

# Forging a Knowledge Base on English Language Learners with Special Needs: Theoretical, Population, and Technical Issues

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This special issue includes manuscripts commissioned by the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt) for a national conference on English Language Learners (ELLs) with special needs. The conference was held in November 2004 in Scottsdale, Arizona, with the cosponsorship of the Council for Exceptional Children, the National Association of Bilingual Education, and Arizona State University. NCCRESt pursued this initiative as part of its mandate to address the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. At the heart of this problem are ability and competence ideologies that structure opportunities to learn for minority students. This 37-year-old literature shows African American and Native American students are most affected in the so-called high incidence disabilities (mental retardation, learning disabilities, and emotional/behavioral disorders; Donovan & Cross, 2002). Child factors and systemic forces (e.g., opportunity to learn, biased procedures) seem to account for the problem, though there is wide variability on the disability categories and ethnic groups affected across states (Artiles & Trent, 2000). Attention to this problem has increased in recent years in the policy and research communities. Thus, federal legislation now requires states to gather evidence on, monitor, and address this problem, and a body of empirical evidence is slowly beginning to accumulate (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004).

Surprisingly, there is a dearth of scholarship on ELL placement in special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982).

Recent studies suggest that ELLs were overrepresented in districts that served a sizable population of ELLs, particularly older students who had, by district criteria, limited proficiency in their first language *and* English (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higuera, 2005). Nevertheless, it was not clear what shaped these placement patterns; for example, was it due to lack of first-language proficiency, child poverty, literacy in first language, assessment procedures, referral bias, or lack of opportunity to learn in general education? Unfortunately, the research knowledge base on ELLs with special needs is rather thin (Klingner, Artiles, & Barletta, 2006). A recurrent question raised in these discussions relates to the diagnosis of disabilities with this population—that is, how can practitioners differentiate between ELLs who struggle to learn because of a disability and ELLs who struggle to learn because of language acquisition issues?

It is paradoxical that we possess little knowledge about ELLs in special education at a time of explosive changes in this population. ELLs represent a sizable portion of student populations in the nation's school districts. In some states, ELLs constitute over a quarter of the population (California, Texas), whereas in other states, they constitute about one fifth of all students (Arizona, Florida, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, and Rhode Island; United States Department of Education, 2003). All in all, over 3 million ELLs attend schools in the United States. ELLs are a complex heterogeneous population in which many nationalities and languages are represented. At the same time, however, Latino/Latina Spanish-speaking students constitute about three fourths of the ELL population (Zehler et al., 2003). It is unfortunate that ELLs exhibit negative educational outcomes that include academic achievement and dropout rates. The majority of the ELLs who struggle academically exhibit reading difficulties (Klingner et al., 2006). Preliminary evidence suggests that a disproportionate number of ELLs are being placed in special education, particularly those ELLs considered to lack proficiency in their first and second language. Unfortunately, the research base on the link between language acquisition and literacy learning is still rather thin (August & Hakuta, 1997; Klingner et al., 2006).

This state of affairs is complicated by the fact that language acquisition processes can be easily misunderstood as learning disabilities (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Ortiz, 1997). Educators, particularly special educators, have a bias toward accounting for within-child factors (e.g., cognitive deficits) when explaining learning difficulties. This is a significant problem because socio-cultural factors associated with the acquisition of a second language can be overlooked. Moreover, variables associated with opportunity to learn can also increase the chances of special education placement, particularly for low-income minority students (Harry & Klingner, 2006). It is critical, therefore, that educators are prepared to discern between second language

acquisition and special needs, but as we explained above, practitioners do not have access to a substantive research knowledge base.

The dearth of research with this population, and the prominence of the disproportionate representation problem and its potential (though largely unknown) impact on ELLs fueled the need for the NCCRESt conference. The meeting papers focused on high-incidence disabilities, with an emphasis on learning disabilities (LD) because they account for over half of the population with disabilities in the United States. Half of the conference papers were published in the *Journal of Learning Disabilities* (Klingner et al., 2006) because our goal was to address both special education and general education audiences. Indeed, this is a problem that concerns both constituencies. The conference addressed theoretical, population, and technical issues. The following questions guided the design of the conference:

*Theoretical.* Do the theoretical assumptions of the LD definition take into account linguistic and cultural differences? What are the limits of such assumptions? What is the nature of LDs in a society in which cultural and linguistic differences pervade? For this purpose, we invited Margaret Gallego, Grace Zamora Durán, and Elba Reyes (2006) to prepare a socio-historical analysis of the definition and identification procedures in the LD field. Their analysis contrasts traditional LD perspectives with sociohistorical theory, which results in the identification of key theoretical tensions in current understandings of LDs.

*Population.* Who are the ELLs? Beyond the traits that define them as a distinctive population, what do we know about within-group variability? Have the characteristics of this population and subgroups changed over time, and what are the implications of such changes for policy, research, and practice? Eugene E. Garcia and Delis Cuéllar (2006) offer a comprehensive profile of the ELL population in the United States, including historical trends and subgroups within this complex community.

*Technical.* By “technical,” we mean the agreed-upon professional practices and procedures related to instruction in general education, referral, assessment, and identification tools and practices. Thus, we asked, What culturally based design features and assumptions embedded in professional practices and procedures mediate the identification of LD with ELLs? Janette Klingner and Beth Harry (2006) reported a study to address this theme in the context of special education referrals and decision-making processes during eligibility team meetings. A key technical area is assessment, particularly because assessment results from standardized tools play a major role in eligibility and placement decisions. For this purpose, Jamal Abedi (2006) addressed the issue of psychometric bias in the assessment of

ELLs, with a focus on the impact of test-item language complexity on student performance. Next, we included two manuscripts on semilingualism, which was originally defined as “less than native-like command of the vocabulary and syntactic structures” of a child’s first and second languages (Cummins, 1979, p. 238). This is a highly controversial notion that has been criticized over the years on empirical and theoretical grounds. Jeff MacSwan and Kellie Rolstad (2006) reported a study in which they examined the validity of language proficiency tests used to determine semilingualism. Their comparative analysis of standardized language proficiency tests with natural language samples raises critical questions about the validity of such tests and the notion of semilingualism. In turn, Kathy Escamilla (2006) conducted a study in which the notion of semilingualism was extended from oral to written language; she examined teachers’ assessment of ELL writing performance in English and Spanish tasks. Her study shows that teachers’ constructions of *biliteracy* were not necessarily supported by the writing evidence, nor by the type of training that teachers had received. Willy Solano-Flores (2006) authored the last assessment manuscript. He contributed a sociolinguistic assessment framework that aimed to account for ELLs’ linguistic repertoires and practices by addressing language, dialects, and register. Solano-Flores also proposed the use of generalizability theory to gauge how ELL performance is influenced by student proficiency in the dialect encoded in the test, and by the linguistic demands of test items. The final technical issue addressed in the special issue is instruction. Bernhard, Cummins, Campoy, Ada, Winsler, and Bleiker (2006) reported on the Early Authors Program (EAP), a literacy model that targeted young ELLs at risk for school failure. The program aimed to promote the development of language and literacy and cultural identities in a text-rich instructional environment. After describing the components of the program, Bernhard et al. reported an experimental evaluation of the EAP and summarized the positive outcomes of this intervention project. The special issue concludes with Nonie Lesaux’s discussion of future directions for research with ELLs; she raised critical questions and identified important challenges for this field of inquiry that covered theoretical and methodological considerations. We expect that this special issue will contribute to the emerging research knowledge base on ELLs with special needs.

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