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## Teachers' Experiences of Educating EAL Students in Mainstream Primary and Secondary Classrooms

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*Abstract: Many schools in Victoria, Australia, are multicultural, with students coming from a variety of cultures and backgrounds. Content area teachers often educate EAL students in their classrooms, even though they may not have specialised EAL teaching qualifications. This paper presents the experiences of primary and secondary teachers working in multicultural schools in Victoria. It explores the way in which teachers meet the needs of EAL students in their classrooms, and the support that is available to assist them to do so. This paper reports that teaching practice, school leadership, professional learning, and identity, influence the way in which teachers educate EAL students. However, this paper reveals that teachers require more support to assist them with educating EAL students. The most beneficial forms of support are professional learning, collaboration between staff, and understanding different cultures. This paper also argues that experienced teachers require relevant ongoing professional learning throughout their careers.*

### Introduction

The Australian Curriculum strongly advocates for student diversity in the education system by recognising “that the needs of all students encompass cognitive, affective, physical, social and aesthetic curriculum experiences” (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2016). When referring to student diversity, ACARA includes students with a disability, gifted and talented students, and students with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D). ACARA uses the acronym EAL/D, and defines EAL/D students as “those whose first language is a language or dialect other than English and who require additional support to develop proficiency in Standard Australian English (SAE)” (ACARA, n.d.2). Although ACARA has used the term EAL/D, the term EAL is used throughout this paper. The term EAL is used in the Victorian Curriculum, which is the curriculum that the participant schools were using at the time of data collection.

This inclusion of EAL students in the Australian Curriculum’s definition of diversity demonstrates that there is a need for all teachers to be able to educate these students, regardless of whether they possess EAL teaching qualifications. In addition, the Australian Curriculum highlights the need for EAL students to be educated within content area classrooms by the development of the English as an Additional Language or Dialect: Teacher Resource (ACARA, n.d, 2).

The Australian Curriculum has further demonstrated its support of student diversity by using the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Council of Australian Governments Education Council, 2019) to underlie the curriculum. These goals include:

*Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity.*

*Goal 2: All young Australians become:*

- *confident and creative individuals*
- *successful lifelong learners*
- *active and informed members of the community.*

(Council of Australian Governments Education Council, 2019, p. 4).

This research is situated in Melbourne, Victoria. The need for all teachers to be able to support EAL students' learning needs in mainstream schools is a strong focus in Victoria. In fact, the Victorian Budget 2020/21 has provided \$25.1 million to support EAL students with their language learning, and a range of teacher resources such as "No English Don't Panic" (Department of Education and Training, Victoria, 2014a), are available on the Department of Education and Training Victoria's website. In Victoria, there are a large number of refugee and migrant students from war-torn regions (Miller et al., 2005; Windle & Miller, 2012). Many are classified as EAL students. According to the "EAL learners in mainstream schools" report published by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) in Victoria, an EAL student is a student who comes from a language background other than English, has been enrolled in an Australian school for less than five years, and requires additional support in learning English (DEECD, 2014b). Due to the large multicultural population in Victoria, Victorian schools have high numbers of EAL students. The Victorian Government conducts a yearly school census which provides details about EAL students in government schools. The latest data at the time of writing this paper shows that there were a total of 197,742 Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) students enrolled in Victorian government schools, with 73,838 meeting the EAL funding criteria (DET, 2020). These statistics are from Victorian government primary and secondary schools (both rural and metropolitan).

