years with students from the junior and primary levels. She is very involved with the ELL students at her school and has created an ESL club as well as a peer mediation group for students at her school. She is very knowledgeable and passionate about her work with ELL students and has conducted several Identity Texts with her students. She described the school she works in as having a very diverse population of students and described working with 1st and 2nd generation migrant families and communities. Rebecca received an undergraduate degree in English and then went on to teacher’s college and eventually completed her Masters of Education with research that centered around ELLs.

Stacy has a total of 35 years working as an educator in Ontario. She has held several positions including being an ESL teacher for a high-school, teaching ESL abroad and as an ESL/ELD program coordinator for multiple boards. Stacy has worked alongside Dr. Jim Cummins as they implemented Identity Texts with students in Ontario. Stacy has a broad range of expertise with the ESL and ELL field and is actively involved in facilitating the sharing of Identity Texts throughout the province. Stacy has an undergraduate degree in Linguistics as well as a post graduate Master of TESOL degree.

Alex has over 20 years of teaching experience including 8 years as an ESL teacher. She is currently an itinerant ESL teacher in Ontario and works in 6 different schools each week. She has also taught adult ESL and has served as a classroom teacher in Ontario for several years. Alex has conducted many Identity Texts with her students and is passionate about sharing stories from her ELL students. She has presented these Identity Texts at several
conferences throughout Ontario. Alex received an undergraduate degree in TESOL and has completed a Masters degree in Linguistics where she focused her research on the impacts of sharing personal narratives.

3.4 Data Analysis

The interviews have been transcribed, coded and analyzed. Cross-analysis involved searching and exploring the texts for overlapping themes in order to establish domains and core ideas from the research (McLeod, 2013). The coding process also involved a thorough search for common themes and divergences from the data. To facilitate for this process, I used a computer to manually transcribe the data. I then read through the data multiple times and began to identify prominent themes or areas participants seemed to emphasize. Next, I coded each transcript and created concept maps with themes, sub-themes and direct quotes from participants. Throughout this process, I kept ongoing notes about my coding process in the form of analytic memos. I identified the null-data, where certain topics or themes were omitted or not spoken to. I also identified and set aside themes that were discussed that didn’t seem to be relevant to my research question.

The goal of thematic analysis and coding is to discern patterns to reveal insights relevant to my research question. These themes and patterns can also be categorized into relevant groupings that assist in further organizing and relating the material (Saldaña, 2011). During the data analysis, I explored areas in which these patterns and categories interplay and interact to articulate influences and effects of certain events, environments and actions (Saldaña, 2011). There was a lot of data that I wanted to include but didn’t because of the constraints presented within this research project including limited time, length requirements and direct pertinence to my research question. In the end, I tried to create a narrative that best reflected what my participants presented considering my research questions. Finally, the
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transferability of these findings has been situated and discussed based on the relevant contexts and situated practices of the research participants.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

In cases of research there are several ethical considerations that need to be made. For the purposes of this research study all participants are volunteers and have the right to withdraw at any time during the study. All participants have the right to confidentiality and have been assigned a pseudonym to protect their identities. Any identifying markers related to their schools, students or larger community would be excluded. There are no known risks to participation in this study. The topics at hand are not sensitive in nature and should not illicit trauma. As sensitive subjects emerged I re-assured participants throughout the process that they have a right to refrain from answering any and all questions that they did not feel comfortable with as well as re-stating their right to withdraw from participation.

After the initial interviews were conducted, I provided participants with the opportunity to review the transcripts to clarify or retract any statements before conducting the final analysis. All data, including notes and audio recordings were stored on my password-protected computer at home and will be destroyed after 5 years from the initial publication date. Participants have been asked to sign a consent letter (Appendix A) thereby giving their consent to the interview as well as to the audio recording. This consent letter provides a brief overview of the study, addresses ethical implications, and specifies the expectations of participation (One 60-minute semi-structured interview).

3.6 Methodological Strengths and Limitations

The strengths of this qualitative research study conducted through a semi-structured interview include being able to hear from teachers about their experiences in a more purposeful and yet open format than could have been achieved through the alternatives. This research method enables participants to both be introduced to the topic and guided through
the key concepts in a way that facilitates positive rapport and respect within an open and explorative context. Teachers are given the space and platform to share their voice, key experiences and insights. This also provides teachers with an opportunity to reflect and celebrate their practices in a way that promotes further opportunities for growth and development for the teaching practice in general.

In terms of limitations, this study has time restraints, no financial incentives and limitations in scope. Out of respect for the time teachers are dedicating to this study I was determined to keep the interviews to 60 minutes. This time restraint may limit the amount of material and experiences that are gathered. This project has no funding, therefore participation is voluntary and this may limit my access to qualified participants. Finally, in terms of scope, this research method does limit the topic and the audio recordings do limit the level of perceptible nuances (body language). The small sample size of participants limits the generalizability and transferability of the research findings. Finally, limiting the participants to the GTA may limit transferability to other countries and provinces.

3.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, I have conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews of voluntary participants that teach in the GTA so that they can share about their experiences, insights and best practices pertaining to the use of first languages and multi-literacies within the classroom. The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and participants signed a consent form. All participants fit the sampling criteria (experience in facilitating Identity Texts and multi-literacy programming, 3 years teaching experience, 2 years teaching ELLs, demonstrated leadership in implementing first language use in classrooms and located in the GTA) and were kept informed about the purpose and intent of the research. The ethical considerations of confidentiality, freedom to withdraw as well as the voluntary nature of the proceedings were communicated and agreed upon at multiple points in the process. Finally,
the data was securely stored, transcribed, and coded in order to analyze and apply the research findings, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I will report the findings resulting from the contributions and responses shared during three semi-structured interviews conducted with three ESL teacher participants. The question guiding my analysis is: What are teacher’s perspectives on the feasibility of implementing Identity Text projects and what are their perceived outcomes with ELL students? The main agenda for this chapter is to gather key teaching strategies, resources, reported challenges, important accommodations, and teacher’s perceived outcomes after implementing Identity Texts. The main themes for this chapter are as follows:

- 4.1 Participants spoke to the value of using effective teaching strategies in conjunction with the use of key resources as an integral part of implementing Identity Texts with ELLs.
- 4.2 Participants spoke to the various levels at which ELLs are being marginalized by both the greater society and our school environments which affected the students’ ability to participate in and complete their Identity Texts.
- 4.3 In the effort to overcome the challenges of teachers not being equip, ELLs being marginalized, and deficit thinking, participants pointed to the value of leadership, advocacy, and the use of technology to facilitate for students’ needs and as means for empowerment.
- 4.4 Teacher participants spoke to the value and importance of conducting Identity Texts with ELL students as they created opportunities for ELL students to engage academically, share, and build relationships, as well as explore and value their own unique identities.
These themes will each be broken down into three subthemes in which you will find teacher participant perspectives, anecdotes and perceptions with respect to their work with ELLs on implementing Identity Texts.

