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Identification of English Language Learners in Special Education

Sonia George
Governors State University

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Identification of English Language Learners in Special Education

Sonia George

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Abstract

This study investigated the knowledge and opinions of teachers with regards to the identification of English language learners (ELLs) for special education services. The participants were 22 general education and special education teachers at two schools in a school district in the Chicago suburbs. The data collected included responses to a questionnaire. The questionnaire asked teachers to consider different factors that influence the placement of ELLs in special education. The results indicated that teachers did not believe there is a disproportionate amount of ELLs being identified for special education. On average, approximately 90% of the teachers surveyed believe that teacher training, language barrier, response to intervention (RTI) implementation, and parent communication all are factors in ELL identification. Almost half believed that socioeconomic status did not influence ELL identification.

Keywords: English language learners, special education, survey

Identification of English Language Learners in Special Education

Chapter 1

Introduction

For the past several decades, research has indicated that there is a disproportionate number of minorities (racial, ethnic, and language) in special education (Morgan et al., 2015). In fact, Morgan et al. state that legislation has been put into place to prevent disproportionality from occurring. Although the problem has been occurring for several decades, it was first addressed at the federal level by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) in its 2004 reauthorization (Beratan, 2008). Morgan et al. (2015) state that this law requires local education agencies to report on the representation of minorities in their programs. If minorities are overrepresented, then 15% of Part B funds from IDEA must be allocated for early intervention services specifically for minority students with disabilities (Morgan et al., 2015).

This paper will focus specifically on the disproportionate numbers of English language learners (ELLs) in special education. Data indicate that the number of ELLs identified for special education is increasing (Sullivan, 2011). Sullivan further explained that ELLs are more likely than any other group to be retained in their grade or dropout from school. Additionally, she states that other factors work against ELLs, such as the presence of English-only laws and the shortage of bilingual educators. These disadvantages, she explained, can result in students being identified for special education without actually needing services.

Statement of the Problem

Sullivan (2011) described how the Civil Rights Movement following the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) promoted the equality of students in education; however, the existence of disproportionality indicates “problems of inequity,

prejudice, and marginalization within the education system” (p. 318). According to Hibel and Jasper (2012), there are a number of problems associated with inappropriate placement in special education. They state that these issues include: unnecessary costs to educate the child, the stigmatization of children, and lower educational expectations. The result of these issues, is “flatter achievement trajectories” and “poorer socioemotional outcomes” for ELLs placed inappropriately. (Hibel & Jasper, 2012, p. 504).

Purpose of the Study

This study examined the knowledge and perceptions of educators who work with ELL students. The study surveyed educators’ views on how ELLs are being identified for special education services. Furthermore, the accuracy of the assessments conducted will be reviewed.

Questions of the Study

The study focuses on two research questions. What are educators’ understanding of identification of ELLs for special education services? The second question is: what are educators’ perceptions regarding the identification of ELLs for special education services. The study explored how educators view these important issues.

Assumptions and Limitations

One assumption of the study was that there is inappropriate referral to special education for ELLs. Another assumption was that the educators who respond to the survey have basic understanding of the legal and educational consequences of inappropriate identification of students for special education services. One limitation was the probability of socially appropriate, rather than honest, answers to the survey questions. These individuals likely have their own biases about the education of ELLs, but may choose to disguise their actual beliefs.

Another limitation is that for the Multicategorical Special Education program at Governors State University, students must complete their research within one semester.

Educational Significance of the Study

As discussed above, inappropriate placement in special education can have a detrimental impact on a child; this can mean that they miss out on educational opportunities or are stigmatized by their peers (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Additionally, the cost of services means other demands on funds might go unmet. The educational significance of this study is that it addresses whether ELLs are being accurately identified for special education.

Definition of Terms

Disproportionate. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines disproportionate as “having or showing a difference that is not fair, reasonable, or expected: too large or too small in relation to something” (para. 1). This study will examine whether the percentage of ELLs in special education is large in relation to the total number of ELLs who are present within a school.

English language learners. According to the Glossary of Education Reform (2013), English language learners are “students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds, and who typically require specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses” (para. 1).

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). According to Yell (2015), there are six principles of IDEA: zero reject, free appropriate public education (FAPE), protection in evaluation, least restrictive environment (LRE), procedural safeguards, and parent participation. Additionally, Yell states that there are 13 categories of disability. In summary, these six principles ensure that students within the 13 disability categories have access to an education that is the least restrictive possible, free, and appropriate for the student (Yell, 2015).

Part B of IDEA. According to the American Psychological Association (n.d.) this section “lays out the educational guidelines for school children 3-21 years of age” (para. 3). According to Morgan et al. (2015), if there is an overrepresentation of minorities in a particular area, that area is mandated to allocate 15% of their Part B funds from IDEA to support early intervention services for minorities with disabilities.