The figures presented above suggest that a large number of students attending Victorian schools can be classified as EAL. However, an even larger number of students have EAL learning needs, yet do not qualify for funding. Only students who meet certain criteria are eligible for EAL index funding (DEECD, 2010). LBOTE students who do not qualify for EAL funding do not receive this support. These include students who were born in Australia but speak additional languages at home. In some cases, these students do not learn or use English until they attend school. These students effectively learn English as an Additional Language and can have similar language and literacy needs as EAL students. However, as they were born in Australia, they do not qualify for EAL funding or EAL support programs. Students who do not qualify for funding also include 'former' EAL students. These students were previously classified as EAL students, however once they have been in Australia for more than five years they cannot qualify for funding (except in some extreme circumstances). When students receive funding, they are offered a range of support services, including intensive programs for new arrivals, support in the classroom, support for parents/guardians, and support for schools, including provision for teaching and multicultural education aides (DEECD, 2011). EAL funding often results in support from an EAL specialist teacher, such as attending specialised EAL classes; having an EAL specialist teacher assist EAL students within their mainstream classes; or an EAL specialist teacher withdrawing EAL students from mainstream classes to assist them individually or in small groups (DET, 2019).

When newly arrived EAL students come to Victoria, they initially enrol in specialised EAL language schools or centres. Regardless of language proficiency, after six to 12 months, EAL students must attend mainstream schools. Even though many schools have EAL specialist staff to assist with the transition into mainstream schools and future learning needs, this is not always the case. The distribution of EAL funding is different within each school as the principal has autonomy over how the funds will be used. It is important to consider that even when EAL specialists are employed at a school, they often cannot be in every class at all

times. There are multiple classes taking place at the one time, and the funding may not allow for one EAL specialist teacher to be employed for every one classroom teacher.

The responsibility for educating EAL students falls largely on the 'mainstream' content area teachers (classroom teachers). It has been suggested that content area teachers would benefit from improved knowledge and skills to meet the needs of EAL students (Santos, Darling-Hammond, & Cheuk, 2012). However, it is unclear as to whether this is the case within the context of Victoria, Australia. This study investigated experiences of content area teachers in multicultural schools in Victoria, and how they are being supported to meet EAL students' learning needs by their school leadership team.

## Literature Review

Literature in this area has indicated that there are four key elements which are essential for educating EAL students in the mainstream. These are: teaching practice; professional identity; pre-service teacher education; and professional learning.

Teaching practice most commonly refers to a teacher's work in terms of pedagogical or classroom activities they are enacting on a daily basis (Colnerud, 2015; Mukeredzi, 2014; Bodil, Spante & Stenlund, 2012). However, other conceptualisations can include teacher professional learning and the reflection that teachers engage in through the course of their teaching career (e.g., Cole, 2012). This broader conception of 'teaching practice' has been adopted in this study, and aligns with the way that Kemmis et al. (2014) have defined teaching practice in their work. The conception of teaching practice in this study incorporates not only pedagogical practice, referring to classroom teaching activities, but also includes the entire career progression of teachers, containing their experiences of classroom teaching practices, professional identity, pre-service teacher education and professional learning.

One important element of teaching practice for EAL in the mainstream is that of collaboration between mainstream and EAL specialist teachers (Arkoudis, 2000, 2006; Davison, 2006; Doyle & Reinhardt, 1992; Miller et al., 2005; Premier & Parr, 2019). Davison (2006) presents a view that if collaboration occurs successfully in mainstream schools, the learning needs of EAL students are better addressed. Premier and Parr (2019) argue that collaboration between teachers, specifically EAL specialist teachers and mainstream content area teachers, can be an effective form of informal professional learning for teachers. However, ensuring that collaboration is effective may require some degree of trial and error. Collaboration may take place in a number of forms, including withdrawal, support teaching, or teaching partnerships (Creese, 2002). It is the responsibility of each school and teacher to establish a collaborative approach that works best for their school and students.

In addition to collaboration, literature advocates for Second Language Acquisition (SLA) teaching approaches when educating EAL students in mainstream settings (Lucas, Villegas & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008; Miller & Windle, 2010). For example, supporting EAL students with literacy within all content areas, by using frameworks such as the learning and teaching cycle (De Oliveira, Jones & Smith, 2020). Having some understanding of SLA teaching approaches can be beneficial for both teachers and students in mainstream settings. Employing these strategies will assist teachers with meeting EAL learning needs through their teaching, and will assist EAL students with their learning. A range of practical support is available for teachers in this area. For example, the Department of Education and Training Victoria have a dedicated section on their website with support resources for teachers.