4.1 Participants Spoke to the Value of Using Effective Teaching Strategies in Conjunction with the Use of Key Resources as an Integral Part of Implementing Identity Texts with ELLs.

In this section I will discuss the key teaching strategies and resources that were reported by participants to be important during the implementation of identity texts. This section paints a picture of how teachers have successfully implemented identity texts and what tools are important for the process. All three participants identified the importance of good teaching strategies such as scaffolding, activating prior knowledge, and gradual release in conducting Identity Texts with ELLs. More specifically, two participants found that the use of minds-on activities as well as modeling were key practices in promoting student engagement. Furthermore, all three participants cited first language use as a significant conduit for activating and accessing student knowledge and connecting to student experiences. Through this discussion, participants also revealed the value of certain key resources as being helpful supports.

4.1.1 Teacher participants described their use of modeling as a successful tool for activating student engagement and motivation as they initiated the Identity Text projects.

All three participants spoke to the value of utilizing good teaching strategies in support of student engagement during the implementation of Identity Texts. Rebecca and Alex both spoke to the importance of having a minds-on as well as the use of modeling to support student learning and engagement. In reflecting on her experiences, Rebecca shared the following:
So, there is K’naan’s book. I don’t know if you know K’naan. He is an artist, and he has a picture book he wrote or that he was involved in writing about his journey to Canada. So, it talks about his experiences in Somalia, going through America and eventually coming to Canada and receiving the label “refugee” and then his experiences here in schools… We will use it kind of as a minds-on, or something for them to get excited about. You know, when they see K’naan, they usually know who he is or they know that song and (they) sing the song and they get all excited. And then they kind of model their own journeys off from his.

Another participant, Alex, also used modeling for her identity texts and she shared; “I start off with a model. Showing them other people’s work, then they know where we are going with it.” Participants reported that minds-on and modeling strategies were beneficial as they created opportunities for students to connect to prior experiences and have some ideas for the direction and goals of the project. The research conducted by DeJong and Harper (2005) suggests that simply relying on Just Good Teaching (JGT) strategies such as scaffolding, the use of visuals, hands on activities, cooperative learning and activating prior knowledge do not encompass an adequate pedagogy on their own when instructing ELLs. They found that these strategies are only effective when paired with teaching strategies that focus more explicitly on English language development as an additional language. In considering this research and the participants’ experiences, the additional strategies that participants spoke to includes the use of modeling, accessing first language use, as well as exercising patience and flexibility.

4.1.2 As students proceeded into their Identity Texts, specific pedagogies were highlighted by participants as being effective tools in support of ELLs’ academic engagement.
The strategies highlighted by all participants as effective practices for meeting ELLs at their corresponding academic levels include: the use of scaffolding, chunking, activating prior knowledge and gradual release. As Stacy shared, “Some of the kids who are newcomers don’t yet have a lot English proficiency… you want to give them a lot of scaffolding, chunking, and a lot of very clear and manageable bits of directions for the project. So I think those are all important strategies.” Alex noted that in order to work well with beginning ELLs, you must be “flexible and versatile and chunk things.” Rebecca also spoke to the importance of chunking, ”because it's so long [identity texts], you're not going to have them write a whole book. So they each kind of picked a page from the book where they could connect to their own experiences.” Rebecca added that another important pedagogy is gradual release. She said that it is important to introduce kids to various types of texts and the different forms. The idea being that over time, as students get familiarized with the project and the material, they can work more independently.

A few of these reported strategies expand on the list created by DeJong and Harper (2005) related to JGT mentioned above. Although participants did not speak directly to the strategies that focus on characteristics and strategies related to language learning, they did utilize additional strategies that were not accounted for in this research, such as the use of gradual release, modeling, explicit connections to literature, chunking and first language use. Therefore, while these practices may not be the conventional strategies for new language learners as defined by DeJong and Harper, they do go beyond the list of JGT strategies to include first languages, extended time and flexibility.

4.1.3 Participants spoke passionately about the multiple benefits of first language use on behalf of ELLs as they work to create their Identity Texts.

Students’ first language use was reported by all participants as an effective resource for brainstorming, activating knowledge, making connections, and enriching student’s
literacy skills. Rebecca enthusiastically commented; “If you compare students who are… even for students who know English… if you can pair students up who share a language, they can use that for the brainstorming process to generate ideas… you know, it's so much better.”

On a similar note, Alex shared the following:

And what I do with him is when he comes down with his work sometimes and we translate the questions and he writes it in his first language. And I said “okay, you get all your ideas out in your first language and then let’s see if you can explain any of it to me in English, and I'll write it down in English first…” And you know, we just started to work together, so I haven’t worked with him too much yet, but I see… it’s an amazing thing what they CAN tell you… if you let them… and just because they can't tell you in English, it doesn’t mean that they don’t know it.

One significant benefit to using students L1 that was reported by all participants was the effect of underlying language proficiency and language transference. The participants were familiar with these theories and were excited about the results they were having with students when first languages were being activated in order to access knowledge and concepts that could then be transferred into English. As Stacy affirmed:

[Using L1] makes it much easier for them to learn the English reference for those concepts because they don’t have to go through all the conceptual learning again, they just have to put the English labels on things. So, from that perspective, first language use in learning is extremely important.

While Stacy agreed that first language use has positive impacts on participation, she also warned teachers to be strategic in how they set up the use of first languages in classrooms. She recommends that teachers always have a clear purpose in mind for the first language activity, otherwise students might quickly get off task. In accordance with these observations,
Cummins (2007) found that the use of first language as an inclusive pedagogical approach for ELLs resulted in students being able to access their background experiences and conceptual knowledge, which can then be transferred into English. This finding was confirmed by all the participants as they reported first language use as a valuable tool for accessing prior experiences, activating higher level thinking.

