



Distinguishing language learning from learning disabilities: EAL/D teacher perspectives

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigates the experiences of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) teachers in identifying and supporting students with learning disabilities. Data were collected through an online survey of 19 experienced EAL/D teachers in NSW, Australia, followed by 10 semi-structured interviews. EAL/D teachers reported considerable professional knowledge in distinguishing language acquisition from indicators of learning disability but reported significant systemic barriers when supporting these students. Fifteen of the nineteen participants reported teaching EAL/D students with diagnosed learning disabilities, indicating that contact with this group was common among the EAL/D teachers surveyed. Teachers identified several challenges affecting identification and support, including delayed diagnosis associated with cultural stigma, limited availability of multilingual assessment tools, insufficient enrolment information, and mainstream teachers' limited understanding of second language development. In doing so, the study contributes to TESOL scholarship by providing empirical evidence from an Australian context of how EAL/D teachers' specialist knowledge of second language development positions them to differentiate language acquisition from learning disability, an intersection that remains underexamined in applied linguistics research. The study highlights the need for improved professional learning, culturally responsive family engagement, and linguistically appropriate diagnostic tools to support equitable outcomes for EAL/D students.

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Introduction

The increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of Australian school students in recent decades has led to a growing need for English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) support, with approximately 1 in 4 students in New South Wales being identified as EAL/D (CESE, 2022). Nationally, EAL/D learner numbers are likely to be under-reported, with no publicly available data from independent schools (Fenn, 2021). Within this diverse population exists a subset of students with learning disabilities comparable to that found among first-language English speakers (Skues & Cunningham, 2011; Sugisaki & Sowell, 2022). However, there is growing recognition that these students may not be adequately identified and supported within current educational frameworks (Merga, 2019).

The identification of learning disabilities in EAL/D students presents unique challenges for educators. Teachers must distinguish between typical language acquisition processes and indicators of underlying learning disabilities, a task complicated by the similar behavioural manifestations of both learning needs (Case & Taylor, 2005; Kangas, 2026). Furthermore, assessment tools are predominantly designed for native English speakers, potentially disadvantaging EAL/D students whose linguistic learning needs differ significantly from the mainstream (Barker, 2023; Fraine & McDade, 2009). These challenges are compounded by inadequate teacher training, cultural factors, socioeconomic disparities, and insufficient resources (Creagh et al., 2023).

National data indicates that 10.4 per cent of Australian students receive adjustments for cognitive disability (ACARA, 2023). However, comparatively little research has examined how these needs intersect specifically with those of EAL/D learners (Luyt & Hilton, 2026). Current EAL/D policy guidance (NSW Department of Education, 2020) acknowledges linguistic diversity but does not explicitly account for the possibility that persistent difficulties in meeting curriculum outcomes may be associated with underlying learning disabilities. Similarly, national data collections on disability do not distinguish EAL/D learners within reporting frameworks, limiting the visibility of this subgroup in policy and planning contexts.

This gap is further reflected in assessment practices. Standardised measures such as NAPLAN prioritise literacy and numeracy outcomes but may not capture the complexity of multilingual learners' development, particularly where language proficiency and cognitive processing intersect (Creagh, 2014). In addition, incomplete enrolment information, often due to limited documentation or reliance on oral communication, can restrict early identification of learning needs (Hudson et al., 2023). These systemic limitations highlight the importance of examining how teachers navigate identification and support processes in practice.

Despite the complexity involved in identifying learning disabilities among students learning English as an additional language, limited empirical research has examined how teachers navigate this process within Australian schools. Much of the existing literature originates from the United States and the United Kingdom (e.g., (Castro & Artiles, 2021; Kearns, 2023), where educational systems, diagnostic procedures, and policy frameworks differ substantially from those in Australia (Dobinson & Buchori, 2016). As a result, there remains insufficient understanding of how EAL/D teachers in Australian contexts identify potential learning disabilities, collaborate with colleagues, and support students whose language development may mask or resemble indicators of cognitive learning needs.

EAL/D teachers' perspectives are uniquely valuable in this regard. Through their specialist knowledge of additional language development and their sustained, close interaction with multilingual learners, they are frequently the first professionals positioned to notice when a student's progress diverges from expected language acquisition trajectories. Unlike mainstream classroom teachers, who may misattribute such difficulties to language learning alone, or clinical specialists, who typically encounter students only after referral, EAL/D teachers occupy the critical vantage point at which language acquisition and potential learning disability first become distinguishable. Their professional judgements therefore directly shape whether, when, and how students enter formal identification pathways. Given the increasing linguistic diversity of Australian classrooms and the critical role teachers play in referral and identification processes, investigating teachers' professional experiences is essential. This study addresses this gap by investigating the experiences of EAL/D teachers in NSW schools, examining the challenges they face in identifying and supporting students' learning disabilities, and exploring how their training and expertise position them to address these needs. Importantly, EAL/D teachers do not diagnose learning disabilities, their role is to recognise patterns that may warrant referral for specialist assessment.

The research addresses two questions:

1. What are the experiences of EAL/D teachers in relation to supporting EAL/D students with learning disabilities?
2. In what ways are EAL/D teachers equipped to identify and support students with learning disabilities?

To situate the study within existing scholarship, the following section reviews literature relating to learning disabilities, EAL/D education in Australia, and the identification of learning disabilities among multilingual learners. By examining the professional experiences of EAL/D teachers, this study contributes new insight into how learning disabilities are recognised and supported among multilingual learners in Australian school contexts.

Literature review

Learning disabilities: Definitions, terminology, and early intervention

Terminology relating to learning disabilities varies across educational systems and policy contexts. In Australia, learning disabilities are generally understood as specific cognitive impairments affecting processes such as reading, writing, or mathematical reasoning (ADCET, 2023). These conditions are distinct from language learning needs but may present with similar classroom characteristics, particularly among students learning English as an additional language. This overlap creates challenges for teachers attempting to distinguish between language acquisition processes and indicators of underlying learning disabilities.