Identity, in particular, professional identity, is also a crucial factor for educating EAL students in mainstream schools. Personal identities of teachers are linked to their professional

identities (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004), and it has been shown that personal attitudes of content area teachers and their own experiences with different cultures and languages influence the extent to which they approach educating EAL students in a positive light (Harper & de Jong, 2004; Penfield, 1987; Youngs & Youngs, 2001). Lasky (2005) found that the way in which teachers view their identity informs their teaching practice. Premier and Parr (2019) found that teachers who adopted an identity of being both a content area teacher *and* an EAL teacher were positive about their teaching and how they viewed their vocation. It is significant that much research indicates teachers commence their teacher education program with a sense of what it means to be a teacher, based on their preconceived ideas, experiences, and values (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Friesen & Besley, 2013). However, researchers have noted that professional identity is not a fixed entity and is able to constantly change, depending on the context and school in which they are employed (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Friesen & Besley, 2013; Hobbs, 2012; Hong, 2010; Pillen, Den Brok & Beijaard, 2013).

A number of studies take the view that teaching practice, including classroom practice, professional learning, and identity, begin in pre-service teacher education (Britzman, 2003; Feiman-Nemser, 2001a). Therefore, it is important that pre-service teacher education includes EAL teaching approaches, in order to support the development of mainstream teachers as both content area *and* EAL teachers. It is also important for pre-service teachers to receive ample support with EAL teaching strategies in their pre-service teacher education degrees, so they can build upon this knowledge in their careers. It has been suggested that pre-service teacher education could be revised to enhance the focus on EAL in the mainstream (Premier & Miller, 2010), to address the argument that teachers might be entering classroom under prepared to meet the needs of EAL students (Lee, Maerten-Rivera, Buxton, Penfield & Secada, 2009).

Larrivee (2000) suggest that teachers should continually seek to develop their critical reflection skills and capacities throughout their careers. This supports the argument that in addition to pre-service teacher education, ongoing professional development or professional learning for existing teachers is just as important. Professional learning can be viewed as ‘practice development’, highlighting that professional learning should be a strong focus within schools, and should relate to teachers at varying stages of their careers (Kemmis, et al., 2014; Doecke et al, 2008). Therefore, the need for ongoing professional learning for teachers in the area of EAL in the mainstream is supported by research. Professional learning may take place in the form of mentoring (Ambrosetti, 2014; Feiman-Nemser, 2001b; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000; Nilsson & van Dreil, 2010), or targeted EAL in the mainstream professional learning sessions such as an EAL in the mainstream course (Kay, 1990; Schloss, 2011).

Informal professional learning is just as effective as formal professional learning, and can take place in schools on a daily basis (Premier & Parr, 2019). For example, informal conversations during lunchtime with colleagues about EAL students can be just as effective as professional learning sessions on EAL student needs, delivered by a qualified trainer. This is because discussions with colleagues can target specific students within the school and focus on individual learning needs. Teachers have first-hand experience with specific students, and can offer advice and support related to teaching individual students. In contrast, qualified trainers present general information. They do not have the ability to get to know individual students and their learning needs.

As indicated by the relevant literature, ‘teaching practice’ is more than just what takes place in the classroom. In addition to what takes place in the classroom, ‘teaching practice’ also encapsulates professional identity, pre-service teacher education experiences, and ongoing professional learning. These areas resurface within the findings of this research, highlighting their importance within the field of EAL in the mainstream.

## Methodology

This research was conceptually framed by socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1962). This framework acknowledges the importance of the social, cultural, and linguistic context in which the research is taking place. Therefore, an interpretivist paradigm was employed (Ferguson, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Radnor, 2002). This takes into account the view that the participants and researcher socially construct their reality based on their own experiences and the contexts within which they have these experiences. The participants share their experiences within interviews, by recounting stories, and using particular language to share their insights. Post structural theory also underlies this research, by employing the belief that language shapes our experiences and that we make sense of our life through the use of narratives (Bell, 2002; Parr, Doecke & Bulfin, 2015). Narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and narrative-based research writing strategies (Par et al., 2015) have been used to explore the experiences of teachers and gain an insight into the realities of working within multicultural schools. Narrative inquiry is the main methodology used in this study.