4.2 Participants Spoke to the Various Levels at Which ELLs are Being Marginalized by Both the Greater Society and School Environments Which Effect the Students’ Ability to Complete their Identity Texts.

In this section, I will discuss participant observations pertaining to how ELLs may be experiencing marginalization in schools. This section is important as we consider the role the greater environment plays in restricting students’ ability to participate and succeed in school. This section acknowledges some challenges and limitations that participants encountered and witnessed in schools that affected their own ability to implement Identity Texts. More specifically, I will illuminate the experiences of two participants, Alex and Rebecca, who reported various accounts of marginalization, discrimination and deficit thinking towards the ELL communities in their school. These incidents were seeing as signposts for larger societal trends that reportedly affect ELL students’ capacity to engage in learning as many teachers and administrators are not valuing first languages, Identity Texts, and/or the use of ELL teacher strategies in their classrooms.

4.2.1 Participants observed that some teachers did not have the communication skills necessary for engaging and collaborating with the diverse identities of ELL students, as well as with their parents.

Participants explained that even within the ELL student population there is a wide range and diversity of identities. They identified various significant factors that need to be given serious consideration as teachers approach instruction, such as age, gender, first
language, previous educational background, first language literacy levels (including listening, speaking, reading and writing), English literacy levels, languages spoken at home, and psychosocial needs. Stacy shared that in her experience with refugees, for example, “they have a lot of needs, both educational and psychosocial, as well as orientation needs.” When considering doing work with first language, Rebecca shared that a big limitation for her was that a lot students don’t know how to read and write in their first language. Participants then acknowledged how such diverse students require teachers with certain skills and attributes, such as patience, flexibility and the keen ability to break things down into simpler pieces.

These sentiments correlate with the research done by Faez (2012), who found that diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds amongst students present one of the one of the greatest challenges for teachers in classrooms. Further research by Ntelioglou, Fannin, Montanera, & Cummins (2014) and McGloin (2011) suggests that for this reason, cultural and linguistic backgrounds should be one of the first things a teacher should inquire about with their students. Participants explained that while many newcomers are led through a formal process in which languages and literacy skills are identified, for Canadian-born ELLs the responsibility is often left to the home-room teacher.

Alex and Rebecca shared how they had encountered several teachers that did not know how to support and work with ELL students and their parents. Alex had this to say, “I don’t think most teachers really understand ELLs and how to support them”. Rebecca shared that when it comes to things like Identity Text projects and first language use “it's not happening in the classroom and it's really hard to get teachers on board.” This teacher ineptitude with ELL students was also witnessed with respect to parent relationships. Stacy shared that in her observations of teacher parent interviews she witnessed teachers exerting a sense of superiority that often presented itself in the use of difficult vocabulary. Here is part of what Stacy shared:
I think a lot of parents are afraid to come into schools because they themselves don’t know the language. And I’ve seen that when we have teacher-parent interviews, I’ve seen a lot of parents not wanting to come in… I don’t blame them, I’ve seen teachers use language that… it's almost like they are taking it up a notch instead of simplifying it, you know? And I think that for some of the parents it's almost like the teachers are talking down (at them), it’s like a… almost like a racism that appears… I don’t want to say racism, but it’s almost like a superiority.

These reports are supported by the research of DeJong & Harper (2005), Kibler & Roman (2013), and Faez (2012), which suggested that there is a strong need for more professional development amongst teachers working with ELLs to offer proper strategies and supports. As Yoon (2007) demonstrated, diverse student identities and communities require cultural sensitivity on behalf of teachers to create positive environments that enable collaboration and appreciation.

4.2.2 Participants reported experiencing cultural barriers in schools that functioned to marginalized and socially isolated the ELLs in their schools which in some cases prevented the implementation of Identity Texts.

Both Rebecca and Alex spoke to the many barriers that teachers and administrators contribute to when they fail to create opportunities for ELL students to engage, which limits their capacity for learning and impairs their socio-emotional well-being. Rebecca made the following comment “I would say the big need is being included. Social marginalization and marginalization within the classroom, being seen as who they are and their not being understood.” She went on to point out that for these reasons, ELLs are often silent in their classrooms and this perpetuates the perception of ELLs as being different. She shared that “when there is a large group (of ELLs) together they have a lot more friends and there is a lot
more confidence.” Overall, Rebecca found that valuing the unique skills and knowledges of ELL students was not a common practice in classrooms as she identified that when it comes to the use of first language and Identity Texts, “it's really hard to get teachers on board.”

Alex agreed that social marginalization often plays a significant role in an ELL’s school experience and she expanded the sphere of responsibility to the administration. Alex shared that as an itinerant ESL teacher she is often competing for space in schools and has frequently been displaced as other teachers and classes are given priority. She shared the following:

I mean, once I was put into a kindergarten coat room. There was a little table in the middle, there were two kindergartens and so one side of the wall was one kindergarten’s hooks… and we are in the middle, so when the bell rings all the students pour in and start putting on their snowsuits and I’m thinking, this isn’t right. You know, but there was literally no space… so you know, when they put these programs out there and say that we are going to provide support for ELLs, they have to think about the space… That kind of thing is very disrespectful, not to me, but the kids. I don’t think it’s fair to them to be displaced again.

All participants acknowledged the key role administration plays in valuing and supporting the ELL students in their schools. Unfortunately, both Rebecca and Alex shared many accounts of how often teachers and administrators are not prioritizing the inclusion of ELLs as their skills and identities are not being accessed or valued. The negative effects of this phenomenon included social exclusion, academic disengagement for ELLs as well as lack of support for ESL teachers that sometimes resulted in the devaluing of Identity Texts themselves. Rebecca shared the following about her first experience with Identity Texts; “It wasn’t something that I saw anyone doing or that was valued, so I stopped.”
These findings are surprising given the amount of research, initiatives and policy documents released in Ontario over that past two decades. Principals and teachers currently have access to many policies and initiatives such as *Many Roots, Many Voices* (2005), which advocates for creating inclusive spaces and provides many practices that celebrate and appreciate the unique skills and identities of ELLs in schools.