Response to Intervention (RTI). According to RTI Action Network (n.d.), RTI is a “multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and

behavior needs” (para. 1). RTI Action Network emphasizes that RTI requires scientifically based instruction and ongoing assessment of student progress.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), ELLs are protected by this act, which forbids discrimination on individuals based on their race, color, or national origin. This law indicates that programs educating ELLs must be: “based on a sound educational theory; adequately supported, with adequate and effective staff and resources, so that the program has a realistic chance of success; and periodically evaluated and, if necessary, revised” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, para. 3).

Chapter Summary

As stated above, many studies conducted regarding the presence of ELLs in special education suggest disproportionality (Sullivan, 2011; Beratan, 2008; Hibel & Jasper, 2012). This paper will examine this issue in depth. Additionally, the paper will examine the extent to which disproportionality of ELLs in special education is a problem in the United States and explore whether or not educators believe that ELLs are being accurately identified for special education services.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Legislation History

There is legislation in place on a federal level which supports ELLs that have disabilities. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 guarantees that ELLs are not discriminated against (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). IDEA (2004) discourages the identification of ELLs for special education; however, the law recognizes that it is at times necessary to refer them for these services (Smith 2005).

Individuals with Disabilities Act (1975)

In 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was passed, transforming the state of education for students with disabilities (Smith, 2005). According to Smith, there were four original purposes for this act. This act assured the following: students with disabilities had a free appropriate public education, the rights of parents and children with disabilities were protected, states were assisted in the provision of services, and children with disabilities were educated effectively (Smith, 2005). Smith states that before this act was passed, there were fewer than 3.5 million children receiving special education services, and they were mostly in self-contained settings.

Smith (2005) explained that IDEA included some important requirements, including:

- Schools are mandated to find children with disabilities and take charge of the referral process.
- Each student in special education was required to have an Individualized Education Program, or IEP.
- Students should be educated in the least restrictive environment, which means they are educated with nondisabled peers to the greatest extent possible.
- Students were entitled to any related services that would help them benefit from special education.
- The federal government provided a large portion of the funding to educate students with disabilities.
- A student is entitled to a free education that was appropriate to their needs, and in a public school setting (Smith, 2005, p. 315).

IDEA 2004

In 2004, some changes were made to IDEA. Smith (2005) indicated that the “highly qualified” requirement made by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was incorporated into IDEA. Smith states that highly qualified means that a special education teacher has a state special education certification (not an emergency certification) and at least a bachelor’s degree. They must also be licensed in the subjects they are teaching, similar to general education teachers (Smith, 2005).

According to Smith (2005), one primary complaint of special education teachers is the amount of paperwork they must complete. In order to address this complaint, IDEA eliminated

the requirement for short-term objectives for Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals for the majority of students. Smith also indicated that the age of transition plans changed from 14 years of age to 16 years of age. Additionally, Smith states that there were changes made to due process requirements, expulsion and suspension, SLD eligibility, and a few other changes. What remained the same, Smith pointed out, is students with disabilities still have the right to a free, appropriate public education.

IDEA and ELLs

According to Dunn and Walker (2008), IDEA (2004) indicates that ELLs should not be considered for learning disability (LD) eligibility. However, they state that there are some cases when consideration may be necessary. This includes the following factors: ability/achievement discrepancy, processing difficulties, expressive and receptive difficulties in both the student's native language and English, and difficulties with reading in both the student's native language and English (Dunn & Walker, 2008).

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), ELLs are protected by this act, which forbids discrimination on individuals based on their race, color, or national origin. This law indicates that programs educating ELLs must be: "based on a sound educational theory; adequately supported, with adequate and effective staff and resources, so that the program has a realistic chance of success; and periodically evaluated and, if necessary, revised" (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, para. 3).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed in December 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). ESSA is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act (ESEA) (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The American Federation of Teachers (AFT, n.d.) developed a document summarizing how the ESSA affects ELLs. The act offers a separate funding specifically for ELLs, and an increase in that funding (AFT, n.d.). Additionally, they may be excluded on certain standardized tests during their first year of enrollment (AFT, n.d.). The act ensures that ELLs receive language instruction that is high quality. According to ESSA, support must be provided to districts that struggle to provide effective language programs.

Disproportionality

As noted above, Morgan et al. (2015) state that research over the past several decades has suggested that there is a disproportionate number of racial, ethnic, and language minorities in special education. However, there is some controversy over whether this disproportionality does in fact exist (Morgan et al., 2015). According to these researchers, disproportionate representation of minorities in special education is actually not an issue. In fact, they argued that previous research has failed to take into account confounding factors that have an impact on special education placement. Morgan et al. cited several other studies when describing these confounding factors, some of which included:

- Low birth weight
- Being raised in poverty
- Receiving lower-quality (e.g., fewer language-based interactions) parenting
- Being raised in lower-resourced home environments (Morgan et al., 2015, p. 3)

In 2015, Morgan et al. conducted a longitudinal study that investigated the extent to which minorities (racial, ethnic, and language) in the United States were under or over-represented in special education when compared to their white, English-speaking peers. After

following students from the beginning of kindergarten through middle school, they discovered that language minorities were less likely to have learning disabilities or speech language impairments; however, they were not less likely to have intellectual disabilities, health impairments, or emotional disturbances. In addition, the researchers found that racial and ethnic minorities were less likely than their white, English-speaking peers to have learning disabilities, speech language impairments, intellectual disabilities, health impairments, or emotional disturbances.

