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Disproportionate Classification of ESL Students in U.S. Special Education

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Abstract

This study explores the possible causes behind the disproportionate percentages of English language learners (ELLs) classified into U.S. special education. Elementary school classroom teachers were examined, from school districts that exhibited growth in the percentage of English language learners with Individual Education Plans during 2007-2010. Teachers' knowledge of acculturation, referral processes, and knowledge of teacher research-based best practices were qualitatively investigated.

Keywords: ESL, acculturation, professional development, brain-based research, teacher self-efficacy

Introduction

There is a serious problem with the rising percentage of ELLs being classified in special education in the USA (Sullivan, 2011). Identifying why this problem is occurring and more importantly how can educators help ELLs to succeed alongside their mainstream peers remains a critical challenge. This issue is controversial because some educators believe that classifying ELLs into special education helps meet the needs of ELLs who perform below-grade level. Other researchers (Collier, 2004; Cummins, 2002) do not believe that classifying ELLs is always in the best interest of the child. Researchers have suggested that it could take seven to ten years for ELLs to become proficient in academic English, who in many cases are misdiagnosed as having a learning disability (Cummins, 2002; Collier, 2004; Sullivan 2011).

In many different districts and schools, the process of classifying ELLs often varies. Typically, it is the decision of the mainstream teacher to bring a struggling ELL student

to a team of professionals and administrators in their building to discuss a support plan. Such team meetings are also known as Response to Intervention Teams or Instructional Support Teams. At that time, the team determines an intervention plan based on the teacher's recommendation. Depending on the school, the child and the team, some teams may decide to complete a full bilingual evaluation. Other schools might implement academic reading or math interventions.

If the team agrees to complete a full bilingual evaluation, another challenge arises. The person administering the bilingual evaluation might not have the background to accurately interpret the results of the assessments. Additionally, ELLs who are not proficient in their native language or not literate in their native language might perform poorly on the bilingual assessments. Hence, the results of the assessment are often skewed to appear that a child has a learning disability when in fact the child is still in the process of acquiring a second language (Kohnert, Yim, Nett, Kan, & Duran, 2005). According to Kohnert et al. (2005), the person completing the assessment with the bilingual child must remember that the way the assessment is conducted will affect the results. The lack of adequate testing materials and other resources makes the task more difficult.

Collier (2004) describes acculturation as the process of acquiring English while maintaining the dominant language. ELLs are considered acculturated when a child is fluent in their native language and has adapted to the new culture. According to Collier, bilingual assessments should be carefully considered before completing a screening for special education services and the child's acculturation needs to be taken into account. Collier has suggested that ELLs should not be evaluated for at least three years in order to determine if they are struggling due to lack of acculturation or due to a learning disability. Collier recommends filling out an acculturation assessment prior to referring ELLs to special education to help determine accurate intervention plans for them.

Nonetheless, there are times that an ELL may need specialized instruction because of a specific learning disability. A rising concern of ELLs in special education (Sullivan, 1998) is that classifying ELLs into special education occurs much more often that it possibly should. It is often difficult for educators to between distinguish students who truly have learning disabilities from students who fail for other reasons, such as limited English proficiency. Students learning English are often disadvantaged because of the plethora of inaccurate assessments and a lack of trained teachers who are trained to distinguish the difference between language and disabilities (Ortiz, 2001).

Conceptual Rationale

The overrepresentation of ELLs assigned to special education services in U.S. schools may influence the quality of education in this country in the future. In the United States, the general education population grew by 7.2% to 49.5 million students in schools today. The English language learner population has grown from 3.5 million to 5.3 million, or by more than 51 percent in the past decade (National Clearing House for ELLs, 2011).

The dropout rates for English language learners are 15-20% higher than the overall number of non-English language learners. This lack of academic success is also the cause

for referrals of English language learners to special education, which does not increase the rate of ELLs who graduate. Artiles and Ortiz (2002) suggest that English language learners with the least amount of language support are most likely to be referred to special education and less likely to graduate with a high school diploma. ELLs who receive all of their instruction in English were almost three times as likely to be in special education as those who receive some native language support. It can be inferred from this data that instructional programs implemented in schools could the decrease the amount of ELLs in special education programs.

ELLs throughout the state of New York are currently more likely than native English speaking peers to be placed in special education. These students are being labeled as learning disabled or speech and language impaired and are less likely to be placed in the least restrictive environment (Sullivan, 2011). The Individual Disability Education Act, reinstated in 2004, sought to protect the rights of students and place them in an environment that maximizes learning for all (All Kinds of Minds, 2008). Collier and Thomas (2004) believe that the problem with the federal legislation is the widespread idea that ELLs should be on grade level in English in three years. State mandated test scores in English underestimate the true achievements of ELLs (Collier & Thomas, 2004). Students who have only been in the U.S. for two years take state assessments and may not able to perform well. Some students have not had the opportunity to learn to read and write in English language long enough in order to perform well on the mandated state tests given in English and not in their native language. As a result, the scores do not validate their true understanding and academic progress (Collier & Thomas, 2004). The need for a clearer understanding of the factors that educators must consider prior to referring an ELLs for Special education is evident by the overrepresentation of ELLs currently labeled with learning disabilities (Case & Taylor, 2005).