4.2.3 Rebecca and Alex also shared about how deficit thinking in our society is actively preventing ELLs from accessing their gifts, skills and knowledge both at home and in school.

Rebecca and Alex each recounted experiences with both students and parents, which demonstrated the devaluing of their first language. Alex shared how one student once told her “I do speak another language, but I don’t want anyone else to know.” Alex noted that this report is representative of more students as they feel that first languages are generally “unwanted in schools”. Rebecca held the same position and shared that, as she sees it, "larger society in general just does not value their language, and so you're fighting against this Canadian cultural piece of “English only.” She shared that during the implementation of an Identity Text in her classroom one student reacted as follows; “What? I need to write in my first language? Like, are you crazy?” Both participants reported that many students have already devalued their first languages. In response to this situation Alex reflected: “then, students grow up to become teachers and they don’t know anything about other languages”. This statement supports the opinion that plurilingualism should be viewed as an asset.

Alex shared that this deficit thinking extends to parents’ views on first language use and acts as a barrier to their involvement in schools. Alex reported; "a lot of parents are afraid to come into schools because they themselves don’t know the language. And I’ve seen that when we have teacher-parent interviews, I’ve seen a lot of parents not wanting to come in.” Many parents still believe that academic success for their kids simply means learning and
acquiring English. Alex recounted one night when she was saying farewell to a family she had met with and the parents last words as they left were “Don't worry, we will speak English at home”.

Another significant way that ELLs and multilingual speakers are being devalued is through either being mislabeled or receiving stigma based on the ESL label. Rebecca shared that when she asked one of her new students what she thought ESL was the student said it meant that you are “stupid”. Rebecca expressed that she can no longer use the word ESL in school because it has such negative associations for students. Rebecca went on to say, “I think one of the barriers is that there is an enormous amount of deficit model thinking to the point where now, here in my school board, now, they are actually combining ESL and Spec Ed Programs.” Rebecca expressed concern about this as in her view, teaching ELLs from a special education lens could do a lot of damage both academically and in terms of the student’s self-esteem.

These findings on the deficit nature of school systems are discussed in Street (2005), as they found that the rich knowledge of ELLs is often treated as a deficit ‘home knowledge’. Instead, they advocate for new literary and educational practices such as Identity Texts that promote deep levels of identity formation. While this is great advice, participants in this study viewed deficit thinking as a possible barrier in implementing Identity Texts in the first place.

4.3 In the Effort to Overcome the Challenges of Teachers Not Being Equipped, ELLs Being Marginalized and Deficit Thinking, Participants Pointed to the Value of Leadership, Advocacy and the Use of Technology to Facilitate for Student Needs and as Mediums for Empowerment.

In this section, I will discuss how the participants whom had conducted identity texts were aware of ways they could respond to the challenges presented by marginalization,
deficit thinking and meeting the needs of diverse ELL identities. Participants illuminated numerous strategies and tools that can help overcome the marginalization, isolation, and deficit thinking that has been reported to stifle student growth and engagement. As a response, participants shared how the creation of ELL student leadership opportunities, as well as teacher advocacy on their behalf and the use of technology in creating Identity Texts played important roles in supporting diverse ELL identities in their schools.

4.3.1 Participants indicated the importance of creating supportive roles and a safe environment for ELLs to foster the inclusion of identity texts.

Both Alex and Rebecca found that being an advocate for the ELL populations at their schools was a significant part of their role as ESL teachers. Rebecca explained the following, "I think advocacy is a huge part of ESL teaching because you are constantly getting to kind of step in and be there for the kids and support them and they kind of know you have their back." She spoke of how important it was to create opportunities for first language use in schools to make these differences more visible. She shared how multi-lingual signs, posters and bulletin boards require ELL involvement and leadership, which means that ELLs are being called on to participate and be involved. With respect to creating opportunities for ELL engagement and the use of Identity Texts, she shared, "you just have to get the classroom teacher interested in doing that.” Both Rebecca and Alex shared that they were actively involved in doing such advocacy work within their schools and communities.

An excellent example of this advocacy work is displayed in the following excerpt. Here, Alex responded to a parent who promised to only speak English at home with their child:

And I say ‘absolutely not’. I say, ‘That’s my job. I'll teach them English, you teach them your language. And don’t just speak it at home, send them to
classes, and make sure they are reading books.’ Why wouldn’t you want your child totally bilingual, not just bilingual until the age that they came here. So, I think it's extremely important. Especially when you think about the complexity of idioms and how many times do you have in multiple languages that you know something in one language for which there is no equivalent in the other language. So for these kids to have that and to travel and to later use your languages, and potentially for work enrich our country. Umm… yeah, I think it's important to keep that. And it should be represented in the classroom. And that’s why those identity texts are important.

Although the research done by Taylor et al. (2008) and Cummins (2006) points to the implementation of Identity Texts as resulting in stronger bonds between students and their parents, grandparents, and cultural backgrounds, they did not make the connection to an increased bond and response towards advocacy on behalf of the participating teachers. Their studies did speak to the power and authority gained by students whom have been given the opportunity to share their knowledge and explore their personal experiences.

4.3.2 Participants attempt to empower and connect students to build self-esteem and broader awareness about ELL identities.

Rebecca and Alex both shared about how they were working to create opportunities for student leadership and connection to validate student identities and build self-esteem. Rebecca spoke about how she had created an ESL club, which they always had to rename to avoid stigma as many students associated “ESL” with being labeled as “stupid”. For Rebecca, these types of labels can be countered through the creation of leadership opportunities for ELLs in schools. She reported that it is only through these kinds of leadership roles that students will build confidence, connect with others and counter the effects of stigma and
deficit thinking. Rebecca stated; “when there is a large group together, they have a lot more friends and there is a lot more confidence.” In this way, students in her ESL club have a platform for making first languages visibility in schools, creating awareness of cultural festivals and raising awareness about issues ELLs were facing in their school. Rebecca shared how the presenting of Identity Texts is part of this solution:

I’m thinking they are really positive in terms of showing the students that the school really values their first languages and who they are. I think it really boosts their self-esteem. The children will often start opening-up to me about things, like once we have gone through the project and different issues they may be having in the classroom.

