

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Fusion for Inclusion: Blending Universal Design for Learning and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies in Early literacy, A Scoping Review

Authors:

Melody Mann
University of Maryland
 melmann@umd.edu

Matthew Love
San Jose State University
 matthew.love@sjsu.edu

Sudha V. Krishnan
San Jose State University
 sudha.v.krishnan@sjsu.edu

Abstract

Early childhood literacy skills predict the future success students have in their postsecondary lives. These early classroom experiences with literature lead to better opportunities in higher education, job retention, and beyond. However, the emergent literacy curriculum is not always representative of the culturally and linguistically diverse population that makes up the classrooms. This scoping review looks at the current literature around culturally responsive and sustaining literacy lessons in early childhood education and whether or not they include manners of Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogies and Universal Design for Learning in their investigations. By investigating the study design, methodology, overarching themes, and cultural sensitivity across these studies, researchers found there is a need to promote representation and diversity in emergent literacy in early childhood education.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogies, Universal Design for Learning, Early Childhood Education, Literacy



Introduction

Literacy across disciplines is crucial for students' success throughout their academic and post-secondary lives as early literacy experiences offer robust opportunities for social interactions, and academic skill development, helping to establish a home-to-school connection (National Early Literacy Panel, NELP, 2008; Pillinger & Wood, 2014). Building strong literacy foundations in early childhood, for students in both general and special education, leads to college readiness in the future (Bayly, 2020; Brown, n.d.; Kennedy et al., 2012). In ECSE, and general education settings, the development of emergent literacy skills (e.g., letter/sound recognition, mimicking reading behaviors, identifying environmental print) simultaneously fosters an early interest in learning to read which is pivotal to a child's sustained success (Ne'emman & Shaul, 2022).

In the United States of America, Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) is delivered through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for children between birth and 8 years old who experience developmental delays, disabilities, or special needs (DEC, 2020). IDEA guarantees that young children with disabilities are integrated in the education setting and provided with a fair and developmentally appropriate public education (US Department of Education, 2010). Early childhood special education plays a critical role in supporting the long-term academic, social, and behavioral outcomes of children eligible for early intervention. In early childhood interventions, literacy is a core component that is structured to holistically address multiple areas of development (i.e., academics, social skills, behavior; Kelly & Allen, 2015).

The Problem: Gaps in Literacy Achievement

In 2022, the National Assessment of Education Progress reported that not even half (43%) of children in the fourth grade scored at or above a proficient level in reading across the USA. This statistic drastically grew as racially marginalized students performed lower at just 17% of Black students, 21% of Latino students, 11% of students with disabilities, and 10% of multilingual learners were able to read proficiently by fourth grade. Since the COVID-19 global pandemic, students are increasingly scoring below proficient in literacy across grade schools, causing worrisome trends that support the evidence of the growing achievement gap (NCES, 2023). There is a national academic achievement gap apparent in early childhood education in emergent literacy skills (Assari et al., 2021; Neuman, 2006; Park & Kyei, 2011). Children who do not develop emergent literacy skills in early education tend to perform poorly across subjects going forward in grade schools in language arts and English courses (Niklas et al., 2016; Prevoo et al., 2014). This achievement gap has informed current findings that children who cannot read proficiently by third grade are less likely to graduate high school and go on to college (Hernandez, 2011).

Long-Term Implications for College and Career Readiness

The overarching goal of the US educational system is to ensure college and career readiness for all students, equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in higher education and the workforce. Early education plays a critical role in this mission by establishing a strong foundation in literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development. However, the impacts of early learning can vary significantly among diverse populations. Students from different cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds may experience unique challenges and opportunities, making it essential to implement inclusive and culturally responsive early literacy practices to support equitable outcomes for all learners.

These statistics are troubling for children's later life outcomes as low literacy skills are directly correlated to higher unemployment rates, reduced income, and overall impacts U.S. competitiveness on the global stage (Policy Circle, 2024). The National Assessment of Adult

Literacy (2016) further reports that 2/3 of students who cannot read proficiently by the end of the fourth grade will end up in jail or on welfare. This disparity is particularly concerning among racially marginalized populations as students from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities are often faced with institutionalized racism (Kohli et al., 2017; Polos et al., 2022; Strauss, 2019) and neglected from educational contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2001) leading them to be funneled into the school-to-prison pipelines (Herrick, 1991).

Additionally, educators have stressed the importance of solid reading skills in early grades for successful college and career preparedness, a view backed by longitudinal research (Hernandez, 2011). Research has shown that foundational reading skills should be developed early, as students struggle to acquire them after transitioning from learning to read (Grades K–2) to reading to learn (Grades 3–12) (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2010). Early literacy interventions lay the groundwork for college and career readiness by developing foundational reading and critical thinking skills from a young age. Even though there have been great strides in developing evidence-based techniques for teaching reading, traditional evidence-based reading interventions often overlook students' literacy identities, which are vital for motivation (Utt & Tochluk, 2020). Literacy motivation is increased when students feel relatedness, belonging, autonomy, and competence, achieved through teacher collaboration, choice of texts, and challenging goals (Guthrie & Knowles, 2001).

