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Disentangling Language Differences from Disability: A Case Study of District-Preservice Collaboration

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Identifying which K-12 English Learners (ELs) should receive special education services has historically been challenging and fraught with error. Educators are commonly puzzled as to whether an EL student's academic difficulties are the result of insufficient academic English language, inappropriate instruction, or an intrinsic learning disability. This article examines the influence of a university-district partnership designed to prepare bilingual/bicultural special educators with specific skills and knowledge in disentangling language difference from disability. A unique aspect of the program was that these "BiSped" educators were mostly bilingual, bicultural paraprofessionals in their schools. This feature of the program recognized the unique position that these educators already held as cultural brokers, translators, and caring adults. Distributed leadership, embedded reform, and transformative practices serve as the conceptual framework for this case study. Based on the diverse sources used in the case of one sample district, BiSped educators positively influenced the academic success of ELs. Their practices reinforced effective approaches used in the case district. They became valued team members and resources within the school system and contributed in concrete ways. BiSped educators bridged systems that often act in isolation. Corresponding whole-school professional development further created a culture of collaboration across English Language and special education programs.

Keywords: bilingual special educators, case study, differentiating language differences from disability, English learners, highly qualified teachers, paraprofessionals, pre-service teachers, professional collaboration, teacher education

Identifying which English Learner (EL) students should receive special education services has historically been challenging and fraught with error (Dutro & Moran, 2003; Sanchez, Parker, Akbayin, & McTigue, 2010; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Despite more focus on this topic recently, the task continues to puzzle professionals and has resulted in a pattern of over- and under-referral of ELs for special education testing (MacSwan & Rolstad, 2006; Parker, 2012). School teams continue to struggle with determining whether an EL student's academic difficulties are the result insufficient academic English language, inappropriate instruction, or an intrinsic learning disability.

This study examines the context in which preservice special education teachers were uniquely prepared to support their school teams in differentiating language acquisition challenges from intrinsic disabilities.

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (NCLB, 2002) called for color-blind educational reform that required EL achievement scores be included in a school's reporting of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), thus increasing the pressure on schools to effectively teach these students. NCLB also called for increased accountability for students in special education. These reforms necessitated that *all* teachers have the knowledge, skills and dispositions to teach *all* students. However, data indicate that less than 24% of teacher preparation programs include any coursework in strategies for teaching EL students (Greenberg, McKee, & Walsh, 2013). Some states generally refer to the needs of EL students without requiring preservice teachers to take specific courses. In 2008 fifteen states had no requirements at all for preparing teachers to work with ELs (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008). The lack of teacher preparation to teach EL students is a particularly urgent educational problem as the student population of the nation's public schools continues to diversify. In 2011-2012, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported over nine percent of students enrolled in U.S. schools—more than 4 million students—spoke a language other than English at home (NCES, 2012). In the Pacific Northwest, the number of EL students has increased rapidly in the last decade. For example, the Oregon State Schools Superintendent reported in 2011: "Ten years ago, there were about 44,000 Oregon students who were enrolled in English Language Development programs. [In 2010], that number was 65,618—a 48% increase in the number of our students needing these services." (Oregon Department of Education [ODE], 2011, para. 2).

In an effort to prepare diverse educators and educators to teach diverse students, the governor of Oregon crafted Oregon's 1991 Minority Teacher Act (Office of the Governor, 2011). The goal was to raise the number of minority teachers in the state to approximately the same proportions as minority students enrolled in public schools. An update on the act (Oregon Education Investment Board, 2014) reported "the disparity between individual groups of minority students and educators has stayed relatively unchanged with the gap between Latino students and Latino educators being most notable" (p. 16). The report further notes, "In 2012-2013, Oregon had 21.5% Latino students and only 3.6% Latino teachers. Given that over 20% of all K-12 students in Oregon public schools report a language of origin other than English, it is imperative to increase the number of Spanish speaking teachers in the workforce" (p. 14).

Across the country, while Latino students have become the largest minority, representing nearly a quarter of the student population, the dearth of Latino teachers is striking. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 2011-2012 Latino teachers represented only 7.8% of U.S. teachers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011; White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, 2015).