Alex also passionately discussed the value of creating Identity Texts to promote the sharing of stories, which she observed had the power to connect people. She shared a story about a girl in Grade 1 who spoke no English and was disconnected from all the other students, as nobody seemed to share her first language. As this student created an Identity Text she was able to share about her sense of connection with a teacher in the school who shared her first language and had greeted her a couple of times. Alex reported that when that teacher saw the identity text “she was floored. She said ‘I had no idea the affect I was having on this girl.’” This speaks to the power of how Identity Texts and first language use in schools can serve to create positive spaces for an ELL student’s sense of belonging and community. These experiences reiterate many of Cummins and Taylor’s (date) findings as they reported that collaboration and dialogue surrounding Identity Texts can encourage conversations and connections related to transnational identities and shared languages.

4.3.3 Participants spoke to the role that technology played as an effective resource for overcoming some of the challenges surrounding diverse ELL identities in the completion of identity texts.
As discussed, ELLs have complex identities that pose challenges to many teachers in terms of both general instruction and the implementation of Identity Texts. As a response to these challenges participants referenced the usefulness of technology. Participants shared that technology was useful for translation, oral recordings, and accessing various platforms and templates for creating identity texts such as iMovie, Book Creator, word processing, maps, images, and online sharing. Participants explained how these tools and resources create multiple entry points for ELL students that accommodate for various literacy levels in both their L1 and in English. Rebecca declared; “You really have to bring in technology to use oral languages.” She shared how students who know how to speak in their L1, but don’t know how to write it really benefit from digital resources, such as the ability to record audio texts. The usefulness of a multi-modal approach to literacy work is supported in literature, such as Cummins (2006), who speaks to the value of using pictures, illustrations, and online resources to create identity texts. These studies found that the use of technology enabled students to create, share and access their work.

Rebecca and Alex described how technology accommodated for both low level and high-level ELLs by creating the opportunity for multiple entry points. This was illustrated when Alex shared “And I had a girl, she was in Grade 1, and at the beginning of the year she didn’t speak English, and by February of the year, she was editing her video, she was working independently, and she was voice recording. I had scribed words for her and she was reading her words. And this was a kid that couldn’t speak English.” Alex added that the use of technology for these projects freed her up to support other students as students more quickly gained the ability to work on texts individually. Alex commented that; “The limitation of what is made available in the school, and that’s not always equal. Some schools have technology like crazy… But some schools have nothing, and that makes it difficult.”
4.4 Teacher Participants Spoke to the Value and Importance of Conducting Identity Texts with ELLs as they Created Opportunities for ELLs to Engage Academically, Share and build Relationships, as well as Explore and Value their Own Unique Identities.

In this section, I will discuss the positive outcomes that the participants observed from their experiences implementing Identity Texts with students. All three participants recognized the value of implementing Identity Texts and spoke of them as a powerful tool that promotes ELL academic engagement, improved ELL-school relationships and offered students opportunities for identity development that resulted in a sense of accomplishment and pride in their skills, experiences, and knowledge.

4.4.1 Participants indicated that the co-creation of identity texts and the use of first languages were viable pathways for motivating ELL student academic engagement and creating unique opportunities for students to access their higher-level thinking skills.

All three participants acknowledged that conducting identity texts with ELLs contributed towards the students’ academic engagement. More specifically, Rebecca gave numerous accounts of how students were able to access higher level thinking skills. She commented, “I always like to do identity work, where we incorporate students’ first language, and higher level thinking.” In connection to this, Rebecca shared an example of some connections students were making that she would say demonstrated deep thinking skills. She relayed the following:

But the kids were talking about how your memories… they actually came up with some interesting thoughts about how your memories are connected to your first language and that when you forget your first language you forget who you are along with your memories and they had some really profound thoughts, it was quite good.
In a similar spirit, Stacy noted; “I’ve seen some very good results in English language development” for students who had participated in Identity Texts. Rebecca concluded; “they [ELLs] really want to be engaged, so I highly recommend you do that work. It may not be understood by your colleagues, but you know, hopefully they will come along.” Therefore, Identity Texts were a significant tool for teachers and students when it comes to engaging ELLs in academic work and accessing higher level thinking skills. These results correlate with the findings conducted by Ntelioglou, Fannin, Montanera, & Cummins (2014) in which they found that students who had participated in Identity Text projects displayed an increase in knowledge and skills as well as increased academic and community engagement.

4.4.2 Participants identified how the implementation of Identity Texts was valuable in creating stronger relationships between the participating ELLs and other community members.

Participants claimed that through completing Identity Text projects they witnessed improved relationships between the ELLs that participated and other community members. Firstly, participants indicated that these projects enabled improved relationships between student and teacher, student to school and school to community. Rebecca alleged; “For me, I would say it has a really positive impact on my relationship with my students and they are so excited about doing the projects and they are really engaged in them.” In a similar spirit Alex shared; "I think it’s a great place to be creative. Try a few ideas, experiment and have a lot of fun with kids." These opportunities for connecting and building stronger relationships with ELLs also extended to student-to-school relations. In connection to building student-school relationships, Rebecca reasoned:

I’m thinking they are really positive in terms of showing the students that the school really values their first languages and who they are. I think it really boosts their self-esteem. The children will often start opening up to me about things,
like once we have gone through the project and different issues they may be having in the classroom.

Rebecca also addressed how the school is more able to recognize the value of ELLs when Identity Texts are being shared. She noted how other students would hear their first languages being used, and they would get excited to hear them. Finally, with respect to building school and community relationships, Stacy commented:

Everybody is really excited to see the kids so proud of sharing. Sharing their lives, sharing their languages, traditions and just sharing things about them that they wouldn't normally get a chance to share in other situations. So that's something that everyone wants to see.

In this way, we can see that participants saw the value of sharing Identity Texts as it promoted relationship building through accessing student voice, making connections, and valuing diverse skills, languages and experiences. Per Bernhard, Cummins, Campoy, Ada, Winsler, & Bleiker (2006), multi-literacy projects such as Identity Texts were designed for this very purpose. They are intended to create opportunities for students to access funds of knowledge, language skills and cultural capital that are representative of their communities.

4.4.3 Participants advocated for the implementation and sharing of Identity Texts as they alleged that they are an effective tool for developing unique student identities, affirming diverse skills and bringing forth cultural knowledges and experiences.