Another integral framework which underpins this study is the framework of “communities of practice” (Kemmis et al., 2014). Kemmis et al. (2014) conceptualise practice as fundamentally “interactional” and involving both communities and individuals. They argue that communities of practice themselves interact with one another in intersubjective spaces which to some extent already exist. These spaces exist “first, in *language*; second; in *space-time in the material world*; and third, in *social relationships*” (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 4). These are *arrangements* which can change and transform depending on different contexts and events, and represent what we do as individuals and as groups/communities. “How we act”, say Kemmis et al. (2014)

*is also shaped in large part by the practice landscape of a neighbourhood or school (for example) that enables and constrains how life can be conducted there, and the practice traditions of a particular society or professional (for example) that similarly enable and constrain the ways people conduct themselves. (p. 5).*

By framing the work of teachers educating EAL students as *practice*, the argument being presented is that teaching practice should be inclusive of teachers’ experiences with respect to pedagogy, pre-service teacher education, professional learning, and their ‘performance’ as a teacher overall. Teaching practice interprets what occurs within the classroom and also what occurs within teachers’ careers as a whole, as being crucial to teachers’ efforts to meet the learning needs of EAL students within mainstream schools in Victoria.

A “community of practice” refers to the school community in which the teachers are employed, and incorporates “sayings, doings, and relatings”. In other words, learning (both students’ learning in classrooms and professionals’ learning in a range of professional settings, in this case, teachers’ learning within schools), relates to how one interacts and connects with other people in particular communities and the world, in terms of what they say and what they do, and how these elements work together to achieve a common goal or output.

Schools with a high multicultural student population were invited to participate in this research. These schools were selected based on the number of Language Background other than English (LBOTE) students enrolled in the school. A total of 85% or more of the students at these schools were LBOTE students at the time of data collection. This data was obtained from the My School website, by ACARA.

The participants in this study were teachers at four primary schools and three secondary schools in Victoria. The primary schools were feeder schools to the secondary schools involved in this research. One secondary school had two participating feeder primary

schools, resulting in the uneven number of primary and secondary schools in this study. A total of 15 primary school teachers and ten secondary teachers volunteered to participate in the interviews for this research. Participation was voluntary, and participants were able to withdraw from the research at any time. All teachers who taught EAL students at the school were invited to participate.

Within this paper, the findings from interviews with participants at three secondary schools and three primary schools will be reported (five primary school teachers and ten secondary school teachers). This is because one primary school, with ten participants, presented unique responses. The data from the participants at this particular school was very different to the data from the participants at the other six schools. Due to the amount and type of data generated by the interviews at this one primary school, the researcher made the decision to publish these findings in a separate article, as a case study (Premier & Parr, 2019). Including all of the data within this paper would not have allowed the data from all of the participants to be explored or discussed in depth. Presenting one primary school as a separate case study has allowed the findings from the six remaining schools to be addressed in depth in this paper. Pseudonyms were used for all participants. Pseudonyms were randomly selected names. The researcher was able to identify each participant in the instance that a participant wished to withdraw from the study. Participant details are in the tables below.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Grade/s Taught</b>
Tara	EAL specialist, Grades Prep-6
Annika	EAL specialist, Grades Prep-6
Martha	Teacher of Grade Prep
Clare	Teacher of Grade 1
Mary	Teacher of Grade 5/6