Morgan et al. (2015) take a controversial stance on the issue of disproportionality in special education. Most of the research literature of the past several decades suggests that minorities are in fact overrepresented (Morgan et al., 2015). According to Sullivan (2011), data reveal that the number of English language learners (ELLs) in special education is increasing. Her study examined the representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students (CLD) identified as English language learners in special education, and she found that CLD students are more likely to be identified as having a learning disability or intellectual disability when compared to their white peers. She pointed out that, while states are required to report on disproportionate representation of racial minorities, ELLs are often left out of the discussion. Sullivan argues that additional research on district factors influencing disproportionality of ELLs is needed. While there are certain factors that can predict racial disproportionality, such as “human resources, teacher training, and community poverty”, it is unclear what factors predict disproportionality of ELLs (Sullivan, 2011, p. 327).

The study conducted by Parker, O’Dwyer, and Irwin (2014) found disproportionality of ELLs within a single school district. They discovered that, in an urban school district in Connecticut, the percentage of ELLs in special education was 15.9%, while the overall

percentage of these students in the district was 12%. Sullivan (2011) reported on evidence of disproportionality on a grander scale. She states that some states report up to 17.3% of ELLs are identified as requiring special education services, compared to an average of 9% of all students in the United States.

There is a range of hypotheses regarding causes of disproportionality of ELLs in special education. Fernandez and Inserra (2013) sought to answer this question in their study. They focused their attention on three classroom teachers from different school in Long Island, NY. Interview data revealed that mainstream teachers lacked background on how a second language is acquired (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013). They found that the teachers assumed that ELLs who had mastery over social language would also be able to understand academic language. As a result, they believed that training on second language acquisition is necessary for mainstream teachers.

Assessment of English Language Learners

Assessing ELLs for special education services is a difficult process. Chu and Flores (2011) state that the differences between an ELL with a learning disability and an ELL without a learning disability are difficult to distinguish. They cite Ortiz and Maldonado Colon (1986) in naming characteristics that differ between the two groups: “poor comprehension, difficulty following directions, syntactical and grammatical errors, and difficulty completing tasks” (Chu & Flores, 2011, p. 244). Since it is difficult to identify an ELL with a learning disability, Chu and Flores emphasize that teachers must know the characteristics of each individual ELL to determine if they require special education services.

Figueroa and Newsome (2006) explore the legal issues associated with the assessment of ELLs into special education. They state that, beginning in the 1960s, federal courts explored the

testing of minorities in special education. Figueroa and Newsome explain that at the core of these court cases were two questions: “Do cultural differences make tests biased?” and “Do linguistic differences make tests biased?” (p. 206).

Figueroa and Newsome (2006) investigated the identification of ELLs for special education, and asked, “Is it nondiscriminatory?” (p. 206). They were concerned about possible test bias and discriminatory assessment. Unlike many other studies that explored the psychometric properties of tests, Figueroa and Newsome examined psychological reports used to diagnose specific learning disabilities (SLD). They examined 19 psychological reports on ELLs that were part of the eligibility process for special education. The researchers found that school psychologists do not use existing legal or professional guidelines when reporting on assessments for ELLs.

Kritikos (2003) surveyed speech/language pathologists (SLPs) in five U.S. states about their beliefs about the assessment of bilingual or bicultural people. She found that most SLPs believed they were unable to make bilingual assessment effectively and that in their field there was also little effectiveness in bilingual assessment. She also surveyed SLPs who had learned a second language, both those who learned a language through cultural experience (CE group) and those who learned a language through academic study (AS group; Kritikos, 2003). She discovered that the CE group expressed more confidence in their assessment of bilingual students when compared to the AS group. Furthermore, she found that the AS group had more confidence in bilingual assessment than the monolingual (M group) group of SLPs.

The SLPs who participated in Kritikos’ (2003) study seemed more aware of the impact that language has on the assessment of bilingual individuals than the teachers in interviewed in Fernandez and Inserra’s (2013) study. The teachers in Fernandez and Inserra’s study did not

seem to take into account how acquiring a new language can impact a student and result in mistaken identification of a disability. In contrast, Kritikos (2003) found that a large portion of the SLPs surveyed took into consideration how acquiring a new language could impact a student and took caution to ensure that these students were not misidentified as requiring language services when they really were not necessary. In fact, Kritikos states that 40% of SLPs surveyed were careful in assessing a bilingual student for language services.