The identification of learning disabilities among EAL/D students is further complicated by the multidimensional nature of learner diversity. Linguistic, cultural, and cognitive factors intersect in ways that make it difficult to differentiate between language acquisition processes and underlying learning disabilities (Case & Taylor, 2005). Standardised assessment tools are frequently designed for monolingual English-speaking populations, introducing cultural and linguistic bias that may obscure accurate identification (Fraine & McDade, 2009). In addition, socioeconomic and systemic factors can influence access to assessment and support. EAL/D students with additional learning disabilities may experience barriers related to funding, access to specialists, and familiarity with educational systems (Ndura, 2004). These factors contribute to delays in diagnosis and may result in students not receiving appropriate support at critical stages of their learning. Early identification of learning disabilities is widely recognised as critical for effective intervention and long-term academic outcomes (Kormos, 2017; Vaughn & Edmonds, 2022). Delays in diagnosis can result in students falling behind peers and experiencing ongoing academic difficulties. Teacher professional development is key to overcoming support obstacles. Research maintains that the development of inclusive pedagogies needs to occur with teachers at the forefront (Atif, 2020; Bondie & Zusho, 2017; Slaughter et al., 2024).

Intervention involves identifying learning challenges and implementing targeted strategies to support student progress. For EAL/D learners, delayed identification of learning disabilities can have cumulative effects, including reduced access to appropriate interventions and widening achievement gaps (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2005). These risks underscore the importance of timely and accurate differentiation between language acquisition and cognitive learning needs. Timely identification, however, depends on the capacity of teachers to recognise these needs, which directs attention to teacher preparation and professional development.

EAL/D students in mainstream classrooms

The growing linguistic diversity of Australian classrooms has increased the demand for effective EAL/D support. Research consistently identifies gaps in teacher preparation for supporting multilingual learners in mainstream classrooms. Studies suggest that many teachers feel insufficiently prepared to address the linguistic and academic needs of EAL/D students (Luyt & Hilton, 2026; Nguyen & Rushton, 2022). Limited professional learning in EAL/D

pedagogy may contribute to difficulties distinguishing language acquisition from learning difficulties, increasing the risk of delayed or inaccurate referrals.

While international research has contributed significantly to understanding the challenges associated with multilingual learners and learning disabilities, much of this work originates in the United States and the United Kingdom. These contexts differ from Australian educational systems in terms of policy, assessment practices, and support structures. As a result, there remains limited empirical evidence examining how these challenges are experienced within Australian classrooms. This gap highlights the importance of investigating teacher perspectives within local contexts to inform practice and policy development.

EAL/D students with learning disabilities

Distinguishing between language acquisition and learning disabilities is widely recognised as a complex diagnostic challenge (Case & Taylor, 2005). Research indicates that assessment tools designed for monolingual English speakers may produce misleading results when applied to multilingual learners (Merga, 2019; Woolley, 2010)). Studies have also highlighted the scarcity of culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment measures for multilingual students (Karem et al., 2019). While most published research has originated in the United States and the United Kingdom, some Australian studies have addressed these issues. Fraine and McDade (2009) explored the experiences of refugee students in Brisbane Catholic Education, finding that school psychologists lacked explicit understanding of second language acquisition, refugee issues, and cross-cultural assessment, gaps that could create bias in testing. This was further updated for paediatricians with advice on EAL/D and learning disabilities, extending consideration of this issue beyond the educational sphere to include child health practitioners (Clifford et al., 2014).

Underlying much of this assessment literature is a broader concern with deficit framing: the tendency to locate the source of a linguistic-minority student's difficulty within the student, rather than in the limitations of the instrument or the system around them (MacSwan, 2000). Ruiz's (1984) influential distinction between language-as-problem and language-as-resource orientations, revisited more recently for the Australian context by Lo Bianco (2013), is a useful lens here. Assessment practices that treat an EAL/D student's language background primarily as an issue to be controlled for, rather than as a resource to be understood, risk reproducing a problem orientation even where misdiagnosis is not intended. This concern is consistent with what Australian teachers themselves have identified as gaps in EAL assessment provision (Davison & Michell, 2014). Recent Australian TESOL scholarship has begun to trace how individual teachers move from a problem orientation towards a resource orientation over time, and the professional and institutional conditions that support or hinder that shift (Vo & Choi, 2025). This literature suggests that addressing assessment bias for EAL/D students with possible learning disabilities is not solely a technical matter of developing better instruments, but also a matter of the interpretive frameworks that teachers and assessors bring to the students in front of them.

Parental involvement and cultural factors

An often-overlooked dimension of supporting EAL/D students with learning disabilities concerns parental involvement and the ways in which families understand and respond to disability. Antony-Newman (2019) synthesised multinational data on migrant parent involvement in children's education across 40 studies, finding that migrant parents may encounter particular challenges associated with language barriers and unfamiliarity with new educational systems. The two Australian studies included in this synthesis indicated that parents' interactions with schools depended not only on English language proficiency but also on their own prior schooling experiences, pointing to the diversity of circumstances within migrant communities rather than any uniform set of attitudes. Beliefs about disability are similarly varied, shaped by individual, familial, and broader social factors, and should not be assumed to follow from a family's migrant or linguistic background. Research has nonetheless documented experiences of disability-related stigma in particular contexts, including among families of a child with developmental delay or disability in a Chinese cultural setting (Huang et al., 2020) and among parents of children with autism (Liao et al., 2019), where such stigma may affect willingness to pursue formal assessment. Where such concerns are present, they can complicate communication between schools and families when questions about learning disabilities arise. Recognising this variation is important so that delays in assessment are not attributed to culture alone, when language access, unfamiliarity with school systems, and prior educational experience may be equally or more influential.

Methodology

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2009), in which a quantitative survey phase was followed by a qualitative interview phase. The study was exploratory and descriptive in orientation: the survey was not intended to test hypotheses or model relationships between variables, but to provide a descriptive overview of EAL/D teachers' experiences and professional backgrounds, while the subsequent interviews explored these experiences in greater depth. Mixed-methods research is particularly valuable in applied linguistics and education for addressing complex questions that cannot be fully answered by either quantitative or qualitative methods alone (Duff, 2010). In this study, the quantitative data provided a broad descriptive picture of teachers' experiences, offered deeper insights into the contextual and systemic factors influencing identification and support processes. The research was conducted in two sequential phases, with the qualitative phase building directly on the quantitative phase. In Phase One, an online survey collected closed-item and open-ended responses regarding teachers' experiences, training, and involvement in supporting EAL/D students with learning disabilities. Analysis of the survey data identified recurring patterns and areas of particular complexity, including the distinction between language acquisition and learning disability, the adequacy of assessment tools, and access to support. These findings were used directly to develop the semi-structured interview guide, so that the interviews targeted the areas the survey had surfaced as most significant or least well understood. In Phase

Two, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of survey respondents who had indicated a willingness to participate further. The interviews were designed to elaborate on and contextualise the patterns observed in the survey, rather than to explain them in a causal or inferential sense, given the descriptive nature of the quantitative data. The two strands were integrated at the interpretation stage, where interview accounts were used to add depth and contextual understanding to the descriptive survey findings.