**Table 1: List of participating primary teachers**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Subjects and Year Level Taught</b>
Greta	EAL language school specialist, Years 7 - 12
Mark	Teacher of Year 12 Philosophy, Year 11 VCAL
Elisabeth	Teacher of Year 7, 8, 9 EAL
Sue	Teacher of Year 7 – 10 textiles
Bianca	Teacher of Health and PE Years 7 - 8 and 10 – 12
Stephen	Teacher of Year 7 Humanities, Year 7 and 9 English and Year 11 EAL
Luke	Teacher of EAL VCAL (ie. Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning: a vocational senior school curriculum)
Ingrid	Teacher of Year 7 – 10 German and EAL VCAL
Audrey	Teacher of Year 7 – 9 and Year 12 Health
Barbara	Teacher of Year 7 – 9 and Year 11 Maths, Biology, IT, and EAL Maths

**Table 2: List of participating secondary teachers**

Interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate method to capture the narratives of the participants. Interviews are common in narrative inquiry as this approach to data generation allows participants considerable space and options to share their experiences and create meaning about their experiences, which is important in narrative inquiry (Mishler, 1986). Semi-structured interviews were used, which are common in educational research (Brinkmann, 2013) when the researcher wants to facilitate a focused professional learning conversation amongst teaching colleagues. Interviews lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. The duration of the interviews depended on the availability of the participants. In some cases, participants were limited to 30 minutes as the interviews could only take place when their students were in specialist classes such as art or music. In other cases, interviews could only take place during lunch time or recess. In some schools, participants had a casual relief

teacher take their classes for a period of time in order to attend an interview, while in other cases, teachers had free periods available.

The interview questions were designed according to the research questions below. There were 16 questions which were asked during the interviews. As the interviews were semi-structured, it was possible for the interviewer to ask additional questions if necessary. The questions focused on the participants' pre-service teacher education experiences; their current teaching experiences; their relationship with the EAL specialist teacher/s at their current school; interactions with EAL students' parents; EAL programs in the school; support for EAL students, and teachers of EAL students in the school; and classroom practice pertaining to EAL students.

The research questions explored in this paper are:

1. How do teachers in schools with high EAL student populations meet the needs of students whose first language is not English?
2. According to teachers, which support services can be established, improved or maintained in order to assist teachers in educating EAL students?

## Findings and Discussion

The findings from this study have been separated into themes which emerged from relevant literature and key findings. The data was analysed using NVivo. Key themes emerged from the data, which has guided the way in which the results have been presented. The key themes that emerged from the data also guided the literature review for this research. The findings will be presented according to the following themes: teaching practice, school leadership, professional learning, and identity.

### Teaching Practice

The findings from the primary and secondary teachers involved in this study revealed that even though teachers intend or attempt to employ a range of strategies to ensure that EAL student needs were being met in their classes, they were not always able to articulate particular practices which specifically addressed EAL learning needs, or articulate how their current teaching practices were meeting the needs of EAL students. For example, Mark (teacher of Year 12 Philosophy and Year 11 Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning [VCAL]), said "*I have tried to sort of employ EAL strategies in every subject...I teach vocabulary, scaffolding, and so forth, definitely*". This is an example of where sayings, doings, and relatings do not work together to create meaningful, effective practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014). Another example is from Bianca (teacher of Health and Physical Education - PE - , Years 7, 8, 10 and 12), who proudly shared how she met learning needs of EAL students in her assessment tasks. However, her explanation implied that the EAL students were working on the same tasks as the rest of the students. The only ways in which their language and learning needs were being specifically met were through a minor form of scaffolding of the task, "*explaining it again in another way*" by the teacher or sometimes a student. The EAL students were always expected to work at a lower academic level than their peers, however, the task itself was not differentiated or modified to meet their particular EAL learning needs.

However, on occasion, teachers did recount successful teaching practices which appeared to meet EAL student needs. It is worth noting that these teachers had formal EAL teacher education. This is an example of how one's professional identity shapes current

teaching practice. They appeared to maintain an identity as an EAL teacher, despite not currently teaching the subject. It was apparent that having formal education in EAL teaching could be of great benefit when teaching in a multicultural, mainstream school.