Participants shared that after years of experience teaching ELLs and several experiences implementing Identity Texts, they value these projects for their ability to affirm student identities and bring forth their skills, experiences, and voice. Rebecca reflected that, while she knows learning English is important, “really, it’s the identity piece, especially with children, that is really important.” This speaks to the important role that Identity Texts play in supporting student identity affirmation. Stacy acknowledged that Identity Texts create a
unique platform for first language use and viewed the use of L1 as being “important in terms of maintaining strong cultural identity.” Alex reflected on how ELL students who are coming from other countries or coming from homes with different languages are “entering a new culture when they enter a school” and how Identity Texts enable students to share their stories with the broader community. Alex emphasized the value of finding multiple modes of sharing and alleged that many ELLs brought their digital Identity Texts home and with help from their parents, they could share them on Facebook with their family and friends on an international platform. Rebecca and Stacy shared about Identity Texts that they had done where students went out into their communities and created projects that were displayed community-wide, in libraries, nearby schools, and on the streets.

Finally, all three participants were unanimous in identifying a feeling of pride on behalf of the participating ELLs and their family’s as a significant outcome when completing Identity Texts with students. Rebecca had the following response when asked about parents seeing their kids’ Identity Texts: “They usually love them! Parents are just… really proud of their child. Yeah, they feel really, like, who they are! And their family is supported and valued. It’s really positive.” In a similar fashion, Alex shared; “I think it [Identity Texts] makes them [ELLs] proud. I think it helps them feel valued and not deficient. I think it’s important, I think we have to have it represented, it should be something they say, and I think visual, so that other people can see it too.” This intention is supported by Cummins (2007), who highlights that Identity Texts require multilingual use, community involvement and the presentation of texts, which can be posted online to share with their global community.

4.5 Conclusion

After conducting interviews with three ESL teachers that had experience implementing Identity Texts, I highlight useful strategies and resources, identify some challenges and possible accommodations, as well as share some powerful outcomes from
these experiences. We saw that some challenges exist for schools, teachers and ELL students, such as teacher preparation, student marginalization and isolation as well as a larger deficit structure that have acted as barriers in completing Identity Texts or in accessing ELL’s knowledge and skills. In acknowledgement of these challenges, the participants spoke to the importance of creating supportive roles and environments for ELLs to access their skills and make contributions to the school. Moreover, we discovered that through the process of implementing Identity Texts, teachers can gain some key insights into the ELL experience. These insights enabled teachers to advocate for ELLs in their schools and create more opportunities for student voices to be heard. Finally, we discovered that all three participants saw significant value in both the implementing of Identity Texts and the use of first languages as they contributed to ELL identity formation, academic engagement and sharing in community. These findings will be important as we move into Chapter 5 and discuss the results and implications of this data. Of significance, will be the implications of how the use of Identity Texts were reported to have a significant impact on the student-teacher relationship as teachers gained insights into the specific skills, knowledge and needs of the participating ELLs.
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the overall implications and significance of this research study on teacher experiences with Identity Texts. I begin by revisiting the relevant findings on how teachers implemented Identity Texts to foster student identity affirmation and academic engagement. Then, I discuss the implications of these findings for the educational community as well as for my own future practice as a beginning teacher. Based on these implications, I then make recommendations for educational professionals, including general education teachers, administrators, and school boards. Finally, I explore additional stakeholders as well as further areas of investigation and research that could both contribute to this discussion and expand upon it.

5.1 Overview of Findings

As discussed in the previous chapter, teachers that implement Identity Texts rely on a combination of common teaching practices such as the use of scaffolding, chunking, modeling and accessing prior experiences, combined with the use of key resources such as the students first languages, extended time, the use of technology and gradual release. The use of first languages was emphasized as a central practice that enabled ELLs to access prior knowledge, higher level thinking and literacy skills that could then be transferred into English. Participants working with ELLs also expressed the importance of patience, flexibility and creativity in implementing Identity Texts.

Some potential barriers to implementing Identity Texts with ELLs were the instances of marginalization that both ESL instructors and ELLs experience in schools. ESL instructors shared how their work did not always feel valued in schools and one participant spoke of how she wasn’t given a consistent or adequate space to work in. Per participant accounts, ELLs are facing marginalization in schools and classrooms as their needs and abilities are not
always a priority in schools. Participants shared accounts of how they felt general educators were not equip for teaching ELLs in terms of knowing their needs and creating platforms for understanding. Participants named deficit thinking as a key barrier that has negative effects on parents, educators and ELLs. Deficit thinking and Ontario’s “English only” reductive mindset has led to the devaluing of other languages which acts to limit and devalue ELL identities in schools. Finally, participants spoke to the social isolation that exists for many of our ELLs. These factors have made it difficult for participants to implement Identity Texts.

To overcome the potential barriers of marginalization, deficit thinking and social isolation, participants shared the value of creating nurturing environments for ELLs through advocacy work: including creating student leadership opportunities and promoting first languages in schools. The participants revealed that as ESL educators they saw it as their responsibility to promote and value ELL identities through advocacy work on behalf of their students. They illustrated multiple ways that ELL identities could be supported including the creation of ELL leadership opportunities, promoting the visibility of first language use in schools, actively rebranding “ESL” to counter stigma, and supporting student interests. Participants viewed the work related to implementing Identity Texts as contributing to this advocacy work.

Finally, the teacher participants spoke to the immense value in conducting Identity Texts with ELLs as they promote the inclusion of first languages, and increased self-esteem, the visibility of ELLs in schools, ELL student voice, cultural awareness, identity formation, and academic engagement. Given the demonstrated success of Identity Texts in affirming ELL identities and fostering positive environments for ELL engagement, this study has been meaningful as it has identified some barriers and challenges that teachers have encountered in implementing Identity Texts and offers insights into how these barriers and challenges can be overcome.
5.2 Implications

In this section, I explore the implications of my research for those in the educational community—involving school boards, school administrators, general educators, and ESL instructors—including my own future practice as an emerging teacher.