Terminology in this field is applied inconsistently across policy and research, and several related terms recur throughout this paper. For clarity, they are distinguished here as follows. *Learning difficulties* is used as the broadest term, referring to students who experience difficulty meeting expected learning outcomes for any reason, including instructional, environmental, or linguistic factors, and whose difficulties may be temporary and are not necessarily indicative of an underlying disability. *Learning disabilities* refers to the narrower subset whose difficulties have a presumed cognitive or neurological basis and persist despite appropriate instruction, encompassing specific disorders such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia (ADCET, 2023; Skues & Cunningham, 2011). For the purposes of this study, learning disabilities is adopted as the principal term and consistent with the Disability Standards for Education (2005) under the Disability Discrimination Act (1992), is treated as an umbrella term for these cognitive learning disorders. The terms *special needs* and *additional cognitive learning needs* appear chiefly in the survey and interview instruments, where they reflected language familiar to participating teachers: special needs denotes the broad category of diagnosed conditions requiring educational adjustment, while additional cognitive learning needs is used more specifically for the cognitive learning disabilities that are the focus of this study. Accordingly, the study focused specifically on cognitive learning disabilities within mainstream classroom contexts.

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Macquarie University Arts Subcommittee (Ethics Reference No: 520231591354392; Project ID: 15913). Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Participants

The researcher has professional experience as an EAL/D teacher; however, participants were recruited through professional EAL/D teacher networks rather than personal contacts to minimise potential bias. The survey was advertised on EAL/D teacher Facebook pages where participants may be working in the Government, Independent or Catholic sectors as well as the Australian Independent Schools NSW Research Institute website. Criterion sampling was employed, requiring participants to be NESA-approved teachers working with EAL/D students. The sample demonstrated considerable experience, with seventeen participants reporting more than ten years of EAL/D teaching experience, one reporting five to ten years, and one reporting fewer than five years. Ten participants volunteered to participate in follow-up interviews and were subsequently interviewed. Notably, all participants possessed mainstream teaching experience in addition to EAL/D instruction, with many holding senior roles within schools. The teacher with less than five years of EAL/D experience had more than

20 years of general teaching experience and held both learning support and EAL/D qualifications. The depth of professional experience within this group provided valuable insight into the challenges associated with identifying learning disabilities among EAL/D students.

Participants' school sector (Government, Independent, or Catholic) and school level (primary or secondary) were recorded. Because the achieved sample is small ($N = 19$) and participants were recruited through specific, identifiable EAL/D professional networks, these variables are not cross-tabulated and school level is not reported by individual case, to avoid a meaningful risk that individual participants, or their schools, could be identified within these close-knit professional communities. Sector alone is noted alongside individual illustrative quotations in the Results and discussion section. This approach is consistent with the confidentiality assurances given to participants at recruitment. The selection of an experienced cohort was intentional, as previous research indicates that teaching experience significantly influences professional efficacy and decision-making (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Tsui, 1995). Participants' extensive experience in both mainstream and EAL/D contexts enabled them to draw on a depth of pedagogical knowledge when reflecting on identification and support processes. This level of expertise was particularly relevant given the complexity of distinguishing between language acquisition and learning disabilities.

Data collection

Phase one: Online survey.

Data were initially collected through an online questionnaire consisting of 23 questions organised into three sections:

- Teacher background and professional experience (8)
- Experiences teaching EAL/D students with learning disabilities (13)
- Willingness to participate in follow-up interviews. (2)

The survey instrument was developed by the researcher specifically for this study, as no existing instrument addressed the identification and support of EAL/D students with learning disabilities in the Australian context (Appendix 2). Item content was derived from the study's research questions and from the issues identified in the review of literature and was organised around four areas: challenges in identifying EAL/D students with learning disabilities, challenges in supporting these students, access to teacher resources and professional development, and access to specialist and external support. The 23-item instrument comprised three sections: teacher background and professional experience (8 items), experiences teaching EAL/D students with learning disabilities (13 items), and willingness to participate in a follow-up interview (2 items). It combined multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended items. Multiple-choice items were used wherever possible to reduce participant burden (Fray et al., 2023), while open-ended items allowed participants to elaborate on their perspectives. Teacher confidence was measured using a five-point Likert scale (Bryman, 2016), ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

To establish face and content validity, draft items underwent expert review by experienced EAL/D practitioners at an AISNSW EAL/D Teachers' Network meeting, who checked the wording of each item and its applicability to the current teaching context. Items were refined in response to this feedback before the survey was distributed.

Survey questions were aligned with the study's research focus, including:

- Challenges in identifying EAL/D students with learning disabilities
- Challenges in supporting these students
- Access to professional learning and resources

Access to specialist and external support. The final survey item invited participants to indicate willingness to participate in a follow-up interview.

Phase two: Interviews.

Phase two involved ten semi-structured interviews conducted within one month of survey completion. Semi-structured interviews were selected to allow focused yet flexible exploration of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2009; Dörnyei & Griffee, 2010).

Interview questions were developed from survey responses and the literature (Appendix 1), enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives. Interviews were approximately 30 minutes in duration, with some extending further as participants expanded on relevant issues. Follow-up questions were used where appropriate to clarify and deepen responses. Interviews were conducted via Zoom at times convenient to participants and audio-recorded. This approach enabled detailed exploration of the research focus while maintaining consistency across participants.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using a mixed-methods approach combining descriptive quantitative techniques with qualitative thematic analysis within a pragmatic paradigm (Bryman, 2016). Analysis was guided by the research questions and conducted in two sequential phases, consistent with the study's sequential design.

Phase one data analysis – Survey.

Phase one data were collected using Lime survey. The survey was open from December 2023 to February 2024. The survey incorporated a participant information sheet and consent form in accordance with Macquarie University human research ethics requirements. The survey generated both quantitative data (multiple choice, dropdown, and Likert scale items) and qualitative data through open-ended responses.