Several teachers indicated that the ability levels of EAL and mainstream students varied, and most felt it was beneficial for teachers to have skills in EAL education in order to be able to effectively educate all students in their classes. The interviews also revealed that although teachers attempted to collaborate with one another, including between discipline areas (subject teachers and EAL specialists), overall, collaboration between staff at the schools involved in this research was lacking. Being supported in how to best combine practices ('sayings, doings, and relatings') effectively would be of benefit to teachers in such environments (Kemmis et al., 2014).

Barbara (teacher of Year 7 – 9 and Year 11 Maths, Biology, IT and EAL Maths) summed up secondary school teacher responses at most of the schools involved in the study when she said:

*If I've got a question, I just go and ask the EAL staff and they will direct me in where to go. They're the experts, I don't need to know everything about everything.*

In situations like this, mainstream secondary teachers are placing all the responsibility of EAL student education on designated EAL staff; they are less likely to take responsibility for EAL student education, and will often seek assistance only if absolutely necessary.

At the primary schools, this division between mainstream and EAL staff was even more pronounced than at the secondary schools. Most primary school sites had one EAL teacher on staff (one school had an on-site English Language Centre). The division between EAL and mainstream staff at the primary schools was made apparent through what the teachers said, in particular the discourse they used to describe the relationships. An example from the interview with Martha (teacher of Grade Prep) demonstrates the relationship between EAL and mainstream teachers at a number of the primary school sites. Martha stated that she has a "really good" relationship with EAL staff who work in the on-site Language Centre. However, there was a certain "us" and "them" positioning in her narrative. She went on to explain that:

*The children see them as, they're the ones who teach English, which is you know, child's talk, but they see them as still part of the school and they are respected by the other children as well.*

There was a sense that Martha assumed the students also see the EAL teachers as being separate from the main school community and the other teachers. Although Martha insists that the relationship between specialist EAL and mainstream teachers is healthy, such comments illustrate that the EAL teachers are not always truly seen as part of the school by mainstream staff.

Throughout the interviews at both the primary and secondary schools, participants frequently recounted stories which seemed to indicate that mainstream staff did not collaborate effectively with their EAL colleagues. This is one major consequence of the "us" and "them" positioning. EAL specialist teachers also had similar experiences of collaborating with their mainstream colleagues. When Greta (EAL specialist, Years 7 - 12) was asked whether mainstream staff ask her for advice, Greta noted:

*Yeah that doesn't happen very often actually...I think it's just because everyone's so busy and we're so segregated. And it's a huge school.*

One secondary teacher, Sue (teacher of Year 7 – 10 textiles), said that she is not told who the EAL students are in her classes. A community of practice (Kemmis et al., 2014) was not clearly visible in such instances.

### School Leadership

Throughout interviews with the participants at the primary and secondary schools, there was a lack of information about school leadership teams. This in itself is of interest and indicates that the influence of leadership teams at these schools did not feature strongly in the thinking of the teachers within this research.

The paucity of references by teachers to leadership teams and their approach to EAL students in the data suggests that the leadership teams at these schools were not successful in communicating to staff a clear vision for teaching EAL students in the schools. Participants were asked about the support they received from the school leadership team to assist with EAL students in their classes, and were also asked whether they think the leadership team could be doing more in the area of EAL education. Participants were also asked about support programs for EAL students and professional development opportunities relating to the teaching of EAL students. Responses to questions about the school leadership team tended to be brief, vague, and positive. The school leadership team was rarely mentioned outside of these specific questions. In addition, school values were rarely mentioned or discussed. In particular, teachers at the primary schools involved in this study rarely, if ever, made explicit mention of the assistance they received from their leadership team in educating EAL students.

It appeared as though sustained and memorable support from the leadership team was limited and, in some cases, lacking. These deficits were particularly evident in terms of physical staff location and organisation and timetabling matters. Sue said that due to the location of the staff rooms, *“we’re all so scattered, to get together in our faculty groups is very difficult”*. She revealed that it was difficult to plan in teams because she does not always see her colleagues regularly.