Orfield and Lee (2007) reveal that Latinos are the largest minority group in public schools and they are increasing at a greater rate than any other ethnic group. They go on to state that Latinos will out-number native English speaking peers by 2050 (Orfield & Lee, 2007). Their data suggest that Latino groups are being inadequately identified for special education, which will lead to greater challenges later (Albers, Hoffman, & Lundahl, 2009). Additionally, schools have a limited number of ESL teachers. ELLs spend the majority of their schooling with mainstream teachers who are not certified in ESL and have little to no training on how to support ELLs. The fact that ELLs are spending the majority of their day with teachers who are not trained on how to meet their needs, coupled with the high demand to pass state assessment, may lead to serious problems for English Language Learners.

Artiles et al. (2005) found that ELLs who are labeled as special education students increased from fifth grade and continued to increase into secondary school. These researchers suggested that the rise was due to a lack of language support services as students progressed through grades, stating that students with less native language support were more likely to be served in special education. Additionally, Sullivan (2011) reported a significant rise in the number of these ELLs being classified as learning disabled or speech impaired more often than native English speaking peers.

Sullivan (2011) suggests that understanding the underlying issues regarding the disproportionate numbers of ELLs in special education requires an examination of current practices and routines, an openness to explore new and innovative ways of defining educational practices, and the development of programs not previously considered. It requires a commitment to utilize only effective practices and abandon those that are ineffective. Sullivan suggests that classifying ELLs with learning disabilities because of their inability to perform in school will not help ELLs succeed.

In times of economic difficulty for education and the mandate to demonstrate educational progress for all subgroups as required in the U.S. educational mandate known as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), the need to ensure quality practice models and programs is instrumental in meeting new state guidelines. Many referrals to special education result in students who might need other kinds of academic support. The disproportionate percentage of ELLs in special education prohibits them from receiving the more appropriate services they need to make academic progress (Collier, 1999; Samson & Lesaux, 1999).

Cummins (1997), Krashen (1981), and McGlothin (1997) suggest that a lack of understanding of second language acquisition by mainstream teachers might influence the high number of referrals of ELLs to special education classes. Special education protocols are another dimension in determining the number of ELLs classified into special education (Collier, 1987; Rinaldi & Samson, 2008; Sanchez et al., 2010).

A teacher's use of brain-based research (as described by Lombardi, Caine and Caine & Levine) or research based-teacher practices in teaching ELLs can draw upon multicultural strategies, learning styles, and diverse needs in order to reach all ELLs (Lombardi, 2008). Brain-based research that informs instructional practices helped meet the needs of diverse learners (Caine & Caine, 1997; Levine, 2002; Sousa, 2006). Levine (2002) describes the eight dimensions as attention, memory, language, neuro-motor function, spatial-temporal ordering, sequential ordering and social cognition.

In addition, teachers' understanding and use of research based-best practices, acculturation, and response to intervention might contribute to better suitable strategies they could use to meet the needs of ELLs.

The Study

The objective of this study was to identify themes, patterns and discrepancies between teachers' use of research-based teacher best practices, knowledge of student acculturation, and referral processes in schools exhibiting growth of English language learners with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in K-5 schools. This study was guided by the following question: How did teachers respond to the concern for the increasing number of ELLs being classified to into special education? Teachers from schools exhibiting growth of ELLs classified in special education were interviewed.

Setting

Four different K-5 schools on Long Island, New York were chosen from a purposeful sample. Schools reporting a population of 50 ELLs in the district to a maximum of 100 ELLs in a district were selected to participate in this study. Schools were selected based

upon similar pullout approach models used to teach ELLs. The administrators who were contacted from these schools were revealed through key informants in each of the buildings. Using New York State Report Cards, four schools were chosen that exhibited a growth in the percentage of ELLs with Individual Education Plans during 2007-2010.

Selection of Participants

Three classroom teachers from four different schools on Long Island were chosen from a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 1990) to participate in this study. Twelve K-5 mainstream classroom teachers who have had ELLs in their regular education classroom since 2007 were selected for face-to-face interviews. Administrators who were the key informants were contacted from each of the four schools that recruited three teachers from each of their schools to participate in the study. Table 3.1 describes the setting of the study.

Table 1. Percentages of ELLs in Schools

Type of School	School Population	Percent of English Language Learners	Teachers
School A	791	2.9%	3
School B	801	2.6%	3
School C	491	7.7%	2
School D	791	2.0%	4

Data Collection

A multiple case study design was used (Yin, 2003) to investigate events and their causes. As interviews progressed, themes, patterns, and discrepancies emerged based on teachers' knowledge of acculturation, professional development, brain-based research, and teacher self-efficacy.