Quantitative analysis.

Quantitative data were summarised to produce frequency tables and visual representations (bar and pie charts). Statistical summaries provided an overview of response patterns, with data organised into frequencies and coded in alignment with the research questions.

Qualitative analysis.

Open-ended survey responses were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses were read iteratively and coded openly, with codes grouped into preliminary patterns that were considered alongside the corresponding quantitative data. This produced a preliminary thematic framework that informed the design of the interview phase and the subsequent analysis.

Phase two data analysis – Interviews.

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom and transcribed, with transcripts reviewed for accuracy. Identifying information was removed, participants were assigned non-identifying codes, and transcripts were returned for participant verification, with all participants confirming accuracy and two requesting minor deletions.

Interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis - RTA, ((Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis was approached from a contextualist position, which treats participants' accounts as reports of real experiences while recognising that those experiences are interpreted, and given meaning, through the researcher. This position was adopted because RTA foregrounds the researcher's active and subjective role in generating themes. Accordingly, the researcher's professional experience as an EAL/D teacher was treated as an analytic resource rather than as a source of bias, while the analysis remained oriented towards representing participants' perspectives. This insider perspective shaped the study at several points: survey items were drafted with an awareness of the language and day-to-day concerns of practising EAL/D teachers; the shared professional background supported rapport in interviews, while carrying the risk that shared assumptions would pass unexamined; and interpretations were therefore checked repeatedly against the data and the literature to guard against over-identification with participants' accounts.

Analysis followed the recursive phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). The researcher first became familiar with the data through transcription and repeated reading. Initial codes were then generated by working systematically through each transcript and applying short descriptive labels to data segments relevant to the research questions, initially using colour coding of the collated responses, with consistent codes applied to recurring observations. Codes were collated and compared, and those sharing meaning were grouped into candidate subthemes and themes, which were represented in a thematic map (Appendix 3). Candidate themes were reviewed against both the coded extracts and the full dataset to check their coherence and distinctiveness, then refined, defined, and named.

NVivo software was used to manage and organise the dataset and to generate word-frequency queries that supported familiarisation and code identification. The interpretive work of developing, reviewing, and naming themes was undertaken by the researcher rather than by the software.

Interpretation of data

Findings from the two phases were integrated at the interpretation stage, consistent with the study's sequential design. The descriptive survey findings and the interview themes were compared and used to corroborate one another, with the qualitative data adding depth and context to the patterns identified in the survey (Cohen et al., 2018).

The findings from both the online survey and semi-structured interviews were integrated to provide a comprehensive account of teacher experiences. This approach enables the identification of consistent patterns across datasets and supports a more nuanced interpretation of the challenges faced by EAL/D teachers.

Ethical issues

This study adhered to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007, updated 2018) and received approval from the Macquarie University Arts subcommittee. Ethical considerations focused on informed consent and participant anonymity. Consent was obtained through a mandatory online form at the commencement of the survey. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time (Jann & Hinz, 2016). No identifying information was collected within the survey, and participants were assigned unique identification numbers (T1–10).

Participants who volunteered for interviews provided contact details, indicating implicit consent. Verbal consent for audio recording was obtained at the beginning of each interview. Transcripts were returned to participants for verification, with confirmation provided via email, and all identifying information was removed or redacted during transcription to ensure confidentiality.

Results and discussion

RQ1: What are the experiences of EAL/D teachers in relation to supporting EAL/D students with learning disabilities?

It is important to note that teachers are not responsible for diagnosing learning disabilities; rather, they play a critical role in recognising patterns of learning that may warrant further specialist assessment. EAL/D teachers in this study reported frequent and sustained involvement in identifying and supporting students whose learning needs extended beyond language acquisition. Fifteen of the nineteen survey participants reported teaching EAL/D students with diagnosed learning disabilities. Read together, the interview accounts suggested

that EAL/D teachers were often among the first professionals to recognise when student progress deviated from expected language acquisition trajectories. These findings suggest that engagement with this cohort is not incidental but a regular feature of EAL/D practice, a pattern that appears to reflect both their specialist knowledge of language development and their sustained interaction with students.

Teacher involvement in identification.

Participants consistently described their role as one of early identification and ongoing monitoring of student learning. Teachers reported drawing on their understanding of language acquisition stages to differentiate between expected developmental patterns and atypical learning behaviours. Several participants described recognising when students' progress did not align with anticipated language learning trajectories. One participant, describing a recently arrived student, recalled that "in a very short time everyone saw that it was more than an EAL/D issue" (T10, Independent school). Another teacher explained the difficulty of distinguishing between the two possible sources of a student's struggles, noting that "it was always very difficult to know whether their issues were coming from learning an additional language or whether there was something more to it" (T3, Catholic school).

These experiences reflect the diagnostic challenges identified in previous research, where overlapping characteristics of language learning and learning disabilities complicate identification processes (Case & Taylor, 2005). Teachers reported that their expertise in literacy benchmarks and language progression enabled them to detect inconsistencies in student performance. In particular, participants noted that discrepancies between oral language proficiency and literacy development often signalled the need for further investigation.

In addition, teachers described themselves as "primary observers" of student learning patterns due to their regular interaction with students. This frequent contact positioned them to notice subtle differences in comprehension, processing, and engagement that may not be immediately apparent in mainstream classroom settings. Interview data suggested that this observational role was critical in initiating conversations about potential learning disabilities. Participants further indicated that their expertise in literacy development enabled them to identify discrepancies between expected language acquisition and broader learning patterns. Teachers described comparing students' oral language proficiency with their reading and writing development, as well as considering evidence of first-language proficiency where available. These comparative observations were described as critical in identifying inconsistencies that may indicate underlying learning difficulties rather than language acquisition challenges.

In particular, teachers noted that students who demonstrated strong oral communication but persistent difficulties in literacy tasks were more likely to be identified for further investigation. This suggests that EAL/D teachers draw on both linguistic knowledge and classroom-based evidence to inform their judgements.

However, while teachers were confident in recognising these patterns, they emphasised that their role remained advisory rather than diagnostic. Participants reported that they often needed to advocate for further assessment or raise concerns with learning support teams, indicating a reliance on broader school systems to formalise identification processes.