Sanchez, Parker, Akbayin, and McTigue (2010) also studied the identification of ELLs with disabilities. They specifically wanted to examine how these students are assessed for SLD. After analyzing school and district data, they cited eight challenges that occur when assessing ELLs for SLDs. These challenges included:

- Difficulties with policy guidelines.
- Different stakeholder views about timing for referral of students who are English language learners.
- Insufficient knowledge among personnel involved in identification.
- Difficulties providing consistent, adequate services to students who are English language learners.
- Lack of collaborative structures in pre-referral.
- Lack of access to assessments that differentiate between second language development and learning disabilities.
- Lack of consistent monitoring for struggling students who are English language learners.
- Difficulty obtaining student's previous school records (Sanchez et al., 2010, p. iii).

The issues presented above relate to the study being conducted for this paper. The review of the literature on assessment of ELLs indicated the importance of having knowledgeable staff that are properly trained to assess ELLs. In addition, it emphasized the importance of having appropriate assessments available in the ELL's native language that can help determine if the ELL does in fact have a disability.

Teacher Training

According to Washburn (2008), it is common for teachers to have ELLs in their classrooms. However, they lack a sufficient amount of training. Washburn states that only 12.5 percent of teachers have had more than eight hours of training on how to assist ELLs in the classroom. Washburn also explains the approach some teachers use to work with ELLs. Some teachers will wait until they are certain the ELLs understand the material (Washburn, 2008). Other teachers do not want to take responsibility for these learners (Washburn, 2008). Instead, Washburn states, they expect ELL teachers to take full responsibility for the learning of ELLs.

Washburn (2008) provides recommendations on how teachers can improve the learning environment for ELLs. First, Washburn emphasizes that ELLs need to feel a sense of belonging. Since they are often the minority at the school or within the class, it is easy for them to feel like an outsider (Washburn, 2008). This begins with helping these learners familiarize themselves with the school environment (Washburn, 2008). Washburn explains that they need to know where important places, such as the cafeteria or library, are located.

Washburn (2008) also provides strategies for comprehension. One strategy is using multiple exemplars of the same item (Washburn, 2008). For example, if it is a mathematics class and they are discussing the circumference of a circle, some exemplars would be plates, coins, clocks, and compasses. Washburn also advises teachers to provide ELLs with enough time to

respond. Their receptive language skills may not be as strong as a native speaker (Washburn, 2008).

In the conclusion of the article, Washburn (2008) provides one final suggestion on how teachers could better serve ELLs – by studying a foreign language. This would help teachers better understand the challenges that their ELL students face, and help them to be more creative when devising lesson plans. Also, a more obvious benefit is that it would help teachers promote comprehension for their ELL learners, as they may be able to provide a translation when necessary.

Language Barrier

Fletcher and Navarrete (2003) studied how language barriers impact ELLs. Their research found that Latino ELLs had an increased likelihood of being placed into a remedial class when compared to their white or black peers. In addition, they found that ELLs were often erroneously assessed as having a learning disability or an intellectual disability. In their study of Latino ELLs, Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung, and Roach-Scott, M (2009) found that administrators, parents, and teachers all agreed that language barrier played a major role in the referral process for special education. They noted that there were a limited number of bilingual staff and interpreters to work with students and their families. The professionals interviewed provided some suggestions on how to solve this problem. They recommended hiring more bilingual staff and interpreters to work with families.

Response to Intervention (RTI) Implementation

In a study conducted by Alvarez surveying special education directors, he found that most of them believed that inadequate implementation of RTI has an impact on how ELLs are identified for special education. Orosco (2010) found that when using RTI with ELLs, a

student's success may be in large part due to how effectively school staff are able to take into consideration a student's sociocultural experiences.

Parent Communication

Lack of parent communication can have an impact on how ELLs are identified for special education. In the case of ELLs, lack of participation by parents does not indicate that parents are uninterested in the academic progress of their children. Often times, this lack of communication is the result of language barrier and limited staff proficient in the parents' native language (Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung, and Roach-Scott, 2009). Additionally, sending home written documentation in the parents' native language does not guarantee that they will understand it. Parents may lack reading skills and have trouble understanding the language used by school professionals.

Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung, and Roach-Scott (2009) found that most school professionals noted a limited number of bilingual staff and interpreters to work with students and their families. The professionals interviewed provided some suggestions on how to solve this problem (Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung, and Roach-Scott, 2009). They recommended hiring more bilingual staff and interpreters to work with families (Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung, and Roach-Scott, 2009).

Socioeconomic Status

In his study of special education directors, Alvarez (2010) found that most of the directors surveyed believed high poverty rate was a factor in the placement of ELLs for special education. He discussed how students may arrive to school without having eaten breakfast and lacking school materials. In addition, they may lack access to technology at home, which affects their ability to complete assignments. He emphasized that teachers need to be trained in how to work to work with students coming from families living in poverty.

Placement/Academic Outcomes

Kim and Garcia (2014) explored how being an ELL affects educational outcomes for these students. Data were obtained through interviews with 13 long-term ELLs along with the analysis of documents (Kim & Garcia, 2014). They found that there is a discrepancy between the students' postsecondary goals and their academic performance. As a result, the researchers questioned the quality of educational programs and also the identification of ELLs with disabilities.

