Providing an Appropriate Education to English Language Learners with Disabilities

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Background

In recent years, there has been an influx of refugees, unaccompanied minors, immigrants, and migrant workers into the United States. For many in these groups, English is not their first language. These individuals and families struggle with many obstacles, including access to work, health care, affordable housing, and equitable education for their children. In addition to their unfamiliarity with a new language and culture, families face even greater challenges when their child has a disability. Many families struggle to gain access to educational services and supports in a new and unfamiliar system, which is not always cognizant of, or responsive to, their individual needs. The interaction of numerous complex factors often results in the over-identification, underidentification, or misidentification of English language learners (ELL) receiving special education and related services (Gonzalez, Brusca-Vega, & Yawkey, 1997).

Appropriate and Valid Assessments

Evaluating a student's eligibility for special education and related services can be a complicated process.

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that students be assessed in their native language, but as the ELL population continues to grow in this country, so does its diversity.
- Very few psychological assessments have been normed on populations of Spanish-speaking students living in the United States (Abedi, 2002).
- If a student speaks a less common native language or resides in a less diverse district, the process for obtaining a valid and reliable assessment can be much more difficult.
- Districts are forced to rely on less-than-optimal measures of a student's ability and performance when determining eligibility for special education and related services, because assessments are not normed in diverse languages, and districts lack professional personnel certified to administer exams (Wilkinson et al., 2006).

Mandate for native language assessments

Lack of normed tools

Lack of number of less common languages

Lack of bilingual professionals

Disability vs. Language Acquisition

School teams may struggle with differentiating between a potential disability and typical progression in the language acquisition process.

- Due to the fact that difficulties in reading, vocabulary, and comprehension are often ascribed to the language acquisition process, many ELL students with specific learning disabilities are not identified as early as students whose primary language is English (Samson & Lesaux, 2008).
- Samson and Lesaux found that when compared to primarily English-speaking peers in kindergarten, first, and third grade, students who are ELL and had learning disabilities (LD) were under-identified in earlier grades and overrepresented in grade three (2008).
- Early identification is a critical component of all intervention; unfortunately, it is often not an option for young students who require ELL and special education and related services, because professionals lack the necessary training to be able to recognize the need for referral and intervention.

Lack of training and professionals

Lack of training and professionals

Under-identification and and -representation

Implementation

Once an ELL student has been referred, evaluated, and determined eligible for special education and related services, the real work of education begins. Implementation of services brings a host of new concerns when a child is both an ELL and a student with a disability.

- Placement, curriculum, and instruction need to be highly tailored to meet the unique needs of the student.
- For many districts, ELL services are limited and special educators are not trained to work with limited English proficient (LEP) populations (McLaughlin, Artiles, Pullin, 2001).
- This disjointed approach can be highly ineffective and often results in students not receiving an appropriate educational program, as required by law.

Tailoring placement, curriculum, & instruction

Lack of trained professionals program

Inappropriate educational program

Recommendations

Accurate Assessments and Identification

• When making special education eligibility determinations for ELL students, one resource school teams may wish to reference is the "Questions to guide data gathering and deliberations" list created by Wilkinson et al. (2006). The list provides teams with questions that address the areas of early intervention; referral, assessment, and multidisciplinary team creation when data gathering; and the intervention, referral, assessment, and eligibility determination process (Wilkinson, et al. 2006).

Professional Development and University Partnerships

• School teams under-identify ELL students with LD in early grades because they lack the necessary training needed to make the appropriate recommendations (Samson & Lesauz, 2008). One way a district may increase access to professional development is through a partnership with a university. IRIS, Vanderbilt University's online professional development portal, offers a variety of resources for educators and policymakers. Relevant modules include Dual Language Learners with Disabilities: Supporting Young Children in the Classroom, and Disability Awareness: Cultural Attitudes ("Iris," n.d.). Stanford University recently released online course materials that were used in their ELL teacher preparation program and developed resources for teachers of ELL students in specific content areas, including unit and lesson plans that are specifically designed to address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners in inclusive classrooms.

Response to Intervention

• A Response to Intervention (RTI) approach can assist in addressing the issue of disproportionality of ELL students receiving special education and related services. The use of clearly developed and documented transition and exit plans, which adequately prepare students for success in general education, can prevent the early or delayed release of students from ELL and/or Individualized Education Program (IEP) services (Linan-Thompson & Ortiz, 2009). Using a RTI approach, with universal screening and progress monitoring, can help identify ELL students who may be struggling and then ensure that the services and supports being provided are appropriate and effective (Linan-Thompson & Ortiz, 2009).

Family Engagement

• Considering the complexity and diversity of students who are both ELL and IEP eligible, it is critical to engage parents, families, and/or caregivers in the education process. Family participation and input can provide the school team with valuable insights into the child's previous exposure to formal education, relevant medical and developmental history, cultural mores, and past academic performance. Legislation and policy mandate the availability of some IEP documents in the family's native language, and translation services for families whose primary language is not English (Raj, 2015). It is recommended that schools go beyond minimum outreach to fully engage parents and communities in the education process (Boscardin, Brown-Chidsey, & Gonzalez-Martinez, 2001).



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