Inclusive culturally responsive literacy practices address students' values, beliefs, culture, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and engagement with critical perspectives, fostering their identification with and motivation for literacy learning (McLean & Alexander, 2020). Emphasizing only skills-focused reading practices can limit students' engagement and prevent access to enriching literacy experiences. Integrating diverse children's literature helps amplify students' voices, enhancing their contributions and motivation in the literacy learning environment.

Theoretical Frameworks

Admittedly, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach for interventions that support emergent literacy. However, there are several considerations that can be made when developing lessons to ensure that emergent literacy lessons and activities are inclusive and accessible to all learners. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogies (CRSP) are methods for making learning meaningful and accessible.

UDL

The research evidence supporting the UDL framework is substantial and continually growing, drawing from fields such as neuroscience, educational psychology, special education, educational technology, and implementation science. A review of empirical studies by Rao et al. (2014) found statistically significant positive effects of UDL in literacy, math, science content knowledge, and student engagement. Experimental studies have shown the impact of UDL solutions in science and social studies (King-Sears et al., 2023), with effect sizes ranging from 0.20 to 0.90. The UDL framework is recognized and endorsed by the United States Department of Education, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), various countries, states, universities, and educators. This growing body of research evidence identifies UDL as a promising approach for helping all students, especially those with disabilities, to achieve their educational goals.



CRSP

Considering the goals of emergent literacy to develop early alphabetic awareness and to foster an interest in learning to read, early educators must consider how (i.e., instructional methods) and with what (i.e., representative curricular materials) these goals can be achieved in ways that promote child engagement, create household-to-classroom cultural connections, and foster safe opportunities for discussion and reflection (Gauvreau et al., 2021).

To promote awareness about the early literacy achievement gap, the purpose of this manuscript is to evaluate the current studies and practices among emergent literacy curriculums, DEIJ initiatives, and early childhood education settings to further inform action steps educators can build upon to respond to the address these deficits in applied settings (Alim et al., 2017; Waitoller, et al., 2016) and utilize the equity frameworks of UDL and CRSP that can be followed in the planning and implementation stages of an emergent literacy curriculum to ensure accessible and inclusive early literacy learning environments are available for all children served in inclusive early childhood classrooms.

Research Questions

Early literacy environments provide educators with opportunities to address cultural and linguistic diversity within their classrooms. The purpose of this paper is to explore the current literature around inclusive representation in early childhood literacy instruction, and further how research proceeds to troubleshoot deficits that may surface.

- What are the study characteristics (study design and methodology) of research on culturally diverse and responsive approaches in early childhood literacy?
- Among these studies, does the research conducted on early childhood literacy highlight the significance of culturally responsive and representative literature in promoting student engagement, learning, and motivation in early childhood education?
- What are the emerging patterns in the findings with research on representation, equity, and inclusion in early childhood literacy?