Kim and Garcia (2014) noted that schools have been criticized for placing ELLs in special education due to their academic failure, without taking into account their real needs. Kim and Garcia indicated that special education placement prevents these students from having access to a rigorous curriculum, and as a result, the academic literacy gap increases. The researchers noted that the identification of ELLs for special education services increases in high school, where there are fewer language support services available. They noted that some research shows an underrepresentation of ELLs in primary grades but an overrepresentation in upper elementary levels.

In addition to discussing the issue of misidentification of ELLs for special education that do not need to be there, Kim and Garcia (2014) also recognize that the opposite issue sometimes comes into play. It is possible that ELLs who actually need special education services are not receiving what they need because educators assume that their poor academic performance is actually the result of limited English proficiency.

Similar to Kim and Garcia (2014), Hibel and Jasper (2012) pointed out the issue of students who need special education services, but are not receiving them. Their study found that children of immigrants were less likely to be placed into special education early intervention

services, although they have a heightened need for such services. They believed the reason for this delayed placement was due to the participation in English as a second language programs from a young age and the school district did not want to “duplicate” services for individual students.

Knowledge and Opinions

It is important to examine the knowledge and opinions of educators and other professionals in the school setting to understand their beliefs about the placement of ELLs in special education. Alvarez (2010) collected data on the perceptions of directors of special education on the placement of Latino English language learners of special education in California. Alvarez found that most directors did not believe that there was an overrepresentation of Latino English language learners in special education. There were six factors that directors believed had a major influence on the placement of Latino English learners in special education. These factors include:

- Response to Intervention (RTI) not being implemented
- Teachers not knowing the difference between language acquisition and auditory process
- Differentiated instruction not being implemented in the classroom
- Language barriers
- Some educators are biased
- High poverty rate (Alvarez, 2010, pp. 48 - 49).

Similar to Alvarez (2010), Ferlis (2012) studied the placement of Latino English language learners in special education. However, she studied the perceptions of English as a second language (ESL) teachers, instead of directors of special education. Ferlis found that the

teachers believed that Latino ELL families were less inclined to participate in the pre-referral process. In addition, the teachers stated that special education departments were reluctant to identify Latino ELLs with a learning disability (Ferlis, 2012). Ferlis found that ESL teachers faced three major challenges when identifying students with SLDs. These challenges included: time constraints, language misconceptions, and native language assessment (Ferlis, 2012). Ferlis reported that the ESL teachers' in the study identified three primary recommendations for identifying Latino ELLs with SLDs, including: professional development, native language assessment, and outreach programs.

Cullinan and Kauffman (2005) also studied the placement of students in special education. However, unlike Alvarez (2010) and Ferlis (2012), who studied Latino English language learners, Cullinan and Kauffman studied the identification of African Americans in special education. This group has also been found to be overrepresented in special education. The researchers examined how teacher's opinions of students can differ by race. In order to do this, they analyzed both black and white teachers' ratings of 769 students with emotional disturbance (ED). Based on their results, they reported that racial bias was not the cause of overrepresentation of African Americans.

The research above on the knowledge and opinions of educators and other school professionals indicate that these individuals have differing opinions on the placement of ELLs and African Americans in special education. The directors of special education in Alvarez's (2010) study indicated that they do not believe over-representation of Latino ELLs is an issue. Ferlis (2012) found that time constraints, language misconceptions, and native language assessment present challenges for the placement of Latino ELLs in special education. Cullinan

and Kauffman (2005) determined that teachers believed that racial bias was not the cause of the overrepresentation of African Americans.

Chapter Summary

There are many legal issues surrounding the education of students with disabilities. The passage of IDEA in 1975 had a tremendous impact on the education of students with disabilities in the United States. However, this new law mandated that children be educated in the least restrictive environment, which meant that they were with their nondisabled peers as much as possible (Smith, 2005).

Most researchers agree that minorities are overrepresented in special education (Morgan et al., 2015). However, some argue that there is actually an underrepresentation of minorities (Morgan et al., 2015). Morgan et al. believed that there are confounding factors that must be taken into consideration when considering the representation of minorities in special education, such as being raised in poverty.

When assessing ELLs, there are many factors that must be considered. Chu and Flores (2011) emphasize knowing the individual to determine need for special education services. Figueroa and Newsome (2006) emphasized the importance of unbiased testing. Kritikos (2003) studied how an SLP's knowledge of a second language could impact the way they assess their bilingual or bicultural students. Sanchez, Parker, Akbayin, and McTigue (2010) identified a number of challenges that teachers face when assessing ELLs for SLDs, including "lack of access to assessments that differentiate between second language development and learning disabilities" (p. iii).