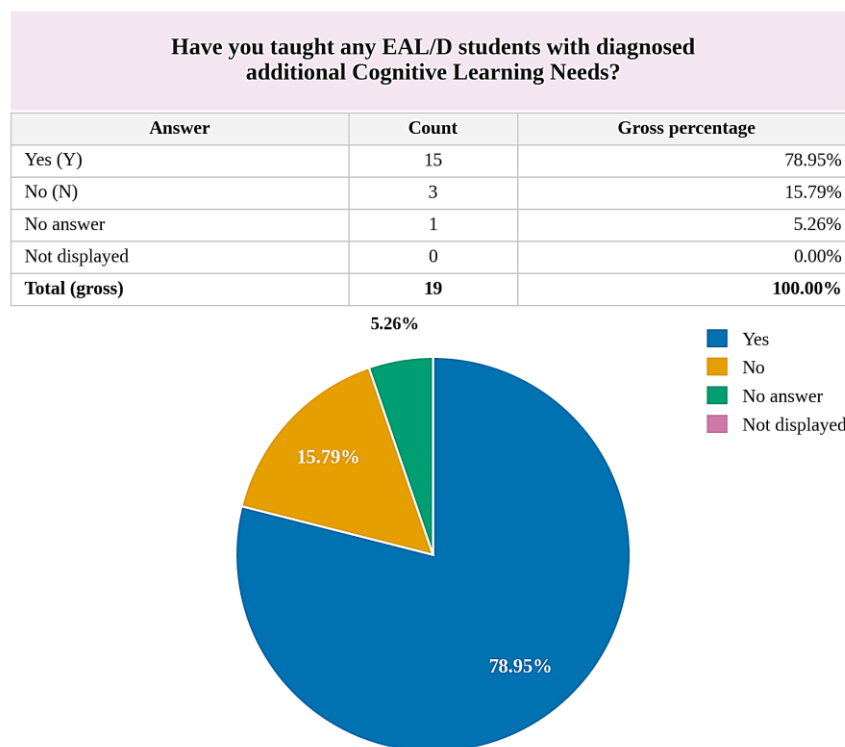


Figure 1. Proportion of participants reporting experience teaching EAL/D students with diagnosed learning disabilities.

As shown in Figure 1, 15 of the 19 participants (79 per cent) reported having taught EAL/D students with diagnosed learning disabilities. Contact with this cohort was therefore the norm rather than the exception among the experienced EAL/D teachers surveyed. This pattern supports the study's broader argument that EAL/D specialists are routinely involved with students whose needs extend beyond language acquisition, and it aligns with participants' accounts of being among the first to notice when a student's progress diverges from expected language development. It may also reflect a tendency for students with unclear or unmet learning needs to be directed towards EAL/D support, a possibility taken up in the discussion of systemic barriers below.

Assessment and diagnostic limitations.

Participants consistently reported limitations in existing assessment tools for multilingual learners. Teachers noted that many standardised tests are designed for monolingual English speakers and may therefore produce misleading results for EAL/D students. One participant commented: "The testing tools we use are designed for native speakers." (T8, Independent

school). This concern was echoed across both survey and interview data, with teachers highlighting the risk of misinterpreting language proficiency as cognitive difficulty. Participants reported that assessment outcomes could be skewed by linguistic and cultural factors, leading to either over-identification or under-identification of learning disabilities.

Teachers also identified significant barriers in accessing appropriate diagnostic services. A recurring theme was the limited availability of bilingual educational psychologists and translated assessment tools. Several participants described extended efforts to locate specialists capable of assessing students in their first language, often without success.

These concerns connect to a broader debate about the construct validity of standardised assessment for multilingual learners, in which such instruments are argued to measure English language proficiency as much as the cognitive constructs they purport to assess, thereby confounding language difference with disability (Karem et al., 2019; Woolley, 2010). In addition to linguistic limitations, teachers reported structural barriers such as long waiting times for assessments and the high cost of private diagnostic services. These factors contributed to delays in formal diagnosis, which in turn affected the timing and effectiveness of interventions. Participants noted that, in many cases, support strategies were implemented without formal diagnosis, placing additional responsibility on teachers to adapt instruction based on observational evidence. Teachers emphasised that accurate assessment and diagnostic tools require consideration of students' educational history, first-language development, and prior schooling experiences. However, participants reported that such information was often incomplete or unavailable, particularly for newly arrived students.

Cultural factors influencing diagnosis.

Cultural attitudes towards disability were also identified as influencing the diagnostic process. Teachers reported that some families expressed concern about the social implications of disability labels, which occasionally resulted in reluctance to pursue formal assessment. One participant explained: "Getting parents on board is the biggest issue." (T1, Catholic school).

Survey responses further indicated that cultural stigma was perceived as a key barrier to diagnosis. Teachers described situations in which parents were hesitant to engage with assessment processes due to concerns about labelling, stigma, or potential limitations on their child's future opportunities.

Interview data provided additional insight into this theme, with participants describing how cultural perceptions of disability influenced parental decision-making. Teachers noted that some families associated disability with social stigma or loss of status. This often led to delayed engagement with support services or reluctance to share relevant information about the child's development. These findings correspond with research identifying stigma associated with disability in some cultural contexts (Huang et al., 2020; Liao et al., 2019). It should be noted that these studies examined the experiences of grandmothers of children with developmental delay in a Chinese cultural setting (Huang et al., 2020) and of parents of children with autism

(Liao et al., 2019), rather than EAL/D or Australian school contexts, and their findings are drawn on here with caution. Participants also highlighted the challenges faced by families navigating unfamiliar educational systems, particularly when communication occurred in a second language. Teachers reported that parents may not fully understand the purpose or benefits of diagnosis, further contributing to delays in assessment.

Teachers also highlighted the broader context of migration and adjustment as influencing parental engagement with diagnostic processes. Families navigating new educational systems may experience uncertainty regarding available support services and the implications of formal diagnosis. Language barriers and unfamiliarity with school systems can further complicate communication between schools and families.