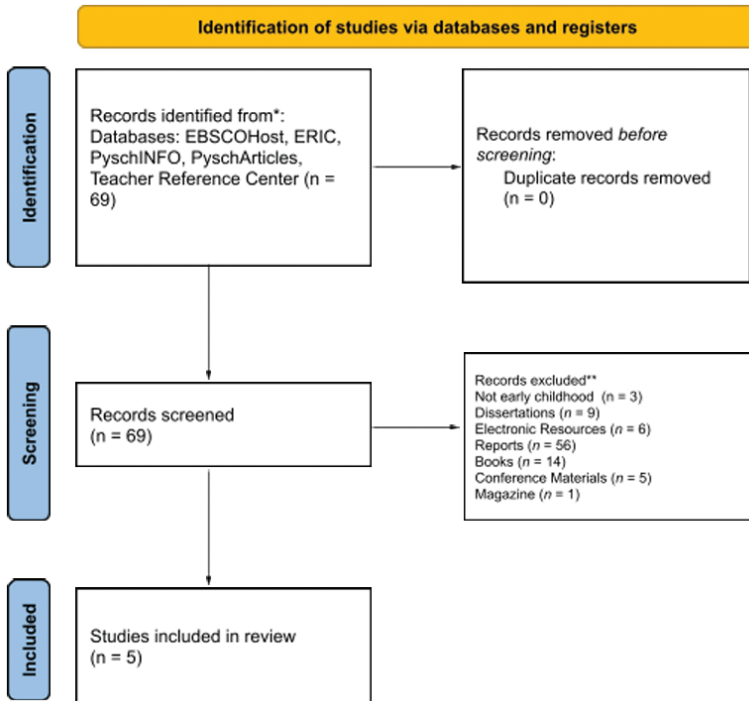
Significance

Scholarship in the areas of equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice in education has long called for pedagogical approaches that support all kinds of learners. However, siloes of research and practice for meeting the needs of diverse learners have created fragmentation in theory, where educators are offered multiple and varying solutions for creating learning environments responsive to the varied and diverse children in their classrooms. However, with theoretical fragmentation impacting how educational systems are established to respond to both cultural and linguistic diversity as well as dis/ability, child identity and educational needs are left unfulfilled (Waitoller et al., 2016). Additionally, educational systems' fragmented response to students' diverse identities ignores the realities early educators face in their classrooms with student populations whose identities are intersectional. Children who exist at the intersections of difference (i.e., cultural and linguistic diversity, disability) experience multiple barriers to inclusion in contemporary education systems that are often masked in mainstream equity movements (Collins, 2019; Kafai, 2021). Extant research has indicated that the influence of children's race, gender, language, and other identity characteristics on their risk of experiencing barriers to success in school cannot be disarticulated from disability (Annamma et al., 2018). Doing so, "...disaggregates race from disability and other markers of difference (e.g. gender, social class, and language) resulting in a fragmented individual" (Cruz et al., 2024).

Methodology

This review was conducted using a systematic approach. In a systematic review, the researchers report the steps they took, which are clearly planned and described in detail. All approaches are reported with transparency, and methodological decisions are grounded in theory for the reader to reference (Hyet et al., 2014; Jahan et al., 2016). These factors listed above were accounted for during the review process.

Figure 1: PRISMA Diagram



Five electronic databases were selected for this literature review: Teacher Reference Center, PsycINFO, PsycArticles, ERIC, and EBSCOHost. These databases were chosen because of their multidisciplinary character and range within the field of literacy and child studies. The following keywords and phrases were used across the databases using the boolean operators “AND” and “OR” throughout early childhood literacy, diversity, culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive instruction, and culturally inclusive. No filters were applied in the initial search of the literature. This search yielded 69 articles. All results were imported into Zotero.

Screening

Articles were for their relevance to the research questions and study topic overall. The screening and selection process was conducted by the primary author to determine the eligibility of the articles in the sample. Articles that were both kept and removed were tracked on an Excel spreadsheet with the categories: abstract, author, year, and research method to track the removal of duplicates and articles that did not meet the criteria. There were no duplicates in the search, thus articles (n = 69) were screened for the following criteria.

Inclusion Criteria

Articles were included in the sample if they met the following criteria: a) published in an academic journal, b) included early childhood (birth - 7 years old) in their sample, c) focused on childhood literacy as the construct of interest, and d) accounted for aspects of diversity, equity, inclusion, and/or social justice in their investigation.

Exclusion Criteria

Articles were screened and observed for the following indicators of exclusion: a) Articles not published in an academic journal, b) Participants in the study were ages 7 and older, and c) Researchers did not account for early childhood literacy and diversity in their study constructs, and d) conference materials, book chapters, dissertations, etc.

Rationale

Early literacy is a critical component of educational development, laying the foundation for future academic success and lifelong learning. However, ensuring that all children, regardless of their backgrounds, have equitable and inclusive access to early literacy education remains a significant challenge. Diverse socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, and cognitive backgrounds among children necessitate tailored approaches to early literacy that recognize and address these differences. Equitable and inclusive approaches in early literacy aim to provide all children with the opportunities and resources they need to develop essential literacy skills.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of equity and inclusion in education, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of how these approaches are being implemented in early literacy programs and their impact on diverse student populations. A scoping review is needed to: (i) map existing literature to identify and categorize the various strategies and interventions used to promote equity and inclusion in early literacy, (ii) clarify concepts and definitions related to equitable and inclusive early literacy practices to establish a common understanding, (iii) identify research gaps to highlight areas where evidence is lacking or where more research is needed to inform practice and policy, and (iv) inform future research in order to provide a foundation for more focused systematic reviews or primary research studies by identifying the scope and nature of existing research.