Teachers were contacted by phone and were asked to participate in this study. In the initial conversations, teachers received information about the study. The primary data collection method consisted of digitally recorded individual face-to-face interviews. Notes were taken during the interview and follow up questions with elaboration and clarification probes guided the data collection process. Permission was obtained to tape the interview to ensure accuracy of the study.

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured, open-ended interview questions were used to obtain data about the commonalities and differences between teachers from schools with percentage growth

of ELLs with IEPs. The interview protocol consisted of approximately ten questions. Forty minutes were allotted for each interview.

The primary protocol questions addressed the methods for referring ELLs for special education. In addition, teachers were asked about how they met the needs of less acculturated ELLs. They were also asked about their reported understanding of the eight dimensions of learning as described by Levine (2002): attention, memory, language, neuro-motor function, spatial-temporal ordering, sequential ordering, social cognition, and higher-order cognition.

Content Validity

Prior to conducting the actual study, a pilot study was used to test the interview protocol, and data collection methods. The pilot study was conducted with two mainstream teachers who had ELLs in their classrooms. The participants responded to the semi-structured interview questions. A review of data from this pilot study determined that no changes in the interview protocol were necessary and the protocol would be acceptable for use during the actual interviews.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). After each interview, summarized notes were read, key findings were highlighted, initial thoughts and questions were recorded, and areas that needed further clarification were identified. Each new interview was compared to the previous ones for commonalities and differences; earlier interviews were reanalyzed when new data were found. Multiple case studies were analyzed from earlier interviews before scheduling and conducting others. Their analytic process influenced the emphasis of certain questions throughout the interview. Responses from teachers were analyzed and compared to find themes, patterns, and discrepancies that emerged throughout each of the interviews.

To minimize any misinterpretations, accuracy of the data description and analysis were addressed using verbatim transcripts to recheck for findings and monitor for common themes, patterns, and discrepancies. A second evaluator trained in qualitative content analysis was employed to verify the validity and reliability of the interpretations of the data. An audit trail was used to record the steps taken from the start of the research project to the development and reporting of the findings.

Findings

Findings from this study support the many reasons for the rising percentage of ELLs with IEPs found in scholarly literature. Hawkins (2008), Karabenick, Clemens, and Noda (2004), Levine (2002), and Rinaldi (2005) discussed the lack of classroom teacher training given to teachers, inconsistent Response to Intervention plans and lack of research-based teacher best practices when working with ELLs as possible reasons for the high percent growth of ELLs in IEPs. Two particular findings, including the need for classroom teachers to be trained on how ELLs acquire a second language and behaviors associated with learning a second language, are consistent with the research (Artiles et al., 2010; Collier, 2002).

In addition, careful consideration of when and how ELLs are evaluated should be considered. It should also be noted that it is very difficult to decipher if an ELL has a language disability or a language deficit. All ELLs should be screened and evaluated on a case-by-case basis in order to make the most accurate recommendation for ELLs. All mainstream teachers that were interviewed were extremely empathetic to the many challenges that ELLs face throughout the day in school and at home. Teachers reported that many ELLs did not have the support of their parents to reinforce skills taught in school. Although teachers felt empathy towards their students and wanted to do what was best for them academically, they did not always know what or how to proceed to help ELLs succeed. In fact, most teachers felt that special education was in ELL students' best interest.

Deming (1982) implies that the problem is not with the students or the teachers, but rather with the educational system. According to Deming, 94% of the root cause of all problems can be found and attributed to the system and only 6% to individuals. This means when problems occur, educators should decide how the school system needs to change in order to help rectify the ongoing problem that is happening in many schools. In schools that are not able to provide sufficient bilingual programs, administrators might want to provide support and training to mainstream teachers who teach ELLs.

The following themes emerged during the teacher interviews: acculturation, professional development, protocols for referring English language learners to special education, and research-based teacher best practices.

Acculturation

Interview data indicate that all the teachers interviewed were not aware of how acculturation plays a role in English language learners being classified as special education students. Language acquisition is a key component of how much an ELL becomes acculturated. This component was not understood by mainstream teachers and may have contributed to teachers quickly referring ELLs to special education. At no fault to the mainstream teacher, many teachers had no training and no background on how ELLs acquire a second language or how long it takes for an ELL to acquire English. Teachers were unaware of the development of second language acquisition and were not familiar with how to tell the difference between ELLs who were struggling academically in the classroom because of acculturation and ELLs who had a learning disability. It is very difficult to distinguish the difference between a disability and a language deficit. Understanding the child's background, knowing if he/she is proficient in the native language, and useful assessments that monitor progress is important to evaluate when deciding if an ELL needs additional support.

Teachers had very limited background knowledge of their students. They did not know when their students came to this country or how much academic language their students understood in their native language. Teachers described ELLs who were struggling academically as having attention difficulties and learning disabilities. Many teachers indicated that the ELLs who were struggling with learning could not focus on the task and the lesson during class. Students may have a wealth of social language and may appear to understand English but they may not understand academic language.

