

***Providing Accessible Learning Materials for the Diverse Learner:  
Equitable Learning Opportunities Provided Through School Libraries***

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**Abstract**

Libraries are founded on a philosophy of equal access to information and are concerned about accessibility to all (Tewell, 2019). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, technology provides an opportunity for accessing infinite learning materials. Once responsible for housing and dispersing written materials, libraries now meet new challenges of providing materials in various media and multimedia platforms. Making materials accessible to diverse populations offers many challenges. Legal requirements for providing accessible materials vary but exist in both the United States and Canada. Apart from the legal requirements, equitable access to information for diverse people is a matter of human rights and an issue of supporting diversity and social justice. To provide equitable access to materials for all, libraries need to provide both materials and environments that allow people to feel empowered to access information and learning materials, including books, videos, screencasts, and interactive multimedia. In 2021 the University of North Texas received funding through an Institute of Museum and Library Services (#RE-250111-O) grant to determine how to provide school librarians with the critical knowledge set required to serve English language learners (ELLs) and their English Language (EL) teachers. The results of an exploratory forum are presented.

Keywords: Libraries, English Language Learners (ELL), Diversity Education, English Language (EL) Teachers, Students With Special Needs, Academic Language

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## **Introduction**

As the classroom composition of students in the USA changes, the role of school librarians continues to evolve to meet the needs of divergent learners and their teachers. This study investigates the current status of school librarians as they encounter a diverse, ever-changing group of students and teachers who require service. As a result of changing school demographics, ELLs are becoming more prevalent in the classroom. Through focused meetings with key players in the fields of library and information science, education, and diversity, needs are identified and explored through group interaction and survey research. Survey results are compared to the literature.

## **Diversity**

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2020) provides a simple definition of diversity. Diversity is the “condition of having or being composed of differing elements; variety, especially the inclusion of people of different races, abilities, cultures, genders, etc. in a group or organization.” Diverse learners present unique challenges to both school librarians and teachers. Meeting student challenges is difficult because of issues such as:

- Diverse students need skills to enter the job market
- Issues with external support (families, communities, etc.) may interfere with the diverse student’s academic needs
- Budget issues
- Very often, diverse students cannot benefit from existing materials
- Collection issues such as do we serve a few or many?
- IEP (Individual Education Programs) requirements (US Department of Education, 2021)

Diverse students present unique educational challenges. Therefore, it is critical for educational planning to anticipate the needs of diverse learners.

## ***Special Needs Learners***

The National Center for Education Statistics states that the number of students aged 3–21 studying under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is 7.2 million. This makes up 15% of all public-school students across the US. (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) (2018) indicates that materials must be accessible to all users. Technology based on universal design concepts is essential for the effective use of information and other library services by all people. To ensure equal access, AASL indicates that school librarians must be prepared to assist diverse school populations, including students with learning, mobility, sensory, and developmental disabilities. School librarians should be aware of how available technologies address disabilities and know how to assist users with library technology. For example, services provided through school libraries may offer students with disabilities specialized services that include differentiated instruction, scheduled library time, collaboratively instructed lessons, access to curated materials specific to their personal interests, extended loan periods, sensory-based learning experiences, STEM skill training, online library access, and opportunities to volunteer in the library.

### ***Students Identifying as LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual)***

The ALA (2023) indicates that libraries should serve LGBTQIA+ people by ensuring that this population is reflected in library collections and provided with services at the library. The LGBTQIA+ population is often the subject of discrimination and harassment. Libraries can provide a safe space and a sense of community. The Library Bill of Rights indicates that libraries should serve as forums for information and ideas for all people and provide access to information for all (ALA, 1939, 1944, 1948, 1961, 1967, 1980, 2019).

### ***Highly Capable Students***

Very often, books and materials that are used in the classroom do not provide a challenge for the gifted learner. Haslam-Odoardi (2010) indicates that advanced readers need to be encouraged to read material that may be difficult for most students but engaging and challenging for gifted learners. Not only can librarians select and order books that challenge the gifted student, but often librarians provide an opportunity to engage gifted students in discussion over an advanced topic. Librarians often make needed adjustments to reading assignments so that students who are gifted have appropriate material as well as the time needed to read more difficult selections.