Regarding placement and academic outcomes, Kim and Garcia (2014) found that more ELLs are placed into special education while they are in high school, which may be linked to the

reduction of language support services for upper grades. They discuss how at times ELLs are identified for special education they do not need it. In contrast, they also point out that sometimes ELLs are not considered for services that they need. This is similar to the argument of Hibel and Jasper (2012) who state that children of immigrants are often delayed in receiving special education services.

When considering the placement of students in special education, it is important to account for the opinions of educators and administration. The study conducted by Alvarez (2010) examined the perceptions of directors of special education regarding the placement of Latino ELLs in special education. Alvarez found that the Directors did not believe there was an overrepresentation of Latino ELLs. Ferlis (2012) found that among other issues, native language assessment made it difficult to assess Latino ELLs for special education. Cullinan and Kauffman (2005) did not examine ELLs in special education, but instead, they examined the placement of African Americans. Based on their analysis of teacher ratings, they believed that racial bias was not a cause for overrepresentation of these students.

Chapter III

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate educators' understanding and opinions regarding the identification of English language learners (ELLs) for special education services. A survey research approach was taken to collect data. The data were collected through examining the understanding and opinions of general education and special education teachers.

Participants

The participants in this study were 22 general education and special education teachers. The majority of participants taught in the suburbs of Chicago. The majority of teachers surveyed had less than five years of experience. Only one of the teachers surveyed had over 20 years of experience.

Instrumentation

The primary data collection instrument used in this study was a questionnaire. Teachers' opinions regarding the identification of ELLs in special education were assessed using a Likert scale survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted with permission from a survey developed by Alvarez (2010). The survey began with two statements regarding whether the teachers believe there is a disproportionate number of ELLs at their schools. For these two items, teachers had to rate their level of agreement. The third item was in regards to the availability of assessments in ELLs' native language. Next, the instrument asked about educators' views of the different factors that influence an ELLs placement in special education. These factors included: teacher training, RTI, language barrier, communication with parents, and socioeconomic status. The last two items on the survey were open-ended to allow teachers to add additional comments.

Procedures

The study was conducted from January 2016 to March 2016. A survey research approach was used to gather data from educators at School A and School B. A letter ensuring confidentiality and the purpose of the study was included with the survey (see Appendix A) and distributed to ten teachers both in special education and general education.

Data Collection

Survey instruments were distributed via Google Forms. Google Forms is an electronic survey program similar to Survey Monkey. Responses can be collected electronically and are analyzed automatically. Two weeks after the questionnaire was sent out, those who had not responded were sent a follow-up email reminding them about the survey and its importance. A total of 22 responses were collected for analysis.

Data Analysis

Response options on the survey were assigned numeric values to allow for calculation. The most positive responses received four points, and the least positive received one point. For the statements regarding disproportionality and availability of assessments, a sum was calculated of the responses of strongly disagree (1) and disagree (2). The sum of these two responses was labeled as “disagree” on Figure 1. A sum was also calculated for the responses of agree (3) to strongly agree (4). The sum of these two responses was labeled “agree” on Figure 1. The results were then converted to percentage of participants who had a particular response.

For the survey items regarding the five factors influencing special education identification, a sum of responses of somewhat a factor (2) and factor (3) was calculated. These responses were labeled “somewhat a factor” in Figure 2. Responses of 1 were labeled “not a

factor” and responses of 4 were labeled major factor. All responses were converted to percentages.

Chapter Summary

A survey research data collection method was used in this study, which was designed to examine knowledge and opinions of teachers with regard to the identification of ELLs for special education services. The data collected included responses to a questionnaire. There were a total of ten items and eight of the items were on a Likert scale. Responses were assigned numeric values to allow for calculation. Results of the survey are discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter IV

Results

A survey about the identification of English language learners in special education was conducted between March – April 2016. The survey received a total of 22 responses. This included 13 general education teachers and nine special education teachers. The survey used was modified from a survey conducted by Alvarez (2010).

Demographics

Information regarding gender of teachers or educational background was not collected in the survey. The majority of teachers surveyed had less than five years of experience. Only one of the teachers surveyed had over 20 years of experience. The majority of teachers surveyed taught at the intermediate level, or 6th – 8th grade. The majority of teachers surveyed came from a school districts in south suburban Chicago. Out of the total number of ELL students that the teachers worked with, there was an average of 29% that received special education services.

Disproportionality

The first two questions of the survey inquired teachers about whether they believe students at their school were being under-identified or over-identified for special education services. The overwhelming majority of teachers believed that there was neither under-identification nor over-identification taking place at their schools. This data is shown in Figure 1.