This lack of academic language proficiency could lead to ELLs misbehaving, failing to complete their work, and not being able to perform academically at grade level.

Teachers did not have training or background knowledge about the differences between social language and academic language to help them understand how students who are not acculturated may exhibit attention deficits and have trouble retaining and understanding content. The literature suggests that it takes between five to seven years to fully acquire academic language (Cummins, 2002). Cummins has also noted that it could possibly take seven to ten years for ELLs to fully acquire academic language when they are not proficient in their native language. ELLs in this study were being referred sooner than seven years, and in some cases, within the first year of school, which is not recommended by many researchers (Cummins, 2002; Collier, 2004).

In addition, teachers interviewed had either never heard of or used an acculturation screening during the pre-referral process. Teachers were also asked if they filled out any paperwork referring to the background of ELLs prior to completing paperwork for classification. Teachers did not know how long students have been in the country or if they were born in the country. It was mentioned repeatedly by teachers that they have had students who were in this country for less than a year, and had made referrals for ELLs to special education early on in their schooling. Not only were teachers not aware of the term "acculturation", but most of the teachers were also unaware of how that might influence a students learning in the classroom. Teachers were not familiar with how long it takes children to acquire language or any other variables related to acculturation.

Students exhibiting attention difficulties were discussed consistently by teachers. Some teachers associated an ELL's inability to attend to a particular task as an indicator that a child might need to be referred to special education. The following response came from a teacher who referred a child for special education without knowing if his difficulties were related to acculturation. This child was born in another country and had only been in school for one to two years. Throughout this article, the (I) will refer to the Interviewer and the (T) will refer to the Teacher:

> *T7: Yes…I referred a little boy from Russia… He is the one that it became evident… or attentional…there were a lot more academic needs….He ended up joining a different type of class for a while…*
>
> *T7: He came here late… Like he didn't start the school year with us… And I can't remember how late the school year was… but I am going to say he was probably here 6 months…and then it became evident that it was not only academics it was behavioral. He could not attend to anything. He was all over the place.*
>
> *T7: He spoke mostly Russian and there were a lot of behaviors… you know he started to learn the language but he could not attend to any task.*

According to Collier (2004) and Cummins (2002) there are many stages of acculturation when a child is learning new academic language and is in a new setting. Not behaving and not attending to the task at hand is typical for beginner ELLs who just has just arrived in the U.S. from another country. In some cases, ELLs who first begin school go through a silent period and do not speak at all during the first year of school. Each ELL

reacts differently when starting school; however, these are typical behaviors associated with a child's lack of English proficiency. ELLs who are have difficulty with attention will often have academic difficulties, which could possibly be a sign of not being acculturated. Researchers suggest that ELLs will outgrow these behaviors as they develop English proficiency and are able to understand more in their classroom. The following statement is a teacher describing how she referred a child based on an inability to attend to a task:

> *T11: I had one child once. He was an advanced ESL student and my Instructional Support Team was wondering if he had a learning disability problem or a hyperactivity problem. We started the referral process at the end of Kindergarten so that when he went to first grade they can identify the learning issues… He was identified and placed in special education. His academics were consistent but he was also all over the place…It was attentional…*

Discrepancies emerged in Teacher Four's statements, who realized that the inability to attend to the task was a result of a cultural barrier. This teacher viewed her student's inability to attend as a cultural difference, which is how a student learning a new language typically behaves when he or she begins at a new school. She was from a different school with low percentage growth of ELLs with IEPs. The following is her response about a child that was having difficulties with attention.

> *T4: The younger brother who did not have much schooling in Japan. He was very hyperactive and had behavioral problems. He did not know how to behave in school. He needed time to adjust being in a new school.*

Although this teacher was not fully aware of acculturation and had never filled out an acculturation screening, she was aware of some of the characteristics that might be associated with a child who is from another country. She was able to identify that this child from Japan was behaving inappropriately in school because of his acculturation difficulties. Likewise, she realized the older brother who had schooling in Japan came to school, and was extremely disciplined because of the school culture in which he was trained. Teacher Four recognized that students who behaved differently were not exhibiting academic disabilities; rather, these students may have had different cultural norms. Some students might be accustomed to being in school and would have a clearer understanding of on how to behave in class.

Another pattern that emerged when discussing acculturation was language acquisition, which included two main components. The first was the lack of teacher knowledge about second language and acquisition and the second was the lack of teacher understanding regarding the differences between social and academic language development of ELLs.

Teacher 2 described a limited understanding of language acquisition.

> *T2: But I do feel that a lot of ESL kids coming up also have learning disabilities and processing and things like that. It is much harder to get them services because they give them so much time to learn the language even though they could have been taught English since they were born. Sometimes to get them what they need is hard. Sometimes they don't need ESL they need resource room and that is much harder.*

Especially when they are boys and a minority and they are having ESL. That is the challenge.

