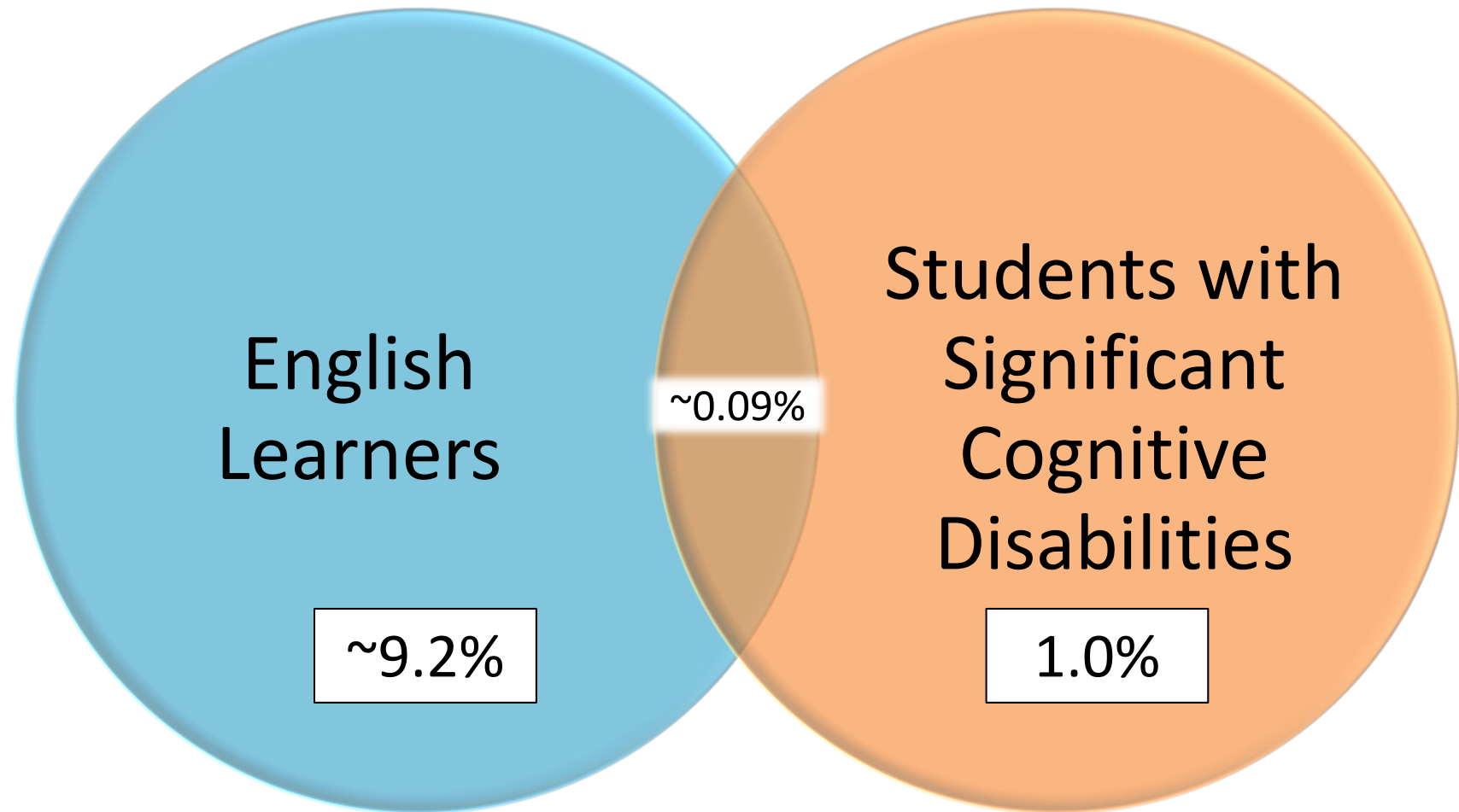


# **Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities who are English Learners: Approaches to Instruction & Assessment**

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# Student Population



# Student Population

- English learners with significant cognitive disabilities
  - As of January 2019, there was no agreed upon definition of students with EL-SCD at a federal, state, or research level

# Working Definition

- who are progressing toward English language proficiency
- whose primary home language(s) is/**are** a language other than English
- who have one or more disability(ies) that significantly affect their cognitive functioning and adaptive behavior (i.e., cognitive and practical/functional skills that affect one's daily life and functioning)



# Research Study

- One-on-one interviews with 10 teachers in spring of 2018
  - Eligible for participation if one or more students were identified as a likely student with SCD-EL based on teacher-provided or enrollment information
  - More than one student in the target population
  - Aimed for variation in state, teaching setting, teacher background/demographics

# Defining SCD-EL

- First Contact survey
  - Is English the student's primary language?
  - Is language the primary language in the student's home?
  - Is English the primary language used for the student's instruction?
- Assessment enrollment data
  - Eligible for or receives ESOL/Bilingual Program or other language-related services

# Final Sample

- 10 teachers (4 male, 6 female)
- Across sample, 46 students in grades 3-11 identified as likely SCD-EL
  - 14 female students
  - First language information available for 8 students, majority Spanish, with Swahili, Arabic, and Karen mentioned in interviews

# Procedure

- 1 hour semi-structured interviews
- Research Questions:
  1. How do teachers describe the disability and language-related needs of their students with SCD-EL?
  2. How do teachers approach instruction and assessment for students with SCD-EL?
  3. How are accessibility supports for instruction or assessment used for students with SCD-EL?
  4. How do teachers communicate with parents of students with SCD-EL about approaches to instruction or assessment?