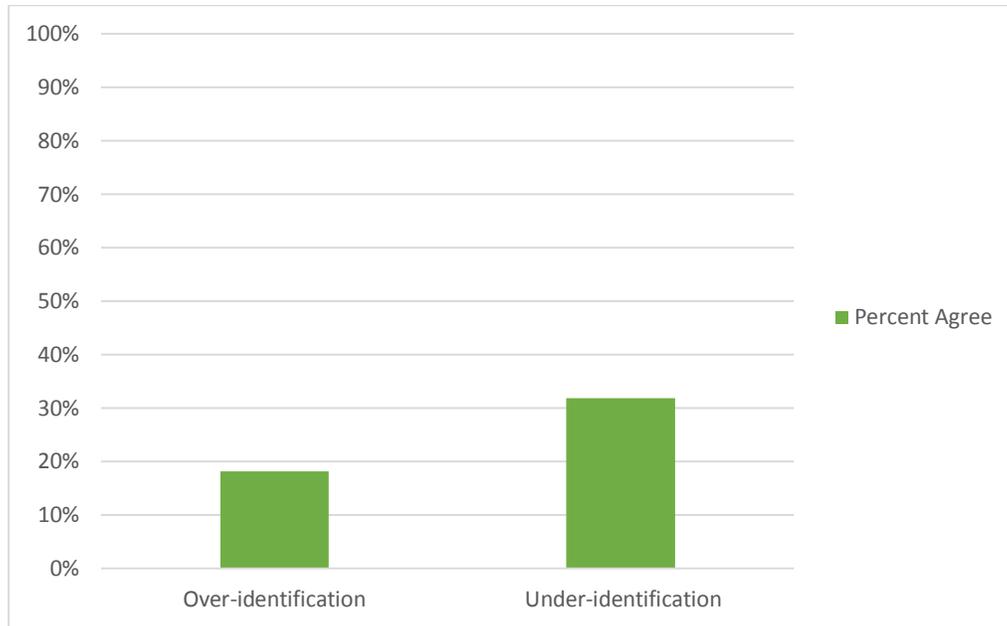


Figure 1. Teacher perceptions of disproportionality. N = 22

Factors Influencing ELL Identification

Teachers were surveyed about a number of different factors that may influence how ELLs are identified for special education services. These factors included: inadequate teacher training, language barrier, inadequate implementation of response to intervention (RTI), lack of parent communication, and socioeconomic status.

Response was considered “not a factor” if given a rating of 1, “somewhat a factor” if given a rating of 2-3, and “major factor” if given a rating of 4. The majority of responses for all factors were given a “somewhat a factor” rating. There was an average of 68% of teachers that responded “somewhat a factor” for each of the five factors. However, for the influence of language barrier in special education identification, almost all teachers surveyed (86%) believed that this was “somewhat a factor”. Additionally, while there were a limited amount of teachers who responded “not a factor” to any of the questions, nearly half of the teachers (41%) believed that socioeconomic status did not play any role in how ELLs are identified for special education.

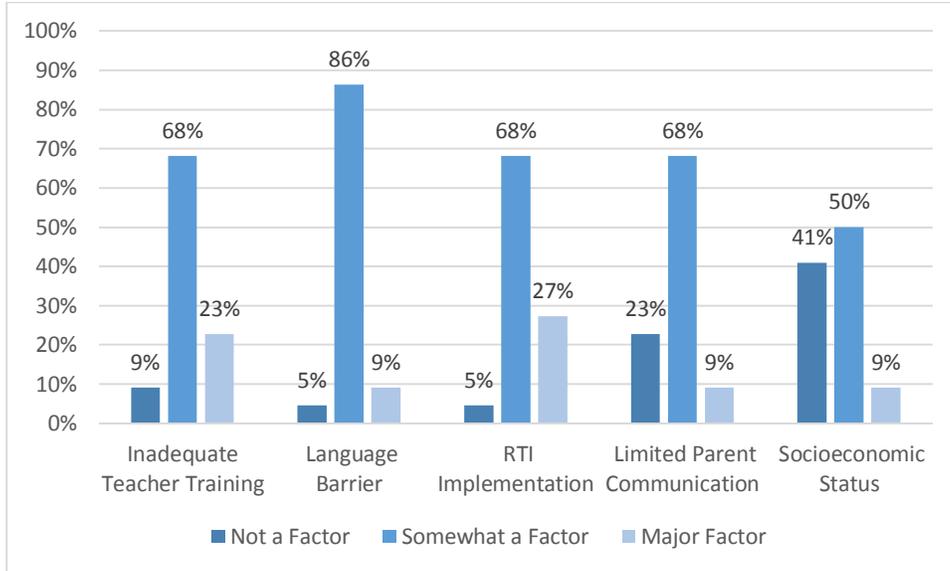


Figure 2: Five factors influencing ELL identification for special education. Teacher responses include not a factor (1), somewhat a factor (2-3) and major factor (4). N = 22.

Chapter Summary

A total of 22 teachers were surveyed for this study. The majority of teachers did not believe that an over-identification or under-identification of special education students was a problem at their schools. The majority of teachers believed that language barrier played a factor in the identification of ELLs for special education. Nearly half the teachers surveyed believed that socioeconomic status did not impact special education identification.

Chapter V

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter covers the survey results and relates them to the literature. The following topics will be discussed: disproportionality, teacher training, language barrier, RTI implementation, parent communication, and socioeconomic status. For the majority of topics, the survey results were supported by the literature review.

