English Learners & Disproportionality in Special Education

Addressing Critical Equity Issues

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English Learners & Disproportionality in Special Education

One of the questions that I have most often been asked during my years as a bilingual/ESL teacher educator is how to distinguish between academic difficulties caused by a language or learning disability and academic difficulties caused by lack of proficiency in a second language.
- Suzanne Irujo, The ELL Outlook, March/April 2004

The overrepresentation of English Learners (ELs) in special education classes is one of the critical issues affecting this group of students. Research indicates that one of the factors affecting this overrepresentation of ELs is the difficulty educators have distinguishing students who truly have special education needs from students who are learning English as a second language (Artiles & Klingner, 2006). ELs are disadvantaged by the scarcity of appropriate valid and reliable assessment instruments and a lack of personnel trained to conduct culturally valid educational assessments. ELs who need special education services are further negatively impacted by the shortage of special education teachers and/or specialists who are trained to address their language and disability needs simultaneously.

The identification of ELs in special education is quite complex because linguistic and immigration factors compound cultural, socioeconomic, and other influences (Klingner, Artiles, & Mendez-Barletta, 2006). For example, determining whether an EL is struggling with reading because of a learning disability or factors associated with language acquisition is particularly challenging (Klingner et al. 2008). Artiles et al. (2005) conducted research regarding special education placement patterns of subpopulations of ELs in urban districts in California and noted significant overrepresentation when they examined data by grade, special education category, and language program (straight English immersion, modified English immersion, bilingual), and level of English proficiency. Findings showed that older ELs were more likely to be overrepresented than younger ELLs. Researchers also found that ELs in straight English immersion programs were more likely to be identified than their peers in modified immersion and bilingual programs. Finally, findings demonstrated that students whose language proficiency tests indicated that they were limited in both Spanish and English were more likely to be placed in special education than ELs with higher scores in their native language (Hoover & Klingner, 2011).

Legal provisions provide a framework for providing ELs with disabilities with appropriate services for both their English language acquisition and specific disability. Ortiz & Yates

(2001) recommend the following practices aligned with current legislation:

- Prevention and early intervention services to avoid unnecessary special education referrals.
- Referral processes that distinguish struggling learners from students who are likely to have disabilities.
- Assessments conducted by qualified bilingual evaluators who use culturally valid instruments and procedures appropriate for ELs and provide accurate data about native language and English language performance.
- Use of interpreters for non-English speaking parents.
- Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) that are culturally and linguistically relevant and that describe how services for English language acquisition and academic instruction will be provided simultaneously.

In addition, Hoover & Klingner (2011) also recommend keeping in mind the following when assessing ELs for potential learning disabilities:

- Use alternative ways of assessing students' strengths to determine the upper limits of their potential.

- Conduct observations of student in different settings as part of any evaluation.
- Pay greater attention to cultural and affective considerations when evaluating students (e.g., sources of potential conflict, motivation).
- Give greater attention to students' native language and the role of language acquisition when determining whether a student may have a learning disability.
- Consider that weak auditory processing skills could indicate language acquisition issues rather than a cognitive processing disorder or learning disability.
- Evaluate students in their first language as well as English to determine predictors of reading achievement.
- Evaluate each assessment device prior to its use with ELs to make certain that it is appropriate for the population for which it is used.

Interpret assessment scores relative to learners' experiential backgrounds and English language proficiency levels to put results into a meaningful and relevant context.

PROMISING PRACTICES

- Determining Appropriate Referrals of English Language Learners to Special Education: A Self-Assessment Guide for Principals http://www.dcsig.org/files/DeterminingAppropriateReferralsOfEnglishLanguageLearnersToSpecialEducation.pdf
- English Language Learners and Response to Intervention – Referral Considerations http://www.k12.wa.us/SpecialEd/pubdocs/APR_Resources/ELL_RTI.pdf
- English Language Learners with Special Needs: Effective Instructional Strategieshttp://www.ldonline.org/article/5622/

- Learning Disability of Language Development Issue?
  http://www.everythingesl.net/inservices/special_education.php
- Strategies for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students with Special
  Needshttp://practicalstrategies.wmwikis.net/file/view/Strategies+for+Culturally+and+Linguistically+Diverse+Students.pdf

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