In conducting this scoping review, we aimed to explore the current state of knowledge on representation in early childhood literature. Our research questions were highly specific, targeting a niche area within the broader field of accessibility and inclusiveness in early reading, which inherently limited the number of relevant studies available. Despite a thorough and systematic search of multiple databases, including PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science, as well as a manual search of reference lists and gray literature, only five studies met our stringent inclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria were intentionally rigorous to ensure that only the most relevant and high-quality studies were considered. These criteria included specific characteristics of the population,

types of interventions, and outcome measures. By focusing on quality over quantity, we were able to conduct a more in-depth examination of the available evidence. The selected articles were chosen based on their methodological rigor and relevance to our research question, ensuring that our findings are based on robust and credible sources. Furthermore, the limited number of studies highlights the scarcity of research on our topic, which is an important finding in itself. This scoping review aims to map the existing literature and identify significant gaps that warrant further investigation. By highlighting the paucity of studies, we hope to stimulate future research efforts in this area. Lastly, it is important to note that the topic under investigation is relatively new, and the body of literature is still developing. The inclusion of a small number of studies reflects the early stage of research in this field and underscores the need for more comprehensive studies in the future. In summary, the inclusion of only five articles in this scoping review is justified by the narrow focus of our research question, the rigorous inclusion criteria, the comprehensive search strategy, the emphasis on quality, the identification of research gaps, and the emerging nature of the field. This review provides valuable insights into the current state of knowledge and highlights areas for future research.

Quality Appraisal

To answer the research questions posited in this review, the final sample ($n = 5$) was reviewed according to the quality indicators established by each specific research design. Articles were critiqued and evaluated for their comprehensive ability to address all major facets of academic dissemination and organization.

Qualitative Articles

Qualitative articles ($n = 5$) were assessed by combining the quality criterion outlined in the Quality Studies in Special Education (Bratlinger et al., 2005) and the Reflexive Quality Criteria: Questions and Indicators for Purpose-Driven Special Education Qualitative Research (QR Collective, 2023). These two sources were the foundation for assessing the sample based on the indicators conceptualized, focusing on research questions clarity, methodology, sampling rationale, participant purpose, constructs of interest, and the comprehensive reporting of study findings.

Bratlinger et al.'s (2005) have provided a foundational understanding for evaluating qualitative articles in early childhood special education, by addressing the essential elements of ethnographies, case studies, and phenomenology, aiming to ensure studies are robust, reflective of the experiences of students and families, and have offered insights into the challenges faced in investigations with diverse individuals with disabilities and their families. . Additionally, the paper discusses the obstacles and ethical considerations inherent in conducting qualitative research in disability studies, making it a valuable tool for evaluation in this review.

QR Collective (2023) expands on Bratlinger et al.'s (2005) insights on qualitative studies by highlighting the significance of the narrative that drives the research questions. The updated quality indicators now incorporate cultural, historical, and linguistic factors into analyzing selected articles, addressing reflexivity, identity, community, and contextual complexities previously overlooked in special education research. By integrating these new considerations with traditional qualitative research expectations, a comprehensive approach is taken to evaluate the majority of the studies.

Considerations

These quality indicators were designed to be in line with UDL and CRSP frameworks, (Bratlinger et al., 2005; QR Collective, 2023) and can be used to evaluate research in this field.

Analysis

Supplemental to the quality appraisal, to create themes across the sample, researchers conducted a thematic analysis utilizing the Braun and Clarke (2022) 'six-phase guide' to understand their data. The first step was becoming familiar with the data ($n = 6$ articles) through 'active reading' (Kiteley and Stogdon 2014) which was depicted in Table 1. Six columns were created to highlight the key components of the studies: authors, research purposes, participants, methods, analysis, and results (themes and overview). Next, the second step was to take the sample and screen for initial codes. In this phase, Table 1 served as the foundation from which Table 2 was created to compare social validity and considerations in the research questions. The third step was dedicated to searching for themes in which a thematic map (Bruan & Clarke, 2006) was created which showed three themes: bilingual integration for multiple literacies, DEIJ in the classroom, and classroom community fostering emergent literacy. Following this, the fourth and fifth steps emphasized the review, conceptualization, and naming of the themes using the Watson and Webster (2002) concept matrix. When creating the themes, results were taken into consideration through the theoretical framework of UDL and CRSP (see Figure 1.0).

In our analysis of the current studies on early childhood literacy education, we employed the frameworks of UDL and CRSP as foundational pieces for understanding representation and inclusivity reported across articles. These frameworks guided our screening process and thematic analysis, enabling us to evaluate the inclusivity, effectiveness, and the extent to which researchers communicate the importance of these principles in their respective papers. By using UDL, we assessed how well the studies addressed diverse learning needs and provided multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. Concurrently, the CRSP framework allowed us to examine how the studies supported cultural diversity and sustained the cultural identities of learners. This dual framework approach ensured that our review captured a comprehensive understanding of how current research incorporates inclusive and culturally responsive practices in early childhood literacy education, as reflected in the five selected studies.

Results

Articles published within the last 15 years signified a gradually growing interest in DEIJ perspectives in early childhood literacy. The research was conducted within the United States of America and did not touch upon these subjects in a global context. Though research in early childhood literacy is limited, these articles ($n = 5$) provide insights into empirical considerations.

Table 1 provides a general content matrix overview of the study logistics and Table 2 provides the concept matrix and thematic analysis results.