# Coding

1. Inductive analytic approach
2. Developed 28 codes within 4 categories (RQs) through iterative process among coding team
3. Coding discrepancies reconciled
4. Processed coded transcripts in Dedoose to produce co-occurrence chart and excerpts based on RQ
5. Wrote vignettes for each interview

# Coding Guide

		STUDENT	
S	D	Disability need	Describes student(s)'s disability-related needs and status
S	L	Language need	Participant describes student(s)'s English language-related needs and status, including identification
S	IEP	IEP	Participant describes IEP goals or considerations
S	Serv-X	General services	Not clearly defined as L or D
S	Serv-D	Services related to disability	Participant describes services related to disability needs (e.g., occupational therapy)
S	Serv-L	Services related to language	Participant describes services related to language needs (e.g., speech, EL, translation services)
S	Ag	Agency	Student-described reflections on knowledge/skills, or behaviors related to their own learning
S	P-com	Parent communication	Describes communication methods and/or relationships with students' parents
S	P-conc	Parent concerns	Describes parent concerns about their child (goals, etc.)
S	P-chal	Parent challenge	Describes specific challenge working with parents of students with SCD-EL
S	Cult	Culture	Describes culture



# Findings

# Disability and Language Related Needs

- Themes
  - Identifying students with SCD-EL
  - Distinguishing disability and language needs
  - Differentiating between ELs and non-ELs
  - Receptive versus Expressive communication



# Disability and Language Related Needs

*...is it because they have a Hispanic last name?  
Because...clearly there are these students who are  
placed in our classroom who, yes, maybe their native  
language...is Spanish but they've been in a self-  
contained monolingual classroom for the past 3  
years.*

# Disability and Language Related Needs

*...But a lot of those things, I kind of don't see them as being EL problems, I see them as being a **symptom of their disability**. Sometimes it's hard to understand, how do you separate the two? Is this a problem because you're bilingual? At home, you are hearing all one language, and **here we're speaking to you in all English**, or is [it] just something that comes along with being autistic, or having Downs?*

# Disability and Language Related Needs

*He understands, he takes it in, he processes it, but he can't always give it back to me, so I can see the look of confusion when he can't process it, where that cognitive ability comes in to play.*

# Approaches to Instruction and Assessment

- Themes
  - Visuals
  - Language rich environment
  - Technology
  - Other staff or students



# Approaches to Instruction and Assessment

*... the stuff we already use in special education, like the picture supports, ... the concrete explaining of new vocabulary words, the modeling of sentence structure ..., is stuff that we have listed under EL supports, but it's also stuff I put in non EL gen IEPs..., because that's stuff we use across special education. **I feel like they overlap a lot.***

# Approaches to Instruction and Assessment

*So, when I'm teaching them, I'm giving them a lot of **repetition of vocabulary**. I need to go back to very basic words like ball, this is a ball, showing a picture of the ball, and focusing on English vocabulary that they don't already have.*

# Accessibility Supports

- Themes
  - Consistency between instruction and assessment
  - Little differentiation between ELs and non-ELs
  - Use of on-the-spot translation, but not translation available within the assessment system

# Accessibility Supports

*[For assessments] I went through and pretty much tried to find the closest matches, based on accommodations and modifications I'm using in the classroom. So with her that meant that I would be able to read to her, that meant that I would be able to scan the choices for her. You know the kind of accessibility options, and, just tried to apply everything that I could in the classroom.*



# Talking with Parents

- Themes
  - Language barriers
  - Cultural or educational barriers
  - Methods of making contact

# Talking with Parents

*They tend to just kind of nod and say okay. So I'm kind of learning some cultural things as well that I didn't wish they feel this way, but I'm sensing that **they see me as a person of authority, that knows more, and so they just say okay I believe you**, and then they don't have any questions or anything and I don't know if they just don't know how to phrase the question, or maybe when it comes to the academic school portion **they just personally don't know what to ask.***

# Talking with Parents

*...she's just trying to deal with being able to function here in the United States with a much different life than what she's used to, and she also came from a refugee camp, so **her concerns, and her priorities are food and shelter and clothing and cleanliness right now. She's not worried about whether or not her child can read and get a job someday.***

# Correspondence with Effective EL Strategies

- Use native languages in the classroom strategically
- Identify students' strengths in both languages
- Provide rich and varied language experiences: read aloud, facilitated discussion, writing
  - Vocabulary, decoding, grammar, reading comprehension
- Build and maintain multilateral relationships with students' families
- Support for teachers and students at all organizational levels



# Discussion

- By approaching instruction and assessment equivalently across all students, teachers may overlook cultural differences or language needs of their students
- Teachers described limited plans for language learning beyond what is provided to all students with significant cognitive disabilities
- Providing a vocabulary-rich environment is an important, but small, piece of an effective classroom for language learning

# Challenges with Identification

- Broad use of Home Language survey to identify EL students
  - This is a pre-screener, not a conclusive tool
  - Students are not often evaluated by EL professionals
- Distinguishing what are language-related versus disability-related delays in English communication
- Confusion about overlapping service eligibility and its implementation, special education and ESL services can be utilized concurrently

# Key Takeaways

- Identification challenges contribute to lack of clarity on what services a student needs and how to best provide them
- Very few studies or resources are available on effective instructional strategies for this population, so many teachers improvise
- Professional development opportunities specific to teaching students with SCD-EL are limited
- Lack of organizational support for these students and teachers may be an additional barrier to students' education

# Additional Interesting Avenues...

- Teacher self-efficacy
- Student agency
- Descriptions of district or school supports & (more often) roadblocks to meeting student needs
- Discourse analysis



# Thank You!

For more information:

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