### ***Students of Color***

Elteto, Jackson, and Lim (2008) studied whether the library was a “welcoming space” (p. 326) for students of color at a sizeable northwestern university. The researchers used Whitmore’s (2005) work as a foundation for their study, in which Whitmore found that:

- White non-Hispanic students used the catalog more than students of Color.
- Students of Color used the library as a place to read or study more than their White counterparts.
- Students of Color asked the librarian for help on par with White Non-Hispanic students.
- Students of color read more basic references and documents more than their White non-Hispanic counterparts.

Elteto et al. (2008) indicate that it is crucial for each library to determine the needs of students from diverse backgrounds at each “library place.” Service at individual libraries should strive to understand and meet the needs of all their patrons, including students of color. Creating “places” where students feel safe and welcome is essential.

In today’s schools, school librarians play many roles, such as leader, instructional partner, information specialist, and program administrator. According to School Libraries (2021), librarians also play a vital role in student learning, fostering multiple literacies, critical thinking skills, and a lifelong love of reading. Very often, school librarians serve as the community builders. Although it is difficult to determine which role is most critical for librarians in today’s 21st-century classroom, meeting the needs of ELLs and EL teachers has become an increasingly demanding role for the school librarian. School librarians are called upon to meet the needs of an ever-increasing number of English Language Learners (ELLs). This paper will focus on this current, ever-increasing challenge for school librarians.

## *ELLs*

The coronavirus pandemic has impacted educators in all countries, with many electing to leave the field (Rand, 2023). EL teachers are experiencing record lows in recruitment and retention, generating a nationwide shortage that has the potential to produce long-standing consequences. In 2018, before the pandemic, the National Center for Education Statistics found that 10.2% of public-school students in the country were ELLs (NCES, 2023). Approximately 7.7% of all students within the public-school system report Spanish as their native language, followed by Arabic and Chinese (NCES, 2023). NCEC indicates that one in 10 children is an ELL in the US. NCEC data indicates that ELLs are less likely to graduate from high school than their non-English learner classmates. NCEC also reports that a lack of English may be misidentified as a disability. Therefore, educating ELLs requires specially trained teachers and librarians which adds an additional expense that schools must address. Still, long term, the ramifications of not serving this population can pose dire consequences to society.

ELL teachers are needed to ensure that students receive the education they deserve in an environment that respects multiculturalism. About 2% of all teachers have a main teaching assignment that consists of working in EL classrooms (NCES, 2023). However, 64% of teachers in the United States have at least one ELL student in their class (NCES, 2023). The pandemic increased the shortage of teachers in general but particularly increased the need for EL teachers. The shortage of EL teachers decreases ELL opportunities to participate equitably in classroom settings. Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE, 2023) indicates that some estimates suggest ELL students will have lost 30% of their annual reading gains and up to 50% of their main gains due to school closures at the start of the pandemic. These data demonstrate the difficulties that EL teachers and ELLs are facing. Supporting ELLs and their teachers is of paramount importance if we support meaningful inclusivity. By providing materials and an accepting environment, school librarians take on a critical role in supporting ELLs and their teachers.

Godbey and Melilli (2021) explore strategies that support ELLs, the educators, and the school librarians who work with them. To benefit ELLs, librarians should assess the current collection, survey the literature and current practices regarding ELL collections, and research the characteristics of the local school district. School libraries should develop a plan to support the continued development of home languages and culture, including materials such as graphic novels and hi-lo (high-interest, low readability) books (Hinton, 2020). When working with ELLs, it is critical to provide an opportunity to read “developmentally appropriate materials with less text intimidation. (Godbey & Melilli, 2021). Suggestions provided by these researchers include identifying curriculum materials libraries associated with teacher education and school library programs. In addition, training programs should modify their collections to better prepare teachers and school librarians for working in increasingly diverse k-12 environments.

Catalano (2025) discusses using “curriculum materials centers” for ELL students. The term “curriculum materials center” (CMC) refers to any physical collection of materials that provide learning experiences for preschool through 2nd grade (P-12) students.” (Catalano, 2015). Godbey and Melilli (2021) indicate that CMC librarians need to understand reading levels for specific grade ranges. Still, just as important is an understanding of the interest levels of young people at different points in their development. CMCs are important components for successfully serving ELLs in the school library. Although it is critical for

school librarians to develop an operational plan for acquiring a CMC for ELLs, it is just as vital for institutions of higher learning to provide training and experiences for future librarians to acquire the skill set for providing a successful CMC for ELLs.