Articles ($n = 5$) were evaluated for their participant demographics, study characteristics, methods, tools, research design, and emerging patterns across the findings.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis Table: Details on studies included in the review.

Authors	Research Purpose	Participants	Study Design and Methods	Analysis	Results
Garces-Bacsal, 2022	This study aims to expand the selection of picture books available to early childhood educators by incorporating international titles translated into English and multicultural titles. The purpose of this proposed expansion is to bolster emotional connections with diverse stories and introduce social and emotional learning skills in early childhood literacy.	Not applicable	This qualitative study used a grounded theory framework and culturally responsive teaching to analyze patterns and themes in diverse picture books.	The research team utilized open, axial, and selective coding to categorize books across five social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies. Peer debriefing was conducted to identify predominant themes, and personal reflexivity was practiced to acknowledge researchers' biases.	Researchers provided a diverse booklist divided across the five SEL competencies. The booklist consisted of titles that are not only aligned with SEL themes but were also developmentally appropriate for early childhood settings. Researchers sought to enhance cultural responsiveness, provide exposure to narratives from around the world, and promote identification and representation for young readers. These findings highlighted the importance of using diverse books to support social and emotional learning in children.
Hilaski, 2020			This qualitative study		
Long et al., 2013	Researchers aim to explore how teachers can use the concept of syncretism to create inclusive literacy practices for young children from minoritized communities. By emphasizing critical syncretism, the research advocates for privileging marginalized traditions and practices to support student achievement and broaden worldviews. The study underscores the importance of challenging discriminatory practices in education by appreciating and implementing syncretism as a powerful learning process.	2 teachers and their grade school classroom accounts	This practitioner paper utilized vignettes from classrooms to present action steps that educators can utilize to create inclusive literacy curriculums. Researchers pulled from texts and research that reference racial pedagogies and emphasize how these can inform culturally responsive practices in literacy instruction.	Researchers used critical syncretism to integrate and merge findings across schools of thought, bodies of literature, and theoretical perspectives in responsive approaches of culturally informed practices in literacy curriculum.	
Naqvi et al., 2012	The purpose of the study was to identify linguistically and culturally responsive teaching practices in dual-language book reading contexts and to document their effects on children's linguistic, metalinguistic, and cultural engagement. The study sought to address the research question of what constitutes effective linguistically and culturally responsive teaching and learning practices in mainstream kindergarten classrooms.	160 children in kindergarten	The quasi-experimental study collected approximately 45 hours of video recordings of reading sessions in 132 sessions of about 20 minutes each. Researchers took detailed descriptions of teaching/learning vignettes to showcase the responsive elements of teaching and evidence of children's growing linguistic, cultural, and metalinguistic awareness.	The analysis focused on teaching/learning vignettes that provided descriptions of the book, session participants, instructional context, excerpts of session transcriptions, and an analysis of the session to highlight the linguistically and culturally responsive elements of teaching and children's linguistic, cultural, and metalinguistic awareness. They analyzed these recordings to identify exemplary teaching practices that supported multilingual emergent-literacy learners in making meaning of DLBs.	The initial descriptive analysis revealed that about 35% of the sessions showed some evidence of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and learning, with only approximately 10% of sessions including substantive evidence involving extended talk. Researchers highlighted the importance of supporting professional learning communities to enhance culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices in educational settings.
Purnell et al., 2007	Researchers aim to investigate how educators can utilize the integration of early literacy skills and arts to cultivate the appreciation and celebration of cultures in early childhood instruction. The study aimed to establish a theoretical framework through personal accounts that highlight the importance of a viable home-to-school connection for young children.	3 accounts/ anecdotal vignettes were utilized in this study	This practitioner paper shows how researchers analyzed accounts of consideration in early childhood literacy to provide action steps on what can be implemented, integrated, and adapted to optimize student learning.	Anecdotal analysis: observing scenarios through critical lens of culturally informed pedagogy	Researchers highlight through their action steps that incorporating diverse cultural perspectives into the curriculum can help students develop a strong sense of cultural identity, promote inclusivity, and enhance their learning experiences. By bridging the gap between students' home cultures and the classroom environment, educators can create a supportive and engaging learning space that respects and celebrates diversity.

Table 2: Concept matrix identifying main themes (Watson & Webster, 2002)

Article	Themes		
	Bilingual Integration for Multiple Literacies	DEIJ in the Classroom	Classroom Community Fosters Emergent Literacy
Graces-Bacsal & Myra (2020)		X	X
Hilaski, 2018		X	X
Long et al., 2013	X		X
Naqvi et al., 2012	X		X

Note: Totals do not indicate the significance of one theme over the other, they merely showcase the researchers who covered these topics in their respective investigations.