Participants described the need for culturally responsive approaches to engaging families, including the use of interpreters and clear explanations of diagnostic processes. Teachers emphasised that building trust with families was essential in supporting early identification and intervention. These findings reinforce the importance of culturally informed practices in addressing barriers to diagnosis. While these cultural considerations were salient in participants' accounts, the data indicate that delayed diagnosis was shaped less by family reluctance in itself than by the systemic conditions surrounding it, including limited language access, the absence of interpreters, and school communication practices that did not adequately explain diagnostic processes. Families' engagement is therefore better understood as a response to how schools communicate and provide access than as a fixed cultural disposition.

Systemic barriers.

Participants identified a range of systemic barriers that affected both identification and support processes. These included limited collaboration between EAL/D teachers and mainstream and enrolment staff, insufficient understanding of second language development among classroom teachers, and inconsistent access to learning support resources.

Teachers reported that mainstream colleagues sometimes lacked awareness of the differences between language acquisition and learning disabilities, which could delay referrals or lead to misinterpretation of student needs. In some cases, students were referred to EAL/D support when their difficulties were unrelated to language learning, highlighting the need for greater professional understanding across school contexts.

Participants also described challenges related to school enrolment processes. Teachers reported that initial placement decisions were often based on limited information, particularly where students appeared orally proficient in English. In such cases, students displayed Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), while enrolment staff were not positioned to assess Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 2000). The BICS/CALP distinction is used here to describe the gap teachers saw between everyday conversational English and academic English, not as a rigid divide. The distinction, and the broader framework in which it sits, has been critiqued for oversimplifying the relationship between language

domains and for inviting deficit interpretations of linguistic-minority students when applied too rigidly (MacSwan, 2000). It is drawn on in this study to describe a practical enrolment problem, not to imply a fixed developmental sequence or a deficit in students' first-language competence.

Reliance on oral communication during enrolment interviews was seen as insufficient for identifying underlying learning difficulties. In such cases, underlying learning disabilities were not immediately recognised, and students were placed in mainstream classes without additional support. In addition, participants reported that incomplete background information at enrolment, such as previous schooling records or developmental history, limited teachers' ability to make informed decisions about student needs. This lack of information increased reliance on classroom observation and delayed referral processes.

Several participants described situations in which students were subsequently referred to EAL/D support when academic difficulties emerged, even when these difficulties were not primarily related to language acquisition. This practice positioned EAL/D teachers as default support providers for students with unidentified learning needs. Taken together, these accounts point to a substantial institutional burden carried by EAL/D teachers. Beyond their core teaching, participants were routinely required to identify unmet learning needs, advocate for assessment, educate colleagues about language development, and coordinate across stakeholders, frequently without formal protocols, dedicated time, or commensurate recognition. This suggests that the identification of learning disabilities among multilingual learners rests disproportionately on EAL/D teachers, whose work in this regard is largely informal and institutionally unsupported.

These systemic challenges were compounded by the complexity of coordinating support across multiple stakeholders, including EAL/D teachers, learning support staff, external specialists, and families. Teachers reported that navigating these systems required significant time and effort, often without clear protocols or guidelines.

One teacher summarised the challenge: "I have trouble identifying what should be focused on first for the student. Do I address the language concerns first, or address the diagnosed need first?" (T6, Independent school). This reflects the broader challenge of balancing language support with cognitive support, particularly in the absence of clear diagnostic information. This dilemma is characteristic of provision for twice-exceptional learners, whose language and disability needs must be addressed concurrently rather than sequentially (Bondie & Zusho, 2017; Vaughn & Edmonds, 2022), and it underscores the need for differentiated planning that does not force a choice between the two.

RQ2: In what ways are EAL/D teachers equipped to identify and support students with learning disabilities?*Teacher training and experience.*

Survey results indicated that participants were a highly experienced group of EAL/D teachers. Seventeen of the nineteen participants reported more than ten years of EAL/D teaching experience, with all participants holding recognised tertiary qualifications in EAL/D education. Nine participants reported a Master of TESOL, while eight held Postgraduate TESOL certificates. In addition, fifteen participants reported some form of training related to learning support. These findings suggest a high level of professional expertise within the cohort. Teaching experience emerged as a significant factor influencing teachers' sense of professional efficacy. Participants reported that their knowledge of language development and literacy benchmarks supported their ability to recognise atypical learning patterns.

Consistent with previous research ((Kraut et al., 2016; Woodcock & Hardy, 2025), teachers with extensive experience and specialised training reported higher levels of confidence in their professional capabilities. However, while confidence levels were generally high, participants also identified gaps in training related specifically to the intersection of EAL/D and learning disabilities.

Teachers reported that much of their knowledge in this area had been developed through professional experience rather than formal training. This suggests a need for targeted professional development that addresses the specific challenges of supporting multilingual learners with additional learning needs.

Table 1. Reported level of teacher qualification.

Types of qualifications	Teacher response numbers
Master of TESOL	9
Postgraduate Certificate or comparable in TESOL	8
Undergraduate or Certificate in TESOL	4

Note: participants could report more than one qualification.

These findings underscore the crucial role of specialised training and extensive experience in building teacher confidence and capability and are consistent with literature on teacher preparation gaps.

Staffroom placement and collegial support.

Teachers' physical placement within schools revealed interesting patterns potentially influencing their capacity to support students with learning disabilities. Seven teachers were situated in English departments, eight in Learning Enhancement (or equivalent departments with various titles), and four in dedicated EAL/D departments.

Sixteen of 19 respondents reported access to additional support for students with learning disabilities, including Learning Support staff, School Learning Support Officers (SLSOs), and resources. However, responses revealed nuanced challenges. When asked about access to school resources to support EAL/D students with learning disabilities.

One senior school respondent stated,

But it is NOT always a question of resources or materials. It is pedagogy. Communication is crucial. Trust from the parents is essential. Materials prepared by others are often not well used by teachers. Most teachers have no idea about the English language. (T9, Government school)

These findings align with research on the influence of collegial and staffroom relationships on teacher effectiveness and well-being (Parks & McKay, 2023). Teachers situated within Learning Support environments reported greater exposure to discussions about student needs, which may enhance their understanding of learning disabilities.