T2: Because it is not language they understand. They can't read and write.

This teacher reported referring a child for special education when in actuality, learning how to read and write in English often takes longer than the speaking component, which Cummins (1984) refers to as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Cummins (1984) states that even if a child is proficient in their social language, it does not mean that they are or should be proficient with academic language. Academic language takes longer for students to acquire and includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Training teachers on the four development stages of second language acquisition and how students acquire language would be beneficial for mainstream teachers.

Collier (2004) discussed the different dimensions of culture shock that ELLs experience as they are becoming acculturated. Behaviors including distractibility, heightened anxiety, and/or a lack of initiative to learn English might be exhibited as culture shock. Collier highlighted the importance of teachers to understand how their ELLs learn best and how much background knowledge a student has in their native language as a means to helping ELLs in the classroom. Collier recommended that in order for teachers to distinguish between acculturation and a learning disability, teachers should fill out an acculturation screening and understand how much language the student actually knows in his/her native language and in English. It is important for teachers to understand the different factors that could influence learning a second language and proceed with caution.

Discrepancies emerged from Teacher Eleven's statement. This teacher, unlike the rest of the teachers, understood the differences between an ELL's social and academic language. She was the only teacher to determine that ELLs typically develop social playground language faster than academic language. She was aware of how ELLs develop their social language much faster than academic language. She reported, "They catch on quick. They catch on verbally a lot quicker than they will for reading." This teacher did not refer ELLs very often to special education and understood the importance for an ELL to be given sufficient time to develop English proficiency before submitting a request for classification.

These findings are consistent with literature that suggests that a lack of teacher training on acculturation could possibly lead to pre-mature referrals of ELLs (Collier, 2004). Teachers who have background knowledge about how ELLs acquire a second language and understand the dimensions of acculturation will be better prepared to meet the needs of ELLs and make more informed decisions before referring ELLs to special education (Collier, 2004).

It is often difficult for mainstream teachers without training to decide if a child needs either additional support services or more time to acquire a second language. Seven to ten years, as the research suggests, is a long time to wait before giving ELLs additional language support services if they actually have a learning disability. Mainstream teachers are faced with the challenge of deciding if an ELL needs extra support. As

children move up the grade levels in school, the challenge for teachers increases. Students who struggle academically while in the process of acquiring English language skills can appear to be experiencing a language disability, when in fact they are just going through the process of acquiring a second language (National Association for Bilingual Education, 2002). Providing mainstream teachers with more background on how ELLs learn could provide mainstream teachers with more strategies and tools to help ELLs in the classroom prior to starting the referral process.

The goal is not to refrain from ever giving remedial services or to never classify students; rather, it is to cautiously evaluate all variables before referring ELLs. There is no single test that clearly tells if an ELL has a learning disability; however, we do know that the problem of an increasing percent of ELLs in special education does exist. Educators must be aware of the problem and prioritize students' needs.

Findings of this study suggest that teachers and support staff should become familiar with the beliefs, values, and educational practices of ELLs in order to make informed decisions about referring them to special education. Understanding the cultural differences of individual students is essential for effective teaching to take place. Teachers who have not had training working with students from diverse populations, or teachers who are not familiar with acculturation, may misunderstand the educational needs of ELLs.

Professional Development

A major finding from this study is that 11 out of the 12 mainstream teachers were never trained or given any information on second language acquisition or effective practices when working with English language learners in their classrooms. The lack of professional development in these schools is a possible cause for the increasing percentage of ELLs being classified. All the classroom teachers interviewed in the study have been working with ELLs in their classrooms for a minimum of seven years. The administrators in these districts had never sought to train teachers to help meet the needs of their ELLs who were struggling academically. The following are excerpts from teachers on their desire to be trained.

> *I: Do you think training on how to work with ELLs would be helpful?*
> *T8: Of course…but I have to pay for it…if I have to have the cluster of ESL students in my class I think the district should send me. I don't speak Spanish and learning extra strategies would definitely be helpful. Every year I have one or two ELLs that I struggle with helping to make progress.*
>
> *T10: No…None and I think it is a crime…because it is not a huge portion but I would say…Between 10-20 percent of our population is either ESL or comes from a bilingual house. So I would say… having a population without a voice little gets done for them. I try to be that advocate for them but ultimately the district doesn't care what I say anyway… I mean they care about the people who are breathing down their neck. Unfortunately parents of English Language Learners do not know any better.*

One teacher recalled a time when she was trained on strategies to meet the needs of ELLs. She taught 4th grade and had received training to help utilize strategies during

whole class instruction. She learned strategies to implement in her classroom that would help ELLs acquire English. The training only taught about strategies that could be used while she was teaching, but she did not learn about how students acquire language, how long it takes to acquire a second language, or specific behaviors and learning difficulties that are associated with students learning a second language. This teacher with ESL training still referred ELLs to special education multiple times. She further explained that one of her students was adopted and believed that without classification, this child would not be successful taking the fourth grade state assessments. She believed that extra modifications were necessary for this student to be successful on the New York State assessment. The reason for her last referral was the same. She believed her student would do better with modifications if she were classified. These teachers provided as many strategies as they could on their own but ultimately felt that providing additional services was in the best interest of the child. When ELLs are struggling and are so much lower than the mainstream peers, it seems feasible to refer ELLs for additional services rather than let them struggle in the classroom.