Research Question One

Research question one sought to highlight the study characteristics, specifically the study design and methodology, of current studies on culturally diverse and responsive approaches in early childhood literacy. All the articles in this sample were qualitative (n = 5) in nature. Across the sample, researchers utilized a variety of approaches to assess their research questions from anecdotal (Purnell et al., 2007), ethnography (Long et al., 2013), thematic analysis through axial coding (Garces-Bascal & Myra, 2022), observational (Naqvi et al., 2012), and constant comparative method (Hilaski, 2020). These methodologies were employed to gauge the relevance of culturally responsive approaches in early childhood literacy instruction.

Research Question Two

This next question sought to investigate whether among the studies currently published, did research conducted on early childhood literacy highlight the significance of culturally responsive and representative literature in promoting student engagement, learning, and motivation in early childhood education. Researchers focused on the representation and inclusion of literature representative of DEIJ manners (Graces-Bacsal & Myra, 2022), bilingual education (Long et al., 2013), multiple literacies for diverse learners (Purnell et al., 2007), addressing the cultural mismatch between home and school-based instruction (Hilaski, 2020), and how linguistic and cultural repertoires build emergent literacy skills (Naqvi et al., 2012).

Graces-Bacsal & Myra (2022) qualitatively investigated the importance of “difficult concepts” for early childhood literacy (i.e., death, slavery, racism) of translated English picture-book texts within the social-emotional learning framework. The authors promoted the usage of stories that emphasize these critical topics in developmentally appropriate manners for young readers to encourage inclusion, sensitivity, and empathy within the classroom. Similarly, Long et. al (2013) qualitatively evaluated the syncretic literacy practices used by bilingual students that draw on their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Their evaluation highlighted the significance of

accounting for student identities within the classroom to promote culturally responsive learning and improved literacy outcomes.

Purnell et al. (2007) built upon this by highlighting the need for educators to be well-prepared with a range of skills, attitudes, and foundational knowledge to create culturally responsive classrooms that respect and foster a safe space for all learners and their identities. Researchers spoke to UDL and CRSP guidelines in their future directions for considering multiple literacies in early literacy instruction for dual language learners such that students from different backgrounds feel included and valued. Hilaski (2020) built upon this finding by emphasizing the cultural mismatch culturally and linguistically diverse students face when transitioning into early literacy instruction. This paper explored the significance of expanding childrens' vocabulary in mindful manners that are culturally inclusive and align with UDL foundations of accessibility and CRSP frameworks for equity. Naqvi et al., (2012) further built on this idea because they showed how multicultural, multilingual, and overall globally diverse perspectives enhance student learning thus contributing to increased emergent literacy skills.

Overall, researchers across the sample highlighted the importance of acknowledging student identities in early literacy instruction to enhance the accessibility, quality, and equity of the lessons. Researchers accounted for UDL and CRSP approaches in their analysis to ensure a comprehensive examination of equity and inclusivity in early literacy practices. The UDL framework was employed to assess how early literacy interventions can be designed to be accessible and effective for all learners, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. Simultaneously, the CRSP framework was brought into the analysis because it focused on identifying strategies that recognize and value the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students, promoting their engagement and success. This dual approach enabled a thorough evaluation of the literature, highlighting best practices and gaps in the implementation of equitable and inclusive early literacy education.

Research Question Three

Lastly, articles were scanned for emerging patterns in the findings with research on representation, equity, and inclusion in early childhood literacy. Overall, all articles within our sample reflected themes of DEI and its significance in the lives of young readers in early childhood education. The following three themes emerged from the thematic analysis: Bilingual integration for multiple literacies, DEI in the classroom, and classroom community fosters emergent literacy (see Table 2.0).

Bilingual Integration for Multiple Literacies

Graces-Bacsal & Myra (2022) highlighted the importance of integrating cultural and linguistic diversity among dual language learners in early childhood literacy. Long et al. (2013) similarly shaped their qualitative study to further emphasize the dual identities that bilingual students bring to literacy lessons. Purnell et al. (2007) built on these strengths by showcasing the variability and power of multilingual instruction for all learners in emergent literacy.

DEI in the Classroom

Graces-Bacsal & Myra (2022) deeply analyzed the importance of instructing young learners on economic, social, and personal issues around diversity and equity in early childhood instruction. They posited emergent literacy as an opportunity to grow awareness and empathy across all learners in the classroom. Similarly, Hilaski (2020) built upon this by showing how having these conversations in early childhood education settings can contribute to building awareness and vocabulary in young learners. Lastly, Purnell et al. (2007) emphasized that children bring their



own unique identities into the classroom, which shape how they view the world through DEIJ lenses.

Classroom Community Fosters Emergent Literacy

Graces-Bacsal and Myra (2022) demonstrated that integrating student identities into classroom instruction enhances a collective learning experience. Hilaski (2020) described this as a communal learning environment that strengthens emergent literacy skills for all learners. Long et al. (2013) emphasized that while diversity encompasses various aspects together, it can create a representative environment reflective of real-world settings, preparing learners for the future. Naqvi et al. (2012) highlighted this in their exploration of cultural and linguistic sensitivity when designing learning spaces that foster emergent literacy skills.