Considering the low number of teachers of Hispanic descent in U.S. schools, and the limited cadre of teachers specifically prepared to teach ELs, few educators in the field have the language skills or preparation to accurately assess ELs' academic

standing. Measuring their academic performance continues to pose a challenge for school professionals. A recent report by the Bueno National Policy Center (Lyons, 2013) identified three factors that contribute to problematic scores on standardized assessments for ELs (mandated under NCLB). First, content assessments are administered in English to emergent bilinguals at all levels of English proficiency. Second, ELs who are re-designated as fully English proficient are removed from the EL category—which results in decreased group scores. This may be a variable that contributes to the difficulty of demonstrating growth in the group. Third, there is a lack of common definitions of English proficiency across states (Lyons, 2013, p. 17).

Academic Performance of EL and Special Education Students

Data from the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2015) show that the performance of ELs nationally falls in the lowest categories with 87 percent, or more, falling below the “proficient” level in mathematics and reading at grade 4 and grade 8. Grade 4 NAEP (2015) proficiency levels nationally and in Oregon show that ELs scored far below all other groups, including students with disabilities. In 2015, 92% of Oregon’s grade 4 ELs scored below the “proficient” level in mathematics, 97% were below the level considered proficient in reading. Comparatively, in 2015 nationally, 84% of grade 4 students with disabilities (both EL and non-EL) scored below the proficient level in mathematics, 88% scored below proficient in reading. Oregon’s students with disabilities posted comparable scores with 87% below proficient in math and 89% below the proficient level in reading. These data point to a national failure of our schools to adequately serve all students, particularly EL students and those with disabilities.

ELs Over-represented in Special Education

In most schools, when EL students demonstrate poor performance they are referred to a Student Study Team or Response to Intervention (RTI) Team for support. If school teams have limited knowledge or resources, they may over-refer or under-refer these students for an evaluation to determine their eligibility for special education services. Disentangling challenges that might result from acquiring a second language and simultaneously learning content in an unfamiliar language can emulate characteristics of an intrinsic learning disability (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004). This can be a challenge even for the most skilled professional.

National figures indicate that approximately 13% of *all* students are in special education programs (NCES, 2010). Yet, a snapshot of ten districts in Oregon with high numbers of ELs shows the percentage of ELs in special education varied from twelve to 21% in the 2011-2012 academic year. When the sample data for the years 2006 to 2012 were analyzed by the authors interesting patterns emerged. The district that made no changes in the percentage of ELs in special education during that time frame also had the highest percentage of ELs as compared to the other districts (40% more). In other districts 9 to 24% of students were designated ELs among their students (ODE, 2013). Six districts increased the percentage of ELs in special education by five to seven percentage points. Three districts increased the percentage of ELs in special education by 10 to 15 percentage points in the six-year period analyzed. In short, during the recent six-year period, all but one of the ten sample districts increased the number of

ELs receiving special education services. This finding raises questions about the reasons for this increase, and begs the question of whether ELs are being mistakenly placed in special education at a disproportionate rate. The Appendix shows the percentage of ELs in special education in the 2006-2007 school year and 2011-2012 for the 10 districts referred to here. All ten of these districts were partner districts in the professional development program described in the next section.

A Unique Preservice Program

In response to the changing demographics in the Northwest, a unique preservice program (BiSped) was envisioned and developed to prepare bilingual/bicultural special educators with specific skills and knowledge to aid school systems in disentangling language difference from disability. The program was a partnership between a major state university and ten local districts that included both rural and urban schools. The major mission of the partnership was to (a) provide school districts with professional development opportunities and (b) prepare highly qualified teachers to use effective approaches with EL students with and without disabilities, and to inform these teachers about best practices in referring and effectively contributing to the decision of which children should be served by special education. The program was supported through a five-year federal grant from the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA). The following section provides an overview of current literature, which frames conceptually the case study discussed in this article.

Conceptual Framework—Distributed Leadership, Embedded Reform, and Transformative Practices

Transforming schools culture in terms of the policies and procedures followed to refer and service students as well as educators' linguistic practices in the classroom is a complex endeavor. As the number of ELs in U.S. schools continues to grow, so does the need for change agents to ensure these students receive high quality educations in the appropriate programs so they become vibrant, contributing members of school and the larger community. All too frequently ELs are poorly served (Lyons, 2013) and inappropriately shuttled into special education classes (Zehler, Fleischman, Hopkins, Pendzick, & Stephenson, 2003). Issues of social justice are central to creating a culture of championing the education of ELs (Tung, 2013). Three research areas frame this case study of a district—preservice partnership to prepare special education teachers in differentiating language acquisition challenges from intrinsic learning disabilities. These are, the importance of: (a) distributed visionary leadership, (b) embedding reform initiatives in complex systems, and (c) transformative linguistic practices.