### Professional Learning

Several participants working in primary schools believed that they had not received any pre-service teacher education in the area of EAL in the mainstream. All teachers would have liked more attention to EAL in the mainstream in their education degree, with Martha saying *“training”* would have been useful, as now *“I’ve had to do all of my training while teaching”*.

Likewise, most secondary school participants were adamant that they had not received any pre-service teacher education relating to EAL in the mainstream. However, it is acknowledged that many participants had completed their teacher education degrees many years earlier. Perhaps their recollections in this respect were not entirely accurate. Their narratives were constructed through their individual lenses and identities (Gee, 2000). Nevertheless, it is still significant that EAL education did not stand out vividly in their memories, if, indeed, it had been incorporated into their teacher education degrees.

It was interesting and somewhat concerning to learn that some of the participants who were currently teaching specific EAL classes had actually been employed as EAL specialist teachers in the first instance without a formal EAL qualification. Tara (EAL specialist, Grades Prep-6) was one example of a teacher employed at one primary school as the school’s EAL specialist, when she was not formally qualified in EAL. She said she had *“done a couple”* of EAL professional learning sessions since taking on the role, but had neither commenced nor completed a formal qualification in the field. Nevertheless, she spoke with supreme confidence about her teaching ability, and shared that *“[she’d] been here [at the school] many years so [she has] taught a lot of children coming in with nothing into the*

*classroom, with no language, nothing whatsoever*". She assumed her prior teaching experience had provided her with enough skills to educate EAL students effectively, and she appeared very confident in her abilities to educate EAL students now.

However, some of the secondary school teachers involved in this study had completed, or were in the process of completing, or were planning to enrol in, a specialist EAL teaching degree, despite not currently being employed as an EAL specialist. The fact that many of these teachers were completing an EAL degree suggests that this is an area in which they see the value of engagement in formal teacher education, and demonstrates motivation and a willingness to enhance their teaching ability. It also indicates their interest in enhancing their teaching to meet EAL student needs in light of the environment in which they are currently working.

Although some professional learning had been provided to teachers in terms of EAL, most did not see it as sufficient for their needs, and when it had been provided, it was not ongoing. Comments made in the interviews indicated that more professional learning should be provided to suit the needs of teachers, the needs of their students, and to build on the skills they have previously learned. 'Practice development' (Kemmis et al., 2014) was not reported in any of these schools. It appears from the stories shared by these teachers that current professional learning opportunities for EAL in the mainstream are at best fragmented, and in most cases, lacking for mainstream teachers.

## Identity

Teacher identity comprises both personal and professional identity (Lasky, 2005). Therefore, aspects of identity may be seen within the other themes that emerge in this study as it is impossible to separate identity from teaching practice, and other personal experiences. Although identity is intertwined within other themes which arise from this data, it is also an important stand-alone theme within this research due to the amount of focused data on identity which arose in this study. The teachers working across schools in the study shared a number of experiences which has allowed an insight into their professional identity, and to some extent their personal identity. As presented by Gee (2000), educators have a number of identities and these are influenced by the context they are working in and the students they teach, and thus can change over time. The identities of the teacher participants in this research are to some extent reflective of their experiences teaching within particular multicultural schools in Victoria, with high numbers of migrant and refugee students who may have experienced limited, interrupted, or in some cases, no schooling in their home country.

Teachers identified many challenges working in multicultural primary and secondary schools in ways that impacted on their views of themselves as teachers. The challenges identified by primary teachers were mainly to do with student behaviour, and meeting the learning needs of students across different ability levels. For example, Clare (teacher of Grade 1) expressed a challenge which impacted upon her sense of success in her educative role. She said it can be difficult trying to address a wide range of abilities in the classroom *because those children need a lot more support, and you try and get around to all of them, like for reading and writing it's especially hard because a lot of them need one-on-one [help from a teacher].*

Despite the challenges mentioned above, many teachers from the primary schools reported excellent behaviour from EAL students. However, some of the teachers working at the secondary schools reported behavioural difficulties with EAL students from traumatic

backgrounds. Elisabeth (teacher of Year 7, 8, 9 EAL) explained that “*certainly there’s disengagement that comes from depression and post trauma and things like that*”.