### ***Possible CMC Materials***

Sullivan (2012) indicates that Hi-lo books can play a critical role in educating ELLs. Hi-lo books have high appeal for youth audiences but are written at a reading level at least three grades below the student's chronological age. Hi-lo books are often action rich with limited vocabulary and syntax.

Vásquez, Hansen, and Smith (2013) indicate that librarians need to provide opportunities for ELLs to engage with texts that are culturally relevant and written in the ELLs' first language. These texts serve several purposes:

- They allow the ELL to advance academically in their language.
- They connect the ELL to their own culture.
- They validate the ELL's culture.

Picture books can serve a need in the CMC library. Hansen et al. (2015) indicate that picture books can stimulate language development in young children. If books are selected with high artistic quality and advanced meaning, they can be used with older, more sophisticated learners.

Materials for ELLs must deal with topics that are age-appropriate for the student. Therefore, it is critical for librarians to match their students' reading levels but just as critical to match students' interests and developmental levels (Stewart, 2017; Silverman et al., 2016).

### **Acquiring Skills for Success**

#### ***Academic Language***

Bielenberg and Fillmore (2005) state that ELLs start their academic career at a disadvantage because they must acquire the skills that native speakers of English usually bring to school just to engage in subject-matter learning. Furthermore, students do not necessarily learn "subject matter language" on their own or even in immersion language environments. Mastering academic English requires planned instructional activities that promote academic language development. Teachers, as well as school librarians, need to ensure that such learning opportunities are available and supported through learning materials.

In the US educational system, few educators know what learning academic English entails (Dutro, Núñez, & Helman, 2016). One method of raising awareness is to work to identify the language used in textbooks and other educational media. Huddleson and Pullam (2001) indicate that reference books can help teachers and librarians talk about the language they find in textbooks (Huddleston & Pullam, 2001). McQuillan (2019) studied effective methods for acquiring new academic words and noted that compared to incidental learning, reading is a more efficient tool for acquiring new academic words.

## ***Reading***

The American Association of School Librarians (2018) indicates that “reading is the core of personal and academic competency” (p.13). Reading skills are critical to the academic success of ELL students (Helman et al., 2016). However, it is important to develop language skills before developing reading. Not only is it essential to be able to converse in English, but academic language is also crucial for success in school. The acquisition of academic language is a time-consuming task. Dutro et al. (2016) state that many ELLs struggle to use English in the academic setting. It is difficult to share conceptual thinking within a specific content area without academic language. A lack of academic language can greatly hinder the ELLs’ academic progress.

## **Cultural Impacts on Academic Success**

Culture may impact the importance of academics. Good et al. (2010) indicate that some Hispanic families emphasize relationships rather than competition or academic achievement. Academic success is not a critical need for many families. Teachers and school librarians need to understand the culture of ELLs. Having teachers and school librarians that reflect the culture of ELLs and relate to the students helps secure academic success for students (Good et al, 2010). Significant factors impact obtaining and implementing a plan for EL teachers and school librarians. These factors include the following:

- The numbers and types of diverse students are increasing at a significant rate.
- Current teachers and school librarians in the field also need training.
- The actual numbers and increasing diversity of the students make the situation difficult to manage.

Further exploration of the problems surrounding the successful education of ELLs is warranted.

## **Research Strategy**

To further explore the issues surrounding meeting the library needs of ELLs and their teachers, researchers from the University of North Texas obtained funding from the Institute of Museums and Library Services. The overarching goal framing the study was to determine methods for providing accessible learning materials and opportunities for the ELL through school libraries.

The Machine Intelligence Research Institute (MIRI) (2013) defines expository research as an investigation to gather supporting evidence and present a point of view or argument on a topic. Expository research methods include comparing and contrasting evidence. MIRI states that Strategic research aims to “clarify how the future is likely to unfold and what we can do now to nudge the future toward good outcomes.” Strategic research involves more novel thought and modeling than expository research.” The UNT research team elected to use both expository and strategic research methodologies. The overall goals for the study were to identify key stakeholders and explore the needs and current state of education for ELLs.