Distributed Visionary Leadership

School leadership has long been recognized as an essential catalyst for educational reform efforts. New models of “distributed leadership” or “hybrid” models (Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2010) suggest that when leadership is shared across a school, community members benefit from the strengths and skills of diverse staff members. The school can draw on those strengths, and staff members gain a greater sense of interdependence amongst themselves. Elmore (2000) described distributed leadership as an environment where individuals and groups in different positions contribute to

leadership functions in areas of school operations over which they have the greatest influence. Principals, teachers, and staff-member leaders who understand the cultures of their school population can integrate cultural practices into successful learning environments for EL students (Torres, 2001). The literature documents the importance of visionary, local, distributed leadership is a crucial component of effective schools for ELs documented in the literature (Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011).

Cohesion is another characteristic emerging in the educational leadership literature. More cohesive leadership fuses school district and state policies. Cohesive systems are designed to align policies and practices and coordinate educational efforts across programs. In a study of leadership among sites creating statewide systems to improve education, *cohesive leadership systems* – addressing all parts and all groups of a system - emerged as a promising approach (Augustine, et al., 2009, p. xvii).

Coupling distributed or shared leadership, with a cohesive vision and focused message on improving instruction for all groups, fosters a supportive environment for ensuring success for EL students. By creating a culture of leadership across roles in schools with a widely understood focus on improving instruction, schools shift the conversation toward ways in which learning can be maximized for individual EL students.

Embedded Reform Initiatives in Complex Systems

Schools are increasingly recognized as complex adaptive systems (Keshavarz, Nutbeam, Rowling, & Khavarpour, 2010) with myriad (and sometimes competing) federal, state and local regulatory and policy mandates. For reforms to be sustainable, they need to be responsive to these mandates while shifting vision and practice (Fullan, 2000; Kozleski & Huber, 2010).

Special programs within schools often act in isolation, with programs for ELs, special education, and general education operating in separate spheres—to the detriment of students who participate in and are members of all these spheres (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011). To avoid such isolation, a systemic approach to student learning becomes essential. This systemic approach can guide district, school and classroom decision making and communication. In a study of schools that showed substantial gains in student achievement within three years of school improvement efforts, systemic and “consistent focus on improving instruction” (Herman et al., 2008, p. 14) emerged as a key recommendation. This focus reflects the broader literature on effective school improvement practices that underscores the importance of maintaining attention across educational components on improving instruction and therefore student success (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003).

A pivotal component of school “turnaround” efforts is the initiation of data teams that regularly examine data to make decisions and guide efforts across programs and services to improve student achievement (Lachat & Smith, 2005). This approach, of examining data and evidence, is at the core of special education referrals (Klingner & Harry, 2006) and has long been a required step in determining student eligibility to receive special education services. However, the skills of teachers on these referral teams, and the nature of data considered, rarely enable teams to distinguish whether

ELs experience learning differences as emergent bilinguals or have a specific learning disability (Ortiz et al., 2011).

Transformative Linguistic Experiences for Students

There are some factors that all teachers must understand regarding the academic challenges many EL students experience. One is that curriculum often assumes middle-class, American cultural knowledge, yet necessitates teachers bridging students' backgrounds and experiences to the curricular content (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1998). A second is that the language of instruction may render the content inaccessible to EL students unless teachers adapt instruction and assignments to the language proficiency levels of students. There is a robust body of research that suggests ELs and other minority students fare better when their teachers understand their language and cultural backgrounds (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005; Cummins, 1986; Rossell & Baker, 1996; Slavin & Cheung, 2005). A challenge to meeting this need is that the percentage of minority teachers has never been equal to the percentage of minority students in the US. Recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicates that 85 percent of teachers in American schools are White (NCES, 2009).