Discussion

Preparing early educators to cross-pollinate CSP and UDL ensures that learning environments are proactively developed to be responsive to the student's academic, social, and behavioral needs (Alim et al, 2017). Instead of retrospectively integrating elements responsive to student needs, a cross-pollinated approach acknowledges and celebrates the funds of knowledge—abilities, assets, and backgrounds—that children bring to the classroom, reflecting them in their learning environment (Paris, 2012). Central to the combined UDL-CSP framework is the idea that children should see themselves in their curriculum while being provided multiple paths to access learning (Alim et al., 2020). Realizing pedagogical approaches and learning environment creation that reflects these ideas is no simple task, however, as it requires early educators to engage in deep reflection on their own practice, identify equity gaps in their classrooms, and thoughtfully redesign the curriculum to address the needs of all learners.

The first research question focused on examining the study characteristics, including study design and methodology, of current research on culturally diverse and responsive approaches in early childhood literacy. The sample (n = 5) employed different research methods such as anecdotal assessment, ethnography, thematic analysis, quasi-experimental observational studies, and the constant comparative method to approach their investigations around their respective topics about diversity and emergent literacy instruction. Researchers used these varied approaches to evaluate the significance of culturally responsive practices in early childhood literacy instruction.

The second question explored the importance researchers placed on culturally responsive and representative literature in enhancing student engagement, learning, and motivation in early childhood education. Across the sample, researchers investigated topics such as difficult concepts in early childhood literacy, bilingual education, multiple literacies for diverse learners, cultural mismatches in instruction, and the role of linguistic and cultural backgrounds in emergent literacy skills. These studies emphasized the significance of using developmentally appropriate stories to address critical topics, recognizing student identities to promote culturally responsive learning, preparing educators with the necessary skills for creating inclusive classrooms, expanding children's vocabulary in culturally inclusive ways, and leveraging multicultural perspectives to enhance student learning. Overall, the findings underscored the value of acknowledging student identities in early literacy instruction to improve accessibility, quality, and equity in educational settings aligned with the CRSP framework and UDL guidelines for instruction.

Lastly, the third research question utilized thematic analysis and concept mapping to identify three emerging patterns across the sample: Bilingual integration for multiple literacies, DEIJ

in the classroom, and the role of the classroom community in fostering emergent literacy. Across the studies, researchers highlighted the importance of integrating cultural and linguistic diversity among dual language learners, emphasizing the dual identities of bilingual students and showcasing the power of multilingual instruction in emergent literacy. They also delved into instructing young learners on social, equity, and personal injustices to promote awareness and empathy in the classroom. The significance of student identities in building a collective learning experience, fostering emergent literacy skills, and preparing learners for the future was emphasized across the studies.

Limitations

This topic is relatively new to educational studies as states nationwide are working to better understand the manners of CRSP and UDL in early childhood literacy instruction. In this light, despite our team not putting any filters or restrictions on our database searches, we have a limited scope in our final sample, which yielded only five articles. Additionally, as more scholars are likely working to publish their findings, the existing literature may not yet reflect the full scope of research being conducted in this area. Consequently, it is challenging to draw definitive conclusions about the effectiveness and implementation of CRSP and UDL in early childhood literacy instruction based on the current sample. Future research should continue to explore this emerging field to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Future Directions: Applications for the Field

For the field of early childhood education research and early childhood educators looking to design learning environments that are accessible and inclusive proactively, considerations for ensuring children’s successful mastery of emergent literacy skills and engagement in a barrier-free learning environment should drive the planning process (Bennett et al., 2016). Early educators should also be aware that current school practices privilege certain forms of knowledge and practice in literacy (i.e., printed text, monocultural representation, and background knowledge) and can create barriers for children from diverse backgrounds and those with diverse dis/abilities. This further becomes a setback in academic achievement as these students transition to consider post-secondary education options (Bayly, 2020). For example, children in early childhood settings, including those with disabilities, may be unable to access literacy if the texts are print-based and require alphabetic knowledge or decoding skills they may not possess (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). Additionally, some children with diverse motor, visual, or auditory abilities may not be able to handle, use, or listen to these texts (Hudson & Browder, 2014). This contributes to the academic achievement gap that prevents students from pursuing higher education and related opportunities as they mature through the grade school system (Kennedy et al., 2012).

Additional considerations should be made for how literature that captures student engagement will foster children’s interest in learning to read in the emergent literacy stage. Given that the student population in the United States continues to represent a more culturally and linguistically diverse population, early educators need to look beyond the historically monocultural, monolingual, and single access points to curriculum and instruction currently used in early literacy programs (Carroll et al., 2019; Cohn, 2020).