5.2.1 The educational community

The literature on ELL identities and ELL instruction in conjunction with my participant’s testimonies reflect the importance of implementing Identity Texts as a positive endeavor for all ELLs. As we have seen, implementing Identity Texts helps create an important platform for ELLs to share their voices, skills, and knowledges in an academic context. There is tremendous power in the sharing of personal voice and experience, especially for those of us who are currently facing marginalization within schools and society. The research indicates that there is still a service gap regarding identifying all ELLs, as Canadian-born ELLs represent a significant portion of our student demographic and yet are often left unidentified as ELLs. During my search for participants for this study I did not come across any classroom teachers that had conducted Identity Texts with their students. Rather, all three of my participants had implemented their Identity Texts as ESL educators with their ELLs. While it is great that I found ESL teachers that were passionate about Identity Texts and advocating for ELLs, I believe that if more general educators were implementing Identity Texts it could contribute to closing this gap. If Identity Texts became a widespread practice for Ontario teachers, based on my findings, my participants’ experiences, and the previous literature on the subject, teachers would become more aware of the multiple ELL identities, including their various needs and more responsive to ELL issues in their classrooms.

My hope is that my research has provided some insights into how teachers can approach Identity Texts. I have tried to gather and outline the key features, strategies,
challenges and outcomes that are involved in conducting Identity Texts with students to provide a roadmap for others who seek to do the same. One key message that is important for the educational community to know is that creating meaningful opportunities for first language use in classrooms has immense value for ELL language learning, identity affirmation and academic engagement. Due to the stated instances of marginalization paired with the impacts of deficit thinking within schools and society, supporting and promoting ELL voices and identities is a functional part of delivering equitable educational practices.

5.2.2 My educational practice

In this section I will discuss the implications of this research for me as a teacher and researcher. I have learned a tremendous amount of valuable knowledge and skills through conducting this research and I am indebted to my participants as well as past researchers for their substantial contributions. After conducting this research, I am dedicated to both conducting Identity Texts with my future students and am devoted to being an advocate for ELLs. One significant finding was the value in promoting first languages in schools. The use and visibility of first languages in schools creates opportunities for ELL student leadership opportunities and actively works to counter the effects of deficit thinking, marginalization and social isolation. Opportunities for first language use are not simply restricted to the sharing of Identity Texts as participants also spoke to the value of dual language books, multilingual billboards and posters, as well as multilingual performances and introductions.

As a future teacher, I will be sure to ask my students about other languages they speak and the languages they use at home and provide ways for them to integrate these languages into their work. As we have seen, first languages represent a wealth of knowledge and skills that both enables higher-level thinking and build on foundational literacy skills that can then be transferred into English. The stories and experiences that were accessed through Identity Texts enabled teachers to better know and understand their students. I am dedicated to
creating more platforms for students to share these stories and experiences as they promote connection, identity affirmation and cultural awareness.

Thanks to my participants I now have a better idea of the successful strategies involved, the challenges I may encounter along the way, and an awareness of the impact Identity Texts can have on individuals, classrooms and communities. I now understand that even if other educators do not promote and value these practices, I have reason to believe they are important and can greatly benefit the school community. Knowing this, I will also seek out opportunities to share and learn from other professionals that are dedicated to this cause by attending conferences, further educational opportunities and remaining in tune with the ongoing research in this field.

5.3 Recommendations

Many things can be done to create further opportunities for ELL academic engagement and identity affirmation within schools. In this section I list some recommendations based on my research and learning surrounding the use of Identity Texts, first language use and ELL inclusion. I have organized my recommendations into three key areas: faculties of education, schools, and teachers.

5.3.1 Faculties of education

In order to address the high number of ELLs in Ontario classrooms teachers need to be prepared. My recommendation would be to create a mandatory ELL course where teacher candidates could learn about Identity Texts, first language inclusion, ELL identities, successful teaching strategies (including modeling, scaffolding, chunking, extended time, gradual release, language transference, and so on), and key resources (including relevant ministry documents, multilingual texts, books, websites, blogs and videos).
- Teachers need to be shown strategies that access student voice to become advocates for these students and create opportunities class involvement, school leadership, and identity affirmation including patience, flexibility, multiple modes of communication, and community awareness.

- It is important to build appreciation for languages other than English and French and for teacher candidates to recognize these as valuable skills that need to be fostered.

- It is significant for teachers to know that effective communication with parents, guardians, and community members can have a substantial impact on a school’s community and children’s learning. Teachers should learn strategies for communicating well with parents and they should know about the availability of translators as a key resource.

5.3.2 Schools

- It is essential that schools recognize and value the languages present in their school community. Schools should create signs, posters, bulletins, newsletters, and so on in multiple languages. Multiple languages should also be represented and encouraged in school presentations, performances, and productions.

- School educators and administrators should be aware of the barriers and challenges that present themselves to ELLs in their schools including the effects of marginalization, deficit thinking, and social isolation.

- Schools need to create leadership opportunities for ELLs to create a platform, from which they can advocate for issues they are facing, actively participate in community, and make their identities visible in schools.

- School administrators need to value and prioritize their ESL instructors by giving them a consistent place to meet, access to technology and opportunities to advocate on behalf of the ELL community.
5.3.3 Teachers

- Ask your students what languages they speak at home and give them opportunities to use these languages in school.
- Conduct Identity Texts with your students. Be creative and explore the numerous possibilities. There are great samples and resources online to assist you.
- Give your students opportunities to present and share their Identity Texts in their first language or in English or both.
- Become advocates for the ELLs in your school by helping create opportunities for leadership and first language visibility.
- Seek out opportunities to collaborate with other teachers, community members and so on in order to create further learning and opportunities for ELL identity affirmation.
- Ensure that you have classroom resources and materials that reflect your students’ identities. Build a collection of multi-lingual books, as well as stories that ELLs can connect to and see themselves’ reflected in.
- Participate in conferences, courses, workshops and so on that seek to promote research and pedagogies related to ELL instruction.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

I was not able to find any general educators that had conducted Identity Texts with their students, but further studies would have to be conducted to get a better sense of how widespread Identity Texts are within general education classrooms. Also, if general educators with this experience can be found, it would be helpful to know about their experiences implementing Identity Texts with their students.

My research focused on the implementation and outcomes of Identity Texts in schools but some larger issues surrounding ELLs emerged that could benefit from further research,
such as the impacts of marginalization, social isolation, deficit thinking and teacher preparation on ELLs.