Beyond understanding students' backgrounds, teachers need to clearly understand the complex processes of second language acquisition and acculturation and the impact of these processes on academic achievement (Skiba, et al., 2006), yet few states embed these competencies into their licensing requirements. A lack of teacher expertise in the instruction of ELs can translate into misunderstanding the root causes of learning difficulties, since student performance can mirror academic patterns caused by learning disabilities (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher & Ortiz, 2010). Below we discuss a case study on the collaboration between one partner school with a high population of EL students and the BiSped program.

Research Design and Methodology

Our primary research question for this study was: In what ways does a district-preservice collaboration in bilingual special education influence practice? To answer this question, a single case study methodology was applied to a BiSped partnership. The application of this methodology afforded the opportunity to study the influence of the BiSped program in context. Interest in offering "insight, discovery, and interpretation" (Meriam, 1988, p. 10) made the use of a case study approach an ideal research design to help deepen our understanding of BiSped's influence. The case study site was selected through a process of purposive sampling (Patton, 1990). Two key areas of practice, based on the literature, and reflecting BiSped goals, were used to gather information on schools. Specifically, the researchers were interested in studying (1) the extent to which culturally and linguistically appropriate instruction was provided to ELs in the general education setting, and (2) the nature of school support systems for ELs (e.g., pre-referral, referral, and placement processes as well as high expectations for all students).

These areas served as a framework for how BiSped educators and graduates influenced the academic success of ELs and what conditions facilitated and supported

their influence. Ten districts partnered with the preservice program in BiSped. These districts ranged from those serving large urban populations, to suburban, and more rural sites. Out of all the partner schools and districts, one school, Corona Elementary, from the Hillside School District¹ in a state in the Northwest region of the United States, evidenced consistent activity on the key practices (both in terms of appropriate instruction and support systems), and was selected to serve as a study site. Seventy percent of students attending Corona were ELs and curriculum and instructional organization was intentionally designed to serve this population. In addition, student achievement on state tests in reading revealed positive growth over time.

Using Corona as a study site, the authors sought to obtain in-depth knowledge of the school. In particular, to understand how faculty perceived the influence of the BiSped educators on school teams as they worked with ELs who were being considered for special education referral. Data were collected through interviews and participant observations. Extant data and documents (e.g. assessment results, student records, meeting minutes, and school/district policy papers) provided additional information sources.

Emerging Patterns

Analyses of the interview data used a process of examining the data from various levels of abstraction beginning with specific items, moving to patterns or categories that fit together across interviews, and then looking for “relationships among patterns in the data” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 68). To identify emergent data variables, patterns, and structures, the analyses combined deductive and inductive processes. Deductive analysis allowed data to be coded and sorted by the best-fit themes. Inductive analysis enabled the researchers “to see into what kinds of chunks [data] seem to fall naturally and then choosing a set of concepts that helps to explain why the data fell that way” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 46). Finally, an interpretive or holistic analysis of the data for the case surfaced corresponding themes or assertions that corresponded (Stake, 1995).

Background and Context of BiSped

Beyond the usual competencies required for special education teachers, BiSped educators engaged in specific coursework and professional development to develop competencies in differentiating a language difference from a language disability. This focus included a grounding in empirically-based instructional practices for both English learners and students with low- and high-incidence disabilities.

In addition to coursework, BiSped educators met quarterly for professional development opportunities with staff members from the ten partner school districts. BiSped educators and district teachers participated in annual conferences in which nationally-recognized scholars and practitioners offered workshops and presentations on second language acquisition and issues related to special education for diverse students (e.g., reading comprehension, biliteracy, and teaching academic language). Thus, BiSped created a professional community focused on the issues of difference and disability.

A unique aspect of the program was that BiSped students were almost entirely bilingual, bicultural paraprofessionals in their schools. By design, this feature of the program recognized the unique position that these educators already held in their schools as cultural brokers, translators, and caring adults who understood—from personal experience—the challenges EL students face. BiSped empowered these paraprofessionals by building on their funds of knowledge (González & Moll, 2002) with essential skills and knowledge of ELs and special education.