There is a need for mainstream teachers to be trained on all aspects of acculturation along with understanding the difference between acculturation versus assimilation. Acculturation is the change of an individual, group, or people, by adapting to traits from another culture or an amalgamation of cultures because of prolonged contact (Collier, 1994). Assimilation refers to the process whereby a minority group gradually adapts to the customs and attitudes of the prevailing culture and customs (Collier, 1994). This study suggests that teachers' understanding of acculturation might lead to mainstream teachers referring ELLs less frequently to special education. This also suggests that schools do not have enough ESL-certified teachers, so mainstream teachers end up using special education as a remedy to help close the achievement gap of ELLs. Most ESL students are pulled out of class a few hours a week and tutored by the ESL certified instructor, and the rest of the day they are with the mainstream teachers who have little or no professional development or training.

Protocols for Referring English Language Learners to Special Education

Throughout the interview process in this study, teachers identified their procedures for classifying ELLs. The procedures for classification were consistent. All the teachers initially had to fill out paperwork and bring the paperwork to the Instructional Support Teams (IST) in their schools. The teams were made up of similar people consisting of administrators, teachers and school psychologists. In all the schools, teachers were required to gather a significant amount of quantitative data for the team in order for them to make decisions to meet the needs of ELLs. It was found in this study that Instructional Support Teams in some schools initiated additional support services as a response to intervention more frequently than other schools, as noted by the teachers in these schools. These findings suggested that with additional support services, English language learners performed academically better on school-wide assessments and reading benchmarks. ELLs were less likely to be referred to special education with the additional support services from academic intervention services.

Some teachers in the study stated that they were not aware of what the Response to Intervention Plan (RTI) existed in their schools, even though they knew there was a

plan. Teachers admitted that they were not prepared to work with this population of students, nor had they acquired any effective strategies for meeting the needs of ELLs. Additionally, classroom teachers felt that they were not given effective strategies on how to work with ELLs in the classroom. In fact, teachers admitted to going to the IST with their concerns for their ELLs, but when asked to implement additional interventions in the classroom before coming back to the IST, teachers admitted that they continued to implement the same strategies they had already been using. Teachers stated that they did not have the resources necessary to implement any different strategies after the initial meeting. A few teachers also stated that they did not know any additional services to implement. Their instructional support team would suggest making sure they read with ELLs more often. However, there are only so many hours in the day. Teachers found it difficult to find extra time to work with their ELLs in small groups when they had other students that also needed their attention. Eventually, after six or more weeks with no change in the academic performance of students, teachers returned to IST for further recommendations.

Most teachers admitted that although they have a RTI plan in place at their school, they had never been trained and were not aware of what is expected of them as the classroom teacher. Teachers reported hearing the term when they brought a student to IST but did not really know any additional strategies that could be implemented as part of the plan.

> *T4: They are actually starting in Kindergarten and first grade so I don't know…they are doing aims on the web but that is about all I know.*
>
> *T5: Yes… but I don't know what it is…only that it is much more difficult to get services…Now it is documentation and documentation.*

When asked about the RTI plan in their school, teachers consistently reported that the intervention was "Just Me." Teachers indicated that they believed they were the only ones responsible for helping struggling learners, and reported that they pulled struggling learners into small groups, differentiated work, and invited ELLs for homework help. They also indicated that recently, it was more difficult for students to get identified for special education than in previous years. Classroom teachers felt that the administrators in their buildings expected the classroom teacher to provide intervention strategies in the classroom before referring a child for any further services. It was reported from teachers that when they went to IST about a child, most teams discussed implementing a response to intervention plan in their classroom. However, teachers were not aware of any additional strategies that could be implemented in their classroom because they believed they already were implementing all the strategies they knew of to help struggling ELLs. Teachers were already modifying assignments, inviting them to extra help and working with ELLs in small groups frequently throughout the day. The following is an excerpt from a teacher stating that she implements all the strategies she knows before she even goes to IST in hopes that she can just get her student classified the first time she goes to the team meeting.

> *T6: First I will bring her to IST… and then they will say wait 6 weeks and implement some strategies…*

T6: Well I am trying to say that I am doing all of the strategies before I even get there… but just in terms of making sure she is here for extra help… giving her manipulatives… and give her less homework that she can complete on her own…so I can say I am already doing the RTI.

T6: They started that whole business here…it is just a lot more that we are already doing in our classrooms. So when I go I say I am already doing those strategies.