However, participants also noted that inconsistent terminology across schools (e.g., Learning Enhancement, Educational Support Services, Diverse Learning) could create confusion for both staff and parents. This lack of clarity may hinder effective communication and collaboration, particularly in linguistically diverse contexts. These staff placement patterns carry implications for collaboration, referral, and professional authority, though the small sample means they are best read as indicative. Teachers located within Learning Support or Learning Enhancement settings reported greater incidental exposure to discussions about student needs, which may shorten the distance between observing a concern and initiating a referral. Teachers based in English departments or stand-alone EAL/D rooms, by contrast, may be more organisationally separated from the teams that formalise identification, potentially lengthening referral pathways. The proliferation of department titles may further obscure where responsibility for these students sits, diffusing authority and making it less clear to colleagues and families whom to approach. Departmental location therefore appears to shape not only what EAL/D teachers observe, but how readily their observations translate into institutional action.

What department do you sit in at your school?

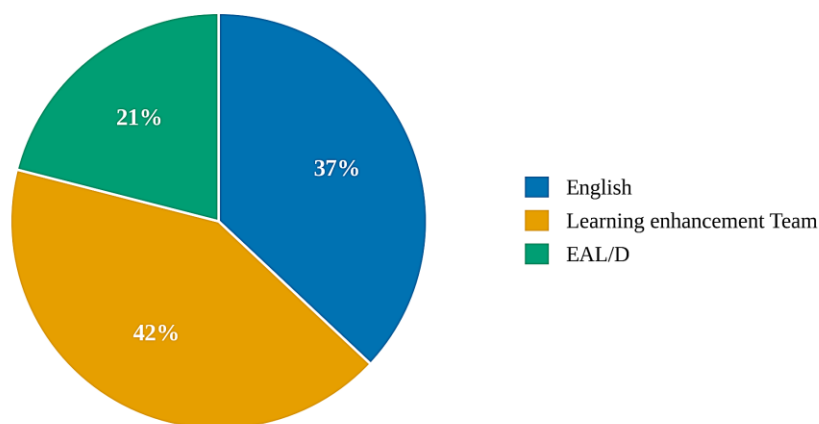


Figure 2. Departmental placement of participating EAL/D teachers.

As shown in Figure 2, participants were spread across three types of departmental offices: seven were located in English departments, eight in learning-support or learning-enhancement departments (under various titles), and only four in dedicated EAL/D departments. This distribution is itself a finding. Rather than being housed in a single, consistent structure, EAL/D work was dispersed across the schools surveyed and, in most cases, embedded within a department defined by another function, either subject English or learning support. The concentration within learning-support settings is notable for this study, as it places EAL/D specialists close to the staff and processes through which learning disabilities are formally identified, which may facilitate referral. Conversely, the small number in dedicated EAL/D departments, alongside the placement of others within English faculties, suggests that EAL/D expertise is frequently positioned as an adjunct to another role rather than as a distinct specialism. As discussed in the following section, this dispersal has consequences for collaboration, referral pathways, and the visibility of responsibility for EAL/D students with additional learning needs.

Professional expertise and confidence.

The combination of specialised EAL/D training and extensive experience positioned participants as expert observers of language development patterns. This expertise is evidenced in the present study by participants' professional profile and practice: seventeen of the nineteen participants (89 per cent) reported more than 10 years' EAL/D experience, all held tertiary EAL/D qualifications, fifteen of the nineteen (79 per cent) reported learning-support training, and fifteen of the nineteen (79 per cent) had taught students with diagnosed learning disabilities. In practice, it was visible in their use of literacy benchmarks and comparisons of oral and literacy development to detect atypical patterns, enabling them to recognise when student progress deviated from typical language learning trajectories.

However, this expertise received insufficient institutional recognition and support. EAL/D teachers often found themselves advocating for students with suspected learning disabilities, educating mainstream colleagues about language development, and navigating complex cultural dynamics with families, all while managing their primary teaching responsibilities. This suggests that, while EAL/D teachers possess considerable expertise in identification, systemic structures do not adequately support them in applying it effectively.

Despite this expertise, participants identified a need for ongoing professional development, particularly in assessment and differentiation. Teachers emphasised the importance of training that integrates language development and learning support, reflecting the interconnected nature of these domains.

Implications for policy and practice.

The findings have implications at four levels: classroom practice, school-level systems, professional learning, and policy.

Classroom practice. The findings indicate that EAL/D teachers already draw on literacy benchmarks, comparisons of oral and literacy development, and evidence of first-language proficiency to distinguish expected language acquisition from atypical learning patterns. Supporting teachers to document these observations systematically, and to record the basis for raising a concern, would help translate their judgements into a clearer evidence trail for referral, particularly given that support strategies were often implemented before any formal diagnosis.

School-level systems. Participants described identification and referral as dependent on collaboration that was frequently informal and unsupported. Schools may benefit from establishing clearer protocols linking EAL/D specialists, learning-support teams, mainstream teachers, and enrolment staff, so that responsibility for EAL/D students with possible learning disabilities is explicit rather than diffuse. More structured collection of background information at enrolment, including prior schooling and developmental history, would also reduce the reliance on classroom observation alone and shorten referral pathways.

Professional learning. The findings point to a need for targeted professional learning, developed through experience rather than formal training in most cases. This learning should address, specifically: the use and limitations of assessment with multilingual learners, including how to avoid confounding language difference with disability; disability referral pathways, so teachers understand how and when to initiate formal identification; culturally responsive communication with families about assessment and diagnosis; and structured collaboration between EAL/D and learning-support teams. Provision should reach mainstream as well as EAL/D teachers, given the reported gaps in mainstream colleagues' understanding of second language development.

Policy. At the system level, the findings underscore the need for culturally and linguistically appropriate diagnostic tools and for improved access to bilingual educational psychologists and

translated assessments, which participants identified as scarce. More broadly, because national data collections on disability do not distinguish EAL/D learners, this subgroup remains largely invisible in planning; addressing this gap would support more equitable resourcing and clearer accountability for their identification and support.

Limitations

Several limitations are acknowledged in interpreting these findings. The sample was small, which limits generalisability beyond this cohort, and the study was confined to NSW, so the findings may not transfer to other states or to the particular cultural communities represented in other contexts. The findings are therefore best read as illustrative of professional experience rather than representative of Australian schools more broadly.

Two features of the sample warrant particular caution. First, participation was voluntary, and teachers who chose to take part may have had a stronger interest in or investment in EAL/D students with learning disabilities, introducing a degree of self-selection bias. Second, the cohort was highly experienced, with most reporting more than ten years in EAL/D education. While this depth of experience yielded rich insight into identification processes, it also means the findings reflect the perspectives of established specialists and may not capture the experiences of early-career teachers, who are likely to face these challenges with less accumulated knowledge and fewer professional networks.