Interviews and Observations

Individuals working in the school and school district staff members working with Corona were identified and interviewed as key informants. Interviewees were recruited through a process of referral sampling in which interviewees identify other potential informants who are knowledgeable on the topic and who might provide additional perspective. Approximately one-third of the staff/faculty (12 individuals; 4 male, 8 female) were formally interviewed using open-ended protocols. Interviewees ranged in experience from new teachers to those with over 20 years of experience as educators or administrators. Interviews were conducted by a highly skilled qualitative research associate of one of the authors (now retired) who was part of the research team. Initial interviews were conducted in-person with some follow-up questions by e-mail or phone to clarify responses as needed. Questions were designed to gain insight into how ELs qualified for special education placement, BiSped educators' role and influence in the school, professional development related to EL instruction, and ideas for enhancing the university-district partnership.

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and uploaded to ATLAS.ti, a software program designed for storing and coding narrative data for analysis. All interviews were reviewed by the interviewees to ensure accuracy (member checking). Further, interviewees provided additional sources of information (e.g., meeting minutes, informational material, policy statements, and school-level data), which illuminated the milieu of work at Corona, and the district in general.

School level meetings that focused on special education and ELs were also observed. Detailed notes were taken and entered into ATLAS.ti for coding and analysis. One author and a data collection team member spent extensive time at the school observing classrooms and meetings, reviewing student records, and informally conversing with faculty members.

Record Review

This study also included an embedded study of eight EL students—four students found eligible for special education services and four who went through the pre-referral process, were assessed for special education services and found ineligible. Each student's cumulative folder of academic records was carefully examined to determine adherence to state and district policy regarding the eligibility process for EL students, the comprehensiveness of assessments, and relevant medical and historical records.

Student Achievement Analysis

Another data source for the case study was student achievement records according to state assessments. To examine these records, ELs who had remained at

Corona for four years and taken state standardized tests each year were identified. These data were analyzed to determine the amount of growth that occurred over that time span. These test scores were compared to other ELs' test results for two neighboring schools in Corona's district. In addition, test results from the English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) were similarly analyzed and compared to other ELs from the two other district schools. These analyses were not designed to show causal connections between EL outcomes and instruction; rather, they situated student achievement results from Corona in the context of local schools.

Addressing Language Differences and Disabilities at Corona Elementary

The Hillside School District is home to slightly over 5,500 students and is a rural district in a state in the Northwest region of the United States. Hillside is comprised of four towns and has an estimated population of 23,096 inhabitants, of which 23 percent are Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The town of Corona has an estimated population of 12,185 which is 50 percent Latino, giving it the largest population of second language learners in the school district (40%). The Latino population for the state in 2014 was estimated at 12.5 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Corona Elementary is one of five elementary schools in the district.

Evidence was gathered to illuminate ways in which BiSped educators and district staff members worked collaboratively to address the educational needs of ELs. Specific information sources included interview data, observational notes from team meetings, and a review of student achievement data. Illustrative quotes and data from interviews are used to portray the nature of implementation at the site.

Data from Interviews

Interviews with school administrators in the Hillside District revealed that three out of four were bilingual/bicultural and expressed firm commitment to the success of diverse students in their schools. The district administrators created infrastructure to support databased decisions and to ensure that procedures and protocols were in place to assist in identifying students for support services.

Distributed local leadership. Principals and teacher leaders within the Hillside School District created a Community of Practice regarding EL issues (Carrejo, Cortez, & Reinhartz, 2010) and engaged in frequent dialogue about ensuring student success and effective practices. The importance of leadership in EL issues emerged as a clear and influential component of the program across the district. Principals were involved in their communities, and were well acquainted with their school's families and the populations they served. Principals conveyed value and respect for families and believed educators should build on student strengths. This can be seen in a comment offered by the Corona principal who noted that:

[Culture] is an overarching focus because of our population. The two-way immersion program addresses culture as do the ELD [English Language Development] and literacy programs. We have 75 percent bilingual staff so that brings culture and language together in the school. (Principal A, personal interview)

The importance of leadership was reiterated by the university BiSped coordinator who commented:

[The district] hired an excellent EL Coordinator, [who] is an exceptional leader. She was an EL student herself, believes in the work with strong research and practice on issues related to EL students. She is a strong advocate for the students and families. Also, she brings in a lot of professional development in an effort to continually improve services to ELs. She reaches out for every opportunity to support ELs such as the opportunities the BiSped program offered. (Coordinator A, personal interview)

Under the careful guidance of the EL director, leadership on EL issues permeated the district and was apparent in hiring decisions as well as professional development offerings and programming. Corona School continuously nurtured a welcoming environment for students and families. Staff members drew upon the “funds of knowledge” (González & Moll, 2002) that families brought to the school community. Further, staff members were valued and respected for their knowledge and leadership they assumed in discussions and procedures regarding special education and ELs within the school.