### ***Pre-forum***

The research team constructed a pre-forum to introduce experts in the field who had experience with the challenges of serving ELLs. A goal of the pre-forum was to gain insight into how school librarians work with ELLs. Insights gained from the pre-forum were used to develop a forum.

### ***Forum***

Using a forum platform, the research team sought to host a discussion among key stakeholders to identify best practices for implementing ELL programming using evidence-based practices. Forty-seven individuals self-identified as EL stakeholders. Stakeholders included professors (EL, literacy, and linguistics), school librarians, linguists, educational technologists, and k-12 EL educators. Participants self-identified as 27.33 males and 72.34% female. Participants were asked to respond to the following prompt, “Given the need to understand how to provide ELL training for school librarians, what types of activities do ELL stakeholders design to assist ELLs.”

### **Data**

Using content analysis, responses to the open-ended question were analyzed. The chart below depicts the needs identified from the content analysis.

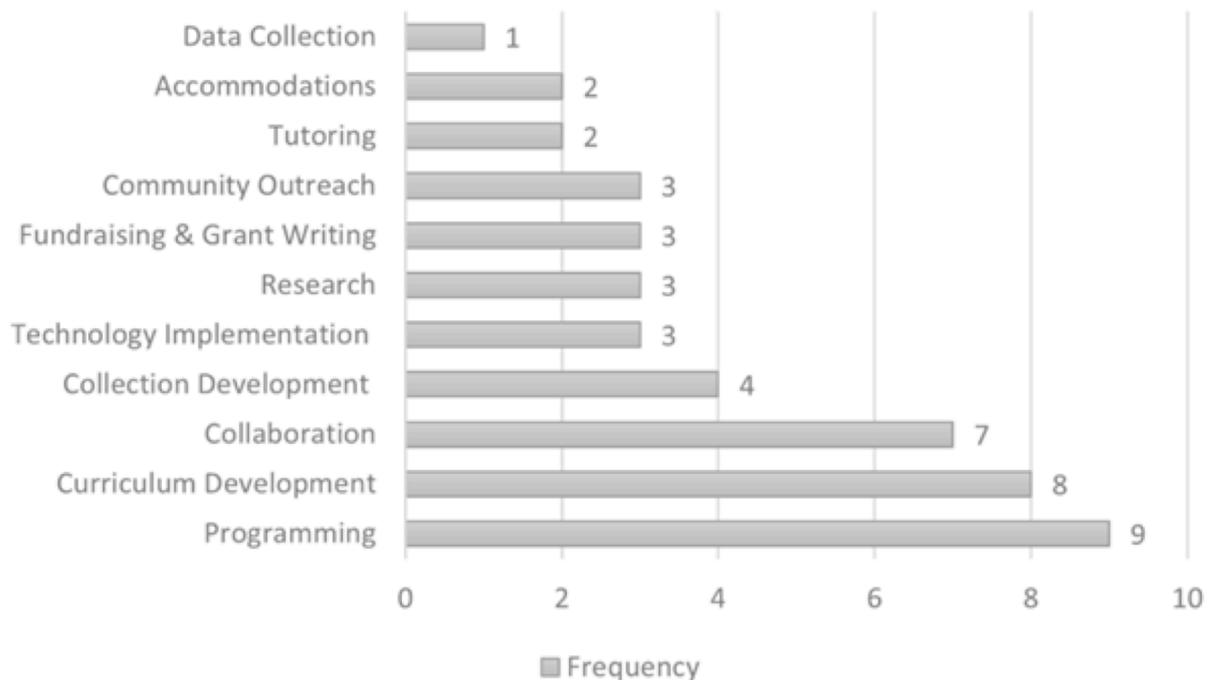


Figure 1: Needs Identified Through Content Analysis

### **Conclusions**

The literature identifies significant problems concerning the education of ELLs. The content analysis reflected issues identified in the literature, such as accommodations, community outreach, collection development, collaboration development, and programming. The

stakeholders also seemed to identify needs from a more global perspective, such as: data collection, fundraising and grant writing, research, and technology implementation. These factors focus more on long-term solutions that need collaboration from more than one site. In addition to problems that might be addressed at the local level, the team of experts identified problems that might need to be addressed at a district or even country-wide level. The plans of the research team include developing a white paper to explore the needs of ELLs, their teachers, and their librarians at a local and national level.

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