Cross-Pollinating UDL and CRSP

Early educators should be willing to adapt and customize their approach in response to their current children’s unique needs and experiences. Mindful practices require ongoing observation,



reflection, and collaboration with children, families, and colleagues to create a truly inclusive and responsive learning environment. Particularly, early educators must strive to avoid tokenism or approach these practices as mere add-ons to existing teaching methods. Instead, teachers should strive to integrate these practices into their teaching meaningfully by first considering the myriad implications for children from historically minoritized communities in the classroom. Children may have diverse needs and experiences, and attending to the intersectionality of a student's diverse identities may require the teacher to be sensitive to all of their concerns, which may be, at times, conflicting.

Teachers should also be willing to recognize and address instances where power imbalances may negatively impact children's learning experiences. Third, teachers need to engage in ongoing learning. UDL and CRSP are complex and evolving practices, and teachers should be willing to engage in ongoing learning and reflection to understand and implement them fully. These efforts might involve attending professional development sessions, reading relevant research, or collaborating with colleagues interested in these practices. The following will provide an overview of how early educators can thoughtfully and intentionally cross-pollinate UDL and CSP in their emergent literacy curriculum in ways that align with the Division of Early Childhood's Recommended practices.

Developing Equitable Curricular Goals to Guide Planning

Beginning with the goals of an early literacy curriculum, NELP (2008) suggests that eleven core knowledge and skills should be addressed in an early literacy curriculum. These elements can be introduced and practiced with children in various ways through research, practice, and theory. To fully engage all children, early educators, and researchers can focus on developing CRSP-aligned goals that allow children to explore and share their identities through the exploration of children's literature and the sharing of personal narratives. Both researchers and teachers can then ensure that all children have equitable means for achieving the established goal. A commitment to a CRSP-UDL approach to early literacy instruction should also include opportunities for active family participation as children develop increased literacy skills when multiple stakeholders participate in the child's academic endeavors early in their school lives (Clarke et al., 2009).

Future areas of research and practice should emphasize the critical importance of including families in emergent literacy programs. Establishing a strong home-school connection not only sets families up for long-term success with schools but also provides children with additional opportunities to engage in literacy activities. This connection also creates avenues for families to share recommended books, stories, traditions, and celebrations with early educators. To further advance this field, researchers and educators should explore the following areas:

- Investigating which emergent literacy skills are targeted by lessons and determining effective strategies for involving families in achieving these goals.
- Developing and assessing the accessibility of educational materials to ensure all children can benefit from them.
- Designing and evaluating collaborative activities that sustain the classroom community and foster the development of children's emergent literacy skills.

By addressing these areas, future research and practice can enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of early literacy education.

Creating Flexible Discourse Opportunities for Children

A final consideration for researchers is developing an empirical knowledge base that embeds elements of CRSP and UDL in emergent literacy would create opportunities for children to engage in meaningful conversations. Making space for student voice and classroom discourse in both schools and academic literature are core elements of CRSP (Hammond, 2014). However, for some children and marginalized groups, classroom conversations can present multiple barriers that do not get discussed in research. Driven by the UDL Guidelines (CAST, 2018), early educators and researchers working with these populations should strive to offer children multiple means of action and expression. For example, instead of offering one option for demonstrating knowledge or engaging in classroom discourse, options can include small group classroom dialogues, video narratives, artistic expression, poetry, painting, or poster creations that allow children multiple opportunities to express themselves and share their ideas. These opportunities promote lifelong learning that leads children to pursue higher education prospects in the future (Ne'eman & Shaul, 2023).

Conclusion

Early educators can still deliver evidence-based practices with holistically focused goals that address the needs of all learners. By engaging in an instructional design process guided by UDL and CRSP, teachers, children, and families are empowered while compassionately sharing, learning about, and viewing the world around them through emergent literacy instruction. While this manuscript has aimed to guide applying multiple curriculum design frameworks to emergent literacy, further research can support inclusive practices in early childhood literacy that combine UDL and CRSP. Representation starts by giving a voice to all families and children. At the same time, further directions promote increased belonging and inclusiveness by continuing the conversation on sensitivity and representation for all learners.

About the Authors:

Melody Mann is a first generation doctoral student, McNair alumna, and former McNair/TRIO writing specialist who is at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her research interests focus on equity and inclusion for diverse students in special education, specifically Punjabi American immigrants. Dr. Matthew Love and Dr. Sudha Krishnan are both Assistant Professors at San Jose State University. Dr. Love's research focuses on Universal Design for Learning to promote inclusive education for all learners in special education. Dr. Krishnan's research focuses on implementing literacy practices using pedagogies based on socio-cultural theory that can provide challenging and empowering education for students with disabilities. Together, all authors are dedicated to creating holistic representation for historically underrepresented populations in academia.



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