Embedded reform in complex systems. A team approach was the nucleus driving an intentional focus on the needs of all students at Corona, and especially ELs. The school district trained all principals on a standards-based collaborative data analysis and decision making process where student’s language proficiencies, background, educational experiences in and out of the US, home literacy context, and acculturation were identified and considered. Principals were trained in the creation of data teams that follow collaborative protocols. After extensive training, principals returned to their respective schools and implemented the model.

Response To Intervention, Early Bilingual Intervention System Teams, use of data

Response to Intervention (RTI) was a process born through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) as an eligibility process for students with Specific Learning Disabilities. This process was included to discourage special education eligibility teams to discontinue use of the traditional IQ ability discrepancy model. RTI focuses on early prevention of reading difficulties, as well as math, by screening all students at the beginning of each year, providing interventions appropriate to the student’s level of struggles, and monitoring results of interventions to inform future instructional decisions (Brown & Sanford, 2011). In an RTI model, students exhibiting academic challenges are referred to a team who: (1) consider the student’s needs based on data, (2) define instructional targets, (3) plan interventions and assessments, (4) determine a timeline to examine the student’s progress, (5) plan further interventions, possibly refer to special education, or if the child has made sufficient progress, phase out interventions. The steps in this phase can be repeated or if the data shows the student is making minimal progress on the academic goals, the team may decide to refer the students for a special education evaluation. At Corona, the principal played a key role in these team meetings. She described her role in this strategy:

... I document meetings, do logistics/organization, and help keep an intentional focus on the child. That includes follow up to ensure RTI program goals are implemented. (Principal A, personal interview)

Protocols were developed within the school, institutionalized, and used in the pre-referral process and with grade level teams. Norms and member roles were reviewed at each meeting. The data teams typically used a five-step process for their work. The steps, detailed below, as similar to those used within an RTI model.

1. Collect and chart data
2. Analyze student performance
3. Agree on a SMART Goal [Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely]
4. Determine instructional strategies to address the goal
5. Determine results indicator(s)

At the final meeting, the team determined the extent to which SMART goals were met, discussed unmet goals, and to determined strategies to implement. Information was graphed and shared school-wide in an effort to be transparent and share leadership.

At the time of the case study, Corona was into its third year of using the data team process. The process was consistently being used by faculty members to problem solve. The data teams also created norms of collaboration that permeated work in the school. Teachers held procedural knowledge about when, and how, to use team processes effectively. At Corona, according to the principal, "Teachers do not meet as a data team until about a month after school has started. By that time they have a good idea about what...they would like to initially focus on." Teachers need this time with their students in order to get to know them well enough that they can begin the data team process. This "wait time" is supported by current research (Kearns, Lemons, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2014).

The use of a RTI model in Corona School. The data team process follows Kovaleski and Pedersen's problem-solving RTI model (2008) of developing interventions based on an analysis of student data, developing an instructional intervention, trying it out in the real world of the classroom, and then assessing student learning. The process is ongoing and subject to modification based on data.

The process used to screen ELs for special education eligibility follows the RTI construct, as well. According to the district EL coordinator, "team meetings are held at every school to review student performance and identify instructional interventions, as needed. This process will avoid misidentification."

To ensure that school professionals remained focused on students, the Corona principal noted, "We don't call it a pre-referral team, we call it the Cougar Team because we want to develop a mindset for meeting student needs and not create another procedural activity." The Cougar Team consists of the principal, general education teacher, EL teacher, counselor, parents, Title I teacher, school psychologist, the student management person, and, as needed, special education teacher and the speech pathologist. The principal leads the process and ensures a strong focus on the student.

The team collaboratively designs research-based interventions through a three-tiered approach as follows.

Tier 1: Teacher intervention. Tier 1 intervention is implemented by the general education teacher for students just below grade level benchmarks. After an appropriate amount of time, at least quarterly, student progress is reviewed. If little or no improvement is made, a Tier 2 intervention is most likely to be recommended.