Discussion

The survey included questions regarding disproportionality of ELLs in special education. In addition survey developed examined teachers' perceptions of what factors influence the identification of ELLs for special education. The five factors included on the survey were: inadequate teacher training, language barrier, RTI implementation, parent communication, and socioeconomic status.

Disproportionality

According to the survey, the majority of teachers do not believe that over-identification nor under-identification of ELLs is an issue at their school. These results were in conflict to the majority of studies discussed in the literature review, which indicated an over-representation of ELLs in special education.

It is important to note that the survey asked teachers to consider the identification of ELLs at their school specifically, as opposed to whether they believed there was disproportionality of ELLs throughout the United States. It is possible that they perceived their schools as being an exception to the rule of overrepresentation of ELLs in special education within the United States.

The survey results on over-identification reflected the results of the survey conducted by Alvarez (2010), which found that most special education directors in California did not believe that there is an overrepresentation of Latino ELLs. In his study, Alvarez also indicates that this is in contradiction to what other studies reveal.

Teacher Training

Nearly all the teachers (91%) believed that inadequate teacher training was a factor in how ELLs are identified for special education. The review of the literature supports the survey results. Research conducted by Washburn (2008) reveals that only a small portion (12.5%) receive more than eight hours of training on how to assist ELLs.

Language Barrier

A total of 95% percent of teachers believed that language barrier was a factor influencing the identification of ELLs for special education. Of this percentage, 86% of teachers believed it was “somewhat a factor”. The percentage of teachers who believed it was somewhat of a factor was far greater for language barrier than any other categories. In other categories, there was an average of 63.5 % who believed that particular category was “somewhat a factor”. These results were supported by the literature. The study conducted by Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung, and Roach-Scott (2009) found that both school professionals and parents agreed that language barrier was a major factor in how ELLs were identified for special education.

RTI Implementation

The majority of teachers surveyed (95%) believed that RTI not being implemented appropriately was a factor in how ELLs are identified for special education. This was supported by the literature. In a survey of special education directors, Alvarez (2010) found that most

directors agreed that poorly implemented RTI impacts how ELLs are identified for special education.

Parent Communication

In regards to lack of communication with parents, a total of 77% of teachers believed this was a factor. The school professionals and parents interviewed in a study conducted by Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung, and Roach-Scott (2009) also agreed that parent communication was important in the referral process for special education. Their study found that language barrier had a major impact on how teachers communicated with parents. The participants of the study suggested that there is a need for more bilingual professionals within schools.

Socioeconomic Status

For socioeconomic status, there were a total of 59% of teachers that believed this was a factor in how ELLs are identified. For this category, close to half of the teachers (41%) agreed that socioeconomic status was not a factor in how ELLs are identified for special education. For the other four categories, the average percent of teachers responding “not a factor” was 10.5%. This indicates that a large percent of the teachers surveyed strongly believe, more than other factors, that socioeconomic status does not play a role in how ELLs are identified for special education.

The results of the survey were not supported by the literature. In the study conducted by Alvarez (2010), he surveyed special education directors to determine if high poverty rate was a factor in how Latino ELLs are identified for special education. He found that only 11% of participants believed that socioeconomic status was not a factor. The remaining 89% agreed that it was a prominent factor.

Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that the teacher surveyed do not believe that disproportionality exists within their schools. Almost all of the participants (over 90%) agreed that inadequate teacher training, language barrier, and poor implementation of RTI were factors in how ELLs are placed into special education. A little over 75% of the participants believed that parent communication was a factor. In regards to socioeconomic status, almost half believed that this was not a factor in how ELLs are placed into special education. This was in conflict with the literature, which indicated that socioeconomic status was a prominent factor influencing how ELLs are identified for special education.

Educational Implications

The results of this study demonstrates the need for three major areas: teacher training, RTI implementation, and language barrier. As the literature indicates, less than 15% of teachers receive more than eight hours of training on how to manage ELLs in their classroom (Washburn, 2008). The participants of study recognize this need for additional training for teachers in order to prevent unnecessary referrals of ELLs for special education services. This training should include guidance on how to implement RTI appropriately. Additionally, the language barrier between school professionals and students must be addressed.

Recommendations for Further Research

In order to better understand the perceptions of teachers regarding the identification of ELLs for special education in the Chicagoland area, more research needs to be done on the hours of training that these teachers receive on ELLs and RTI implementation. Additional data need to be collected on how to resolve the language barrier that exists between teachers and students. An

analysis of how teachers perceive disproportionality on a national level compared to the school level would be informative.

Summary

While most recent literature indicates that there is a disproportionate amount of ELLs identified for special education services when compared to other groups, the results of the survey did not support this. Both the literature and the results of the study support that teacher training, language barrier, parent communication, and RTI implementation influence how ELLs are identified for special education. While a large portion of teachers surveyed did not believe socioeconomic status is a factor, the literature indicates that it is a factor.

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