Teachers indicated that when they have an English language learner who is struggling in their classrooms that child would be brought to the IST. Despite being told to implement additional intervention strategies in the classroom, teachers would continue to work with the ELL in their classrooms and utilize the same strategies they already had tried. Classroom teachers were not trained or given any other additional strategies to use with ELLs other than what they already knew. The classroom teacher was responsible for implementing new intervention strategies without proper professional development. After the classroom teacher returned to the IST for a second time, the team would likely initiate reading, math, or speech services for that child or decide to give a fully bilingual evaluation that often leads to special education. In addition, ESL services and/or any other additional interventions that could be made by the classroom teacher were continued. As a result of administrative regulations in some schools, some teachers were told not to refer ELLs right away and give them time to adjust. It was up to the mainstream teacher and ESL teacher to provide the additional intervention.

Nine out of the twelve teachers reported not knowing any additional strategies to work with ELLs and felt that is was "Just Me" when working with ELLs struggling academically. Teachers stated that professional development or training would be helpful in order to meet the needs of ELLs in their class. It would be beneficial for the teachers to understand why the administrative regulations are in place and to make sure that an ELL is not denied services that are truly needed. Other bilingual evaluations might need to be put in place to help make accurate decisions on the needs of these ELLs. Based on the findings from this study, teachers clearly do not have the support from their district to help ELLs be successful in the classroom.

Teachers Eight, Nine, Eleven and Twelve brought their ELLs to IST three times, collected the necessary quantitative data, and still could not get reading or math services for ESL students because they were already receiving ESL services. These teachers expressed negative feelings towards not having services for their students, and they believed it was something that their students really needed. Ultimately, these students were identified in special education. Teachers not know any effective strategies for working with ELLs, and were not receiving any additional support from anyone else in their school. The teachers who did not give additional support services to ELLs eventually recommended ELLs for special education.

Sanchez et al. (2010) found that although there were some variations with pre-referral practices, referral processes were similar across districts because of the mandates prescribed in IDEA 2004. However, even with the similarities, different districts varied as to when to initiate the referral process according to how long ELLs had been in school. Some teachers described that their IST preferred the teacher wait at least one to

two years before referring an ELL, while other teachers described their IST as preferring to refer an ELL as soon as they see that they are struggling academically regardless of how long they have been in school. Some schools wanted to refer ELLs quickly, while other schools waited much longer before initiating referrals.

Sanchez et al. (2010) noted that teachers often jump too quickly to bring ELLs to IST, believing that ELLs who are struggling academically are learning disabled. These teachers did not know any other effective strategies for meeting the needs of ELLs in the classroom. Teachers who referred ELLs quickly would rather classify ELLs at an early age than implement effective strategies in the classroom first. Sanchez et al. (2010) also noted that some districts provided additional support services where others did not.

The findings of Sanchez et al. (2010) are consistent with the findings of this study that indicated teachers are referring ELLs too quickly to special education, rather than implementing effective strategies. There is currently insufficient professional development and understanding of the differences in the cultural backgrounds of students among teachers in these schools.

There is also evidence from the current study that there are inconsistent methods for evaluating the needs of ELLs. We can conclude that the use of bilingual evaluations should be used more often in order to help administrators make informed decisions. Bilingual evaluations for English language learners who actually have severe learning disabilities are useful tools to be used in order for ELLs to receive early intervention when there is a true disability. It is important to carefully evaluate and interpret the results of bilingual evaluations in order to correctly identify the English language learners who might perform poorly on evaluations because they do not have strong language skills in their own native language. Using bilingual evaluations and interpreting the results cautiously are necessary during the classification process.

Research Based-Best Practices

This study suggests that teachers who possessed some awareness of how ELLs learn implemented teacher best practices which utilize the eight dimensions of learning as described by Levine (2002). Teachers were asked specific questions pertaining to each of the eight dimensions. If teachers were not aware of the terminology the questions were rephrased and asked how they help ELLs master specific skills that pertain to the eight dimensions.

Although some teachers were not always familiar with the terminology there were teachers who implemented research-based teacher best practices consistently in the classroom and were more aware of how to meet the needs of ELLs. These teachers provided small group instruction more often throughout the day, and utilized more modalities to help students retain new information, such as utilizing technology, playing games, and peer support. Teachers' who were aware that ELLs often had a difficult time with memory, understood the importance of implementing different strategies to help students retain information such as giving student a multiplication table during math if a child struggles with memorizing math facts. Understanding all the dimensions of brain-based research would be useful for teachers to understand how ELLs learn in order to and help them in all areas and all learning difficulties.