Tier 2: Pre-referral to the Cougar Team. At Tier 2, a specialist trained in reading interventions provides the intervention in a small group setting, generally outside the classroom for 30 minutes daily. If the student does not improve after Tier 2, the process moves to Tier 3 and a referral team.

Tier 3: Referral. The team discusses the student's lack of progress and then collaborates to review data and determine the need for a comprehensive assessment. If they choose to assess, parent permission is obtained and the team members assess the child in the areas of concern. The evaluation results are prepared for review with the team, including parents, to determine if the student is eligible for special education. The evaluation includes such measures as cognitive tests (in the native language and English if appropriate); classroom observation; first and second language proficiency; parent, teacher, and student interviews; hearing and vision screening; and medical records, if appropriate. After the comprehensive assessment, the multidisciplinary team writes a detailed report that includes eligibility status. If the student is found eligible, the process enters a new stage. For students who do not qualify, they are referred back to the pre-referral team for additional intervention planning to ensure continued support.

Eligibility for special education. When an EL student is determined to be eligible for special education services based on the evaluation process, the team reconvenes to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Special education service provision may be delivered in either English or Spanish as determined by the team. For those students in need of special education services who qualify for English-as-a-Second Language/English Language Development services based on the state's language proficiency assessment, the team discusses how these services will be provided preferring a collaborative model rather than two separate pull-out programs.

Transformative Linguistic Experiences for Students

One theme that emerged across interviews and review of documents was the issue of appropriate placement of ELs. Results of data collection revealed that Corona used a comprehensive assessment approach during the pre-referral and referral processes for ELs including:

- Someone on the Pre-referral Team was a fluent speaker of the student's native language; knowledgeable about language development issues.
- Pre-referral discussions were situated in a culturally responsive context.
- Both English and Spanish versions of the *Woodcock-Muñoz* were used and administered by a bilingual professional. (The *Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey* is a nationally-normed measure of English cognitive academic language proficiency.)

- All testing administration occurred in the student's native language.
- Students' home language was carefully documented using the Home Language Survey.
- Student opportunities to learn were documented through observation of the instructional and school environments.
- A contextually appropriate RTI model, as described earlier, was used to assess the effectiveness of instructional strategies and document student progress over time to help eliminate misdiagnosis.
- Student baseline data were established in order to assess current behavior and performance and measure change over time.
- Specific goals and objectives for student improvement were established.
- Data were collected to demonstrate that interventions were implemented as planned.
- Intervention data to assess student behavior or performance were collected over time.
- Interviews of parents/guardian, students, and teachers were conducted.

Reducing the rate of EL students referred to special education. From the perspective of the Corona principal, the school had “a proportional number of ELs referred in accordance with our EL population.”ⁱⁱ From the time students enter school through their elementary experience, challenges related to language and special education are monitored and reviewed.” As one BiSped educator explained:

We do home visits before [students] come to Kindergarten and try to learn about language(s) in the home, but some kids fall through the cracks because the parents will say the dominant language is Spanish and yet the student knows and uses English at school and this leads to misdiagnosis. Now we test in both languages but in the past they did not. The large number of Latinos creates an opportunity for teachers using that expertise to help identify language vs. learning deficits.
(Educator A, personal interview)

A mistaken assumption that educators and parents can make is that special education is good for EL students regardless of whether they qualify or not. However, the district uses the RTI process as a way to control this mistake. As the school psychologist explained:

We control disproportionality through RTI and the incorporation of bilingual/bicultural members on the team who serve as advocates for the EL students. In terms of special education, I try to convince people that it is not the solution to all student learning problems. I run into people who say that special education is good for the [EL] kids because they get extra help and I say, “No.”

Findings from Observations

To explore how placement decisions were made at Corona, one author and a data collection team member attended a team meeting on students that receive both

special education and ELD services (dual identified students). This meeting was held to examine overrepresentation of ELs in the disability category of speech or language impairment and to review student files on a case-by-case basis as a collaborative team. The meeting focused on reviewing each student's file to address the following questions: (1) Are EL designations and placements appropriate? (2) Are these students appropriately placed? (3) Have they been appropriately identified as EL? (4) If not, can they be exited from ELD services on the basis of ELD or special education IEP modification? It is important to clarify that in Oregon each district creates a plan and documents the rationale for exit from ESL/ELD services based on data from the Multidisciplinary Team. The key premise was that a new placement or change in IEPs must be done on a case-by-case basis to avoid a formulaic decision-making approach.