Here are some questions to explore:

1. How pervasive is the use of Identity Texts in general education classrooms in Ontario?
2. How pervasive is first language use in Ontario schools and classrooms?
3. What are teachers’ perceptions of first language use in classrooms?
4. What are teachers’ perceptions of ELL integration models vs. segregated models?
5. What are itinerant ESL teachers’ experiences like in schools? How can they be excluded/included in schools?
6. Are a growing number of ELLs being misidentified as students with learning disabilities?
7. What are the impacts of deficit thinking on ELLs and their communities?
8. How does access to technology effect the learning environment for ELLs?

5.5 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I reviewed my findings as outlined in Chapter 4. I then discussed the implications of my study on the educational community as well as my own educational practice. Finally, I proposed some recommendations for faculties of education, schools and teachers and explored further areas for research. I now conclude with a few reflective remarks about this research process.

Conducting this research has given me a better understanding of how Identity Texts can be implemented in classrooms, what challenges I can expect and effective strategies for overcoming these challenges. I am now more aware of many issues surrounding ELL identities in schools and understand how the use of Identity Texts can impact students both socio-emotionally and academically. Hearing from my participants about the outcomes and
value in implementing Identity Texts has strengthened my resolve to conduct and promote Identity Texts both currently and in my future practice. It is encouraging to hear from leaders within the educational community advocate and share their work experiences on behalf of their ELLs. It has also become clear that Identity Texts are a great entryway into facilitating more first language use in classrooms. I am dedicated to seeking out platforms for further collaboration, sharing and promotion of the value and success of Identity Texts. For this reason, I am dedicated to doing my part, including sharing this research as broadly as I can with the hopes of continuing this dialogue to advance my own learning as well as our professional care for the ELLs in our communities.
References


Merriam, S. B. (2002). Introduction to qualitative research. *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis, 1*, 1-17.


Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
OISE | ONTARIO INSTITUTE
FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION

Date:

Dear _______________________________,

My Name is Matthew DeJong and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. I am interested in interviewing elementary teachers working in schools with a high proportion of ELLs and who have a demonstrated commitment to enacting multi-literacies programming focused on first language use to support their ELLs. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60-minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for 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. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Angela McDonald-Vemic. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,
Matthew DeJong
Email: matt.dejong@mail.utoronto.ca

Course Instructor’s Name: Dr. Angela McDonald-Vemic
Contact Info: angelamcdonald@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 from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Matthew DeJong and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name: (printed) _______________________________________________

Date: ______________________ __________________
The purpose of this research is to gather teachers’ perspectives on the feasibility of multi-literacy programs. This includes gathering information pertaining to how teacher enact multi-litersacies programming, what challenges have arisen and what outcomes have been observed through the implementation of these programs.

I want to start by thanking you again for being willing to participate in this qualitative research study. There are 19 questions to this interview and they are broken into four sections. They proceed as follows: Background information, Perspectives and Beliefs about ELL needs and support, Implementation of Multi-literacy projects and Next Steps. I want to remind you that you may choose to not answer any question and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the research at any time. As I outlined in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

**Section A: Background Information**

1. How long have you been working as a teacher?

2. What is your current position?
   a. What grades and subjects do you currently teach?
   b. Which did you teach previously?
   c. In addition to your roles as a teacher, do you fulfill any other roles in the school? (e.g. coach, advisor, resource etc.)

3. Can you tell me more about your school(s)? (e.g. size, demographics, program priorities)
   a. Can you describe the community in which your school is situated?
b. Approximately what percentage of the students at your school speaks a first language other than English at home?

c. What does support for ELLs look like in your school? Does your school have a system in place to identify home languages?

d. How long have you been teaching at this school?

4. What experiences contributed to developing your interest in, and preparation for, supporting ELLs?

a. Personal experiences? (e.g. first language learner, own cultural identity, travel)

b. Educational experiences? (e.g. university course work, teachers college, additional qualifications, professional development)

c. Professional experiences? (e.g. employment positions, teaching experience)

i. What is the range of your teaching experiences working with ELLs?

Section C: Perspectives and Beliefs about ELL needs and support

1. In your view, what are some of the key needs that ELL students have?

2. In your experience, what barriers do ELLs face in schools, and how well do schools do in addressing these?

3. How do you feel about the current process involved in identifying ELLs and ESL students in Ontario/your school? How do you feel about the kinds of support systems in place for ELLs in schools?

4. In your view, what role does first language development play in ELL students’ learning?

a. How, if at all, do you think first language use affects student participation?

b. How, if at all, do you think first language use affect students’ identity formation?

c. What are some of the limitations of first language use in ELLs learning?
5. What role, if any, do you think there is for parents to play in school-based ELL support programming?

Section D: Implementation of Multi-literacy Projects

1. You have identified as someone who has participated in a multi-literacies project.
   a. Can you start by telling me how you understand the term “multi-literacies”?
      What does this refer to, in your view?
   b. How did you become involved in a multi-literacies project?
   c. What did your participation in this project involve?
   d. How was this project carried out? How would you describe the process of implementing the multi-literacy projects?
      i. What were the learning goals?
      ii. Who was involved?
      iii. What were the opportunities for learning that were created?
      iv. What key instructional strategies and approaches were taken?
      v. What was the role of first language use in the project?
      vi. What was the role of parents in the project?

2. What were some of the outcomes that resulted from this project? How receptive were students and parents to these projects?

3. Once the project was complete, how did you manage to continue implementing some of the core practices and approaches from the multi-literacies project in your classroom teaching and support for ELLs?

4. What aspect of the project were you able to continue, and what resources and factors supported you?

5. Do you alter or adapt the project in any way to accommodate them to your classroom?
6. What aspects of the project were you not able to continue and why? What barriers and challenges did you encounter?
   a. How, if at all, do you incorporate first language use into the classroom?
   b. How, if at all, do you work with parents as part of your ELL support?

7. What benefits do you these multi-literacy projects have for students?

8. What aspects of the multi-literacy project/programming that you continue to implement are challenging? What challenges have you encountered? How do you respond to these challenges?

Next Steps

1. How could the education system further support you in addressing the challenges that you experience with multi-literacies programming?

2. What advice, if any, do you have for beginning teachers who are committed to supporting ELLs through a multi-literacies approach?

Thank you for your participation in this research.