Regardless, teachers at these primary and secondary schools also shared positive rewards of teaching EAL students. Many of these positives were based on teachers feeling recognised and respected, teachers learning about other cultures, and seeing students improve. The rewards were mainly focused on the effects felt by the teachers and what they were able to receive personally and gain from teaching EAL students, as opposed to ways in which they could contribute to the learning of EAL students. For example, Tara said the most rewarding aspect of working with EAL students is that “*you find out about other cultures*”.

It appears that teachers find educating EAL students rewarding due to the fact that students can be quiet and well-behaved in class, so teachers can feel a level of respect from these students that they may not experience with other students. Also, they appreciate the students’ interesting stories and teachers learn a lot from these experiences. They also find it very rewarding to see their academic progress. It seems that teachers gain a lot personally from educating EAL students and this is what they value most. It is important to note that being quiet and well-behaved in class does not demonstrate evidence of student learning. The personal gains experienced by teachers of EAL students support the argument of this paper, which is that some mainstream content area teachers require greater assistance and support in the area of EAL education.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study has demonstrated that ‘teaching practice’ involves both individuals and communities. The way in which teachers attempt to meet the learning needs of students is closely linked to their individual experiences and identities, as well as the school in which they are employed, and the wider society which exists at the time. This study also argues that mainstream content area teachers require greater support in order to effectively educate EAL students in their classrooms.

The findings from this study which relate to the first research question demonstrate that a number of elements – specifically four areas: teaching practice; school leadership; professional learning (including pre-service teacher education); and identity – all combine to influence the ways in which the learning needs of EAL students are accommodated within mainstream schools. Although they can act in seeming isolation, within the teaching and learning environment they do not act totally independently from one another. Together, they play an important role in how teachers in mainstream schools with high EAL student populations meet the learning needs of EAL students, and influence the type of support services in place to assist teachers when educating EAL students in the mainstream – which are the two main research questions of this study.

The findings which relate to the second research question suggest that teachers in participating schools typically received some support to educate EAL students in their classrooms, however more support and attention from the leadership teams would be of great benefit in many cases. Recommendations for this kind of support include: creating more opportunities for teacher professional learning in EAL in the mainstream; equipping teachers with practical EAL in the mainstream teaching strategies and behaviour management techniques; promoting a collaborative school culture; and raising cultural awareness by developing teachers’ existing knowledge about cultural difference. However, these are only initial ways in which schools more generally can better meet the learning needs of EAL students. It is hoped that future research will build upon this study, and suggest additional ways in which mainstream teachers can be supported in educating EAL students.

A greater focus on improving teacher knowledge and professional learning in the area of EAL education will raise awareness of this issue within our schools and will encourage teachers to be mindful of EAL student needs within their classrooms. This awareness may result in teachers adopting an identity of *both* a mainstream and an EAL teacher. This will encourage mainstream teachers to take responsibility for EAL student learning within their mainstream classes and provide them with confidence to differentiate and modify activities for EAL learners independently. This will be of great benefit in schools with limited EAL support and schools with high numbers of EAL students.

Although this study reveals that a lot of support is currently available, the amount of support and type of support differs greatly between schools. It is understood that funding plays a role, and leadership teams are encouraged to be mindful of how this funding can be best used to support EAL student learning. If funding is limited, it is suggested that school leadership explores other ways in which to support the teaching of EAL students in the mainstream, such as organising professional learning sessions delivered by in-service staff. School leadership is responsible for implementing support structures within schools and developing a cohesive, collaborative learning environment – a strong community of practice (Kemmis et al., 2014).

By focusing on these three areas – (i) prioritising ongoing professional learning in the area of EAL pedagogy, (ii) promoting a collaborative school culture, and (iii) educating teachers about cultural difference – more school leadership teams and their teachers will initiate the development of better skills, practices and approaches in EAL education in the mainstream.

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