Ten out of the twelve teachers were not aware of dimensions such as sequential ordering, spatial ordering, higher-order cognition and social cognition, and how they are major contributing factors in how ELLs acquire language. Sequential ordering deals with giving multiple step directions to children. Spatial-temporal ordering refers to how information is presented visually and as a whole to help students remember new information. Higher order cognition refers to asking high thought provoking questions to help ELLs think beyond the easier questions. Social cognition involves having students work cooperatively in groups to help develop thinking skills. and is a more student-directed teaching method. When questions were redirected and specific skills were asked regarding these dimensions, teachers did not implement any of these strategies related to these dimensions. These teachers did not implement many sequencing activities, rarely used visual guides when giving sequential directions and used few cooperative groups lesson in the classroom. These teachers also stated that it was difficult to ask higher-order questions because ELLs really did not understand the questions. ELLs who have weaknesses in one of these areas might exhibit considerable academic difficulties in the classroom. This does not necessarily constitute a learning disability, but rather an area that needs more improvement.

Implications from this study reveal that if these teachers had training and understood why they were utilizing those strategies in the classroom, they would be able to utilize them more efficiently in the classroom and have a better understanding of how ELLs learn before making a recommendation for special education. These findings suggest that further understanding of research-based teacher best practices would provide a more consistent approach to teaching ELLs.

It can be suggested from this study that teachers who have an understanding of research-based teacher best practices and a solid understanding of the eight dimensions implemented best teaching practices more effectively and consistently in their classroom. Teachers who understand all dimensions of brain-based research were more likely to understand how ELLs learn, and were less likely to refer ELLs to special education.

This study is consistent with the findings from the literature. Teacher research-based best practices could be an effective response to intervention for ELLs by classroom teachers (Lombardi, 2004). The literature details several studies (Sousa, 1998; Levine, 2002; Lombardi, 2004) that suggest various strategies on how understanding the eight dimensions of learning could help meet the needs of ELLs. Additionally, Collier (1995), who has countless articles and research in the field of students acquiring second language, believes that one of the most essential components of teaching ELLs is collaborative interaction, in which meaning is rooted in the center of the learning experience during peer interactions. This strategy of peer collaboration is consistent with findings from brain-based-research in the dimension of social cognition.

Caine and Caine (1994) and later Levine (2002) created a framework on how the brain functions and discussed the different dimensions of the brain that can be particularly helpful to English language learners as they acquire a second language. Levine sought to help educators understand how the brain is uniquely wired, and explained that no student enters school and wants to fail. He described eight dimensions of the brain:

attention, memory, language, neuro-motor function, spatial-temporal ordering, sequential ordering, high-order thinking and social cognition. Levine believed that understanding these dimensions can help teachers be more aware of how the whole brain learns, and by understanding each of these dimensions, teachers can help ELLs be successful in the classroom and less likely to refer ELLs to special education. Teachers who implement research-based teacher best practices use these dimension. School districts need to be more aware of the support that ELLs are receiving and prepare training and professional development to those teachers who teach ELLs the majority of the day.

Pedagogical Implications

Results show that administrators and teachers are not prepared for this growing population, and professional development in the areas of language acquisition, acculturation, and brain-based research, and teacher self-efficacy might help teachers understand how ELLs learn. Professional development aimed at teaching teachers about acculturation and how ELLs acculturate into a new learning environment can help mainstream teachers understand the difference between language acquisition and disability. Implementing an effective response to intervention might help districts meet the needs of ELLs in the classroom and decrease the amount of ELLs with Individual Education Plans. Consequently, administrators should consider the following recommendations:

1. Provide professional development on acculturation, language acquisition, and brain-based research to all mainstream teachers and support staff.
2. Create and review policies and procedures for referrals to Instructional Support Teams to clarify protocols for referring ELLs to Special education.
3. Give assistant superintendents guidance to develop in-service preparation of teachers to deal with ELLs in mainstream classes.
4. Use primary language assessments to evaluate students with delayed speech or other learning disabilities in cooperation with acculturation assessments.
5. Encourage that universities offer pre-service courses to mainstream and secondary teachers on meeting the needs of ELLs, which include all dimensions of acculturation and background on acquiring a second language.
6. Consider co-teaching collaboratively with the mainstream teacher as an effective means for meeting the needs of ELLs.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study reflected a small population. Future research might examine how opinions and viewpoints in a larger population would compare to the smaller one sampled in this study. Future researchers might also wish to re-examine these results with a larger number of teachers and with teachers that have already been trained with brain-based research. We suggest that future researchers:

1. Consider a quantitative study using the interview protocol to create a survey that might be used to uncover other areas, as well as possibly being in a position to generalize to a larger population.

2. Replicate this study to include the feedback from ESL teachers to provide valuable information regarding how much knowledge ESL teachers actually have regarding academically struggling ELLs.
3. Conduct a study of K-5 special education teachers to determine if there are observable differences between ELLs classified and non-ELLs classified with Individual Education Plans.
4. Revise the interview protocol to add more questions related to teacher attitudes. Questions might include: How do teachers feel ELLs learn in comparison to native English speaking students who are struggling academically? Do teachers treat ELLs any differently than mainstream students?

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