Three further limitations should be noted. Recruitment through professional Facebook groups and the AISNSW network may have favoured teachers who are more engaged and better networked than the profession at large. The data are self-reported, so accounts of practice and confidence are open to social-desirability bias and could not be verified against observation. Finally, the researcher's own background as an EAL/D teacher, while treated as an analytic resource, inevitably shaped instrument design, interview dynamics, and interpretation, as discussed in the data analysis section.

Future research

These limitations suggest several potential avenues for future research. Studies that include early-career EAL/D teachers would clarify how the expertise described here develops over time, helping to target professional learning more precisely. Research that incorporates families' perspectives would illuminate the communication and trust issues raised by participants, moving beyond teachers' interpretations of family responses. Finally, examining the perspectives of learning-support specialists, who sit at the formal end of the identification pathway, would complement the present focus on EAL/D teachers and allow the referral process to be traced across the roles involved. Together, such work would build a fuller, multi-

perspective account of how multilingual learners with additional needs are identified and supported.

Conclusion

This study examined how experienced EAL/D teachers in NSW identify and support students with learning disabilities. The findings show that these teachers hold substantial expertise in recognising when a student's progress departs from expected language acquisition, yet that this expertise operates within significant systemic constraints, including limited access to appropriate assessment, delays in diagnosis, and collaboration that is often informal and unsupported. As a result, EAL/D teachers frequently carry the early work of identification without their judgements being formally integrated into school processes.

The study's contribution is to provide an Australian empirical account of EAL/D teachers working at the intersection of language learning and learning disability, an intersection that remains underexamined in applied linguistics. It shows that their specialist knowledge of second language development positions them as key, if under-recognised, agents in distinguishing language difference from learning disability, and that realising this potential depends less on building teachers' capability than on the systems, resources, and recognition that surround them. In shifting attention from language pedagogy alone to the role EAL/D specialists play in equitable identification, the study offers a foundation for both school-level practice and further research into how multilingual learners with additional needs are recognised and supported.

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Appendix 1

Interview Protocol.

Interview questions were developed following the online survey and could vary depending on individual survey responses.

1. How long have you been an EAL/D teacher?
2. How many days a week do you currently work?
3. How many EAL/D students do you support?
4. Do you have any additional roles or responsibilities at school?
5. What department do you sit in at school?
6. What years are your students in?
7. What background information do you get on EAL/D students when they start at your school?
8. Who collects this information?
9. Have you had any specific training on any of the additional Learning Disabilities, Dyslexia, ADHD, Autism Spectrum etc?
10. If yes, where did that training come from?
11. If yes, what has been the most useful part of that training?
12. If you had a student who you suspected had additional Learning Disabilities, who would you discuss this with? What processes are in place?
13. Do these processes work? What could be done to improve them?
14. What could be slowing or preventing a diagnosis?
15. Do you think not having a diagnosis has changed the student's English language development?
16. Do you have any EAL/D students with diagnosed additional Learning disabilities?
17. At what stage of their learning did the diagnosis happen and by whom?
18. Which teacher is the main support for such a student now?
19. Do you think having a diagnosis has changed the student's English language development?
20. What resources do you have access to, to support such a student?

21. What do you think we could do to improve the support for such a student?

Appendix 2

Table A1. Teacher survey items.

How long have you been working as an English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) teacher?
Do you work in Primary/Senior or both schools?
What training do you have to support EAL/D learners?
What training do you have to support Learning Support students?
To what extent do you agree with the statement - I feel confident in my training as an EAL/D teacher. (Likert 5 rating)
To what extent do you agree with this statement - I feel confident in my training for students with additional Cognitive Learning Needs. (Likert 5 rating)
Have you taught any EAL/D students with diagnosed additional Cognitive Learning Needs?
If yes, please say approximately how many in the last 5 years
Did you contribute to the referral process for these students to receive a diagnosis?
Do you think the diagnosis was delayed in comparison to English as a first-language student. If yes, what do you think was the reason?
Do you have access to school resources (including support staff and teaching materials) to support EAL/D students with additional Learning Needs? Please give details.
Have you taught any EAL/D students that you thought may have an undiagnosed additional Cognitive Learning Needs?
If yes – approximately how many in the last year?
Further comments – what do you think are the factors preventing a formal diagnosis?
What resources could you access to gain professional development/upskilling to best support the academic achievement of an EAL/D student with Additional Cognitive Learning needs?

Is there anything you would like to comment on your experiences teaching EAL/D students with either diagnosed or undiagnosed additional learning disabilities and other special needs?

What challenges do you identify when trying to support EAL/D students with additional diagnosed special needs?

What challenges do you identify when trying to support EAL/D students with additional undiagnosed special needs?

Appendix 3

Thematic Map and Theme List.

The table below summarises the themes and subthemes generated through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) and reported in the Results and discussion section, organised by research question.

RQ1: Experiences of EAL/D teachers supporting EAL/D students with learning disabilities

Theme 1: Teacher involvement in identification

Subthemes: recognising divergence from expected language-acquisition trajectories; using discrepancies between oral and literacy development as diagnostic cues; an advisory, not diagnostic, role.

Theme 2: Assessment and diagnostic limitations

Subthemes: assessment tools designed for monolingual speakers; scarcity of bilingual psychologists and translated tools; cost and waiting-time barriers to diagnosis.

Theme 3: Cultural factors influencing diagnosis

Subthemes: stigma and family reluctance to pursue assessment; systemic communication barriers rather than fixed cultural disposition; the need for culturally responsive family engagement.

Theme 4: Systemic barriers

Subthemes: limited mainstream-teacher understanding of language acquisition; enrolment processes and the BICS/CALP gap; EAL/D teachers as default, unsupported support providers.

RQ2: How EAL/D teachers are equipped to identify and support these students

Theme 5: Teacher training and experience

Subthemes: high levels of formal EAL/D qualification; experience-based rather than formal knowledge of the EAL/D–disability intersection.

Theme 6: Staffroom placement and collegial support

Subthemes: departmental location and proximity to referral pathways; inconsistent terminology across schools.

Theme 7: Professional expertise and confidence

Subthemes: teachers as expert observers of language development; insufficient institutional recognition of that expertise.

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