Diverse Voices Heard in Team Meeting on Student Placement

The team meeting described above was well attended by teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school professional staff members who worked directly with the students being reviewed. Everyone conveyed a relaxed and engaged demeanor and contributed important information for making student placement decisions. All team members provided insight from various perspectives into each child's situation including home life, assessment data, and classroom performance. Each professional listened carefully to one another, asked questions to clarify issues, and presented unique viewpoints as ELD teachers, psychologists, or other professionals. Each student's case was individually discussed and reviewed in order to make the best decision for each child. There was careful attention to compliance issues, use of data, and the collection of supporting evidence for the decisions made. However, the primary focus on the child clearly pervaded every facet of the meeting.

Findings from Review of Cumulative Records

An examination of the cumulative records for eight intentionally selected students was carried out to gain knowledge of the process used for qualifying ELs for special education and to understand safeguards used to ensure primary language related misdiagnosis does not occur. This process entailed three distinct stages designed to garner meaningful and valid results.

Eight students' cumulative records were reviewed. Four students were selected from a list of students recently found eligible for special education services (Group 1) while the other four had been evaluated but were found ineligible (Group 2). Each student's school record was carefully examined in areas such as adherence to state and district policy, appropriateness of testing and assessment, and medical and historical records. All of the students in Group 1 qualified for special education services under the category of Communication Disorder (CD). The group included two students in grade four, one in grade three, and one student in grade two. Group 2 (ineligible) consisted of two students in grade two and two students in grade three.

All file contents examined, showed a high degree of fidelity to established practices in terms of file content, processes, and reporting. For example, each file contained examples of relevant assessments and reporting that illustrated the school's commitment to valid and reliable assessments of ELs; thereby reducing the probability of a misdiagnosis. The file review served as a concrete example of how school

infrastructure can support data-informed decisions. The school psychologist summarized efforts to ensure all student-related decisions are based on the best and most comprehensive data available:

We look at academic history, home information, and we test ELs in Spanish. I try to see where the learning difficulty lies. I interview the student, parents, and teachers. I look at development, especially language development. I interview the student, parents, and teachers as well as collect all the information that is available to help me make a decision. It is difficult to assess what they know and don't know. Assessing EL kids for Special Education is very difficult and takes a lot of thought and it is one of the hardest assessments I do.

BiSped Bridging Systems: From Aides to Assets and Advocates

At the time of the case study, there were two BiSped educators at Corona among 26 teachers, 18 of whom were bilingual. The school staff implemented many research-based practices and programs designed to address the needs of ELs (as described previously). Within this context, isolating the influence of two BiSped educators represents a near impossible task. However, by exploring observed influences noticed by key staff members and the two BiSped educators, readers can begin to ascertain the valuable roles BiSped educators played within this selected school district and school. During the case study year both BiSped educators served as teacher assistants (paraprofessionals), while carrying out different duties. Each BiSped educator described their role and how BiSped influenced what they did.

BiSped Educator #1:

I have been focusing efforts on one student who has had learning problems and my BiSped training has helped address his needs. He is primarily with me so I cannot say how working with him has influenced the regular classroom teacher. However, I have collaborated with the [special education] teacher extensively.

BiSped Educator #2:

Everyone is receptive to what we know and they ask for ideas. Teachers are very receptive. I do all the testing for the district in Spanish. We work together as a team across roles. I test all morning using the Woodcock Muñoz. I am an IA [instructional assistant] in the afternoon. We have multidisciplinary teams, especially related to involvement in RTI. We really look at kids to determine, 'Is this a language issue or a special education need?' We have found some students having three languages influencing their learning. So we ask ourselves, 'What are they really speaking at home?'

This has influenced other teachers because of the kinds of questions I am asking - like asking if students have been tested with the [Woodcock-Muñoz] and that raises the question for regular classroom teachers about why I need this data. This has heightened their awareness of EL issues and student needs.

BiSped Educator #2 initiated the testing of native language in the district because she saw a need to ensure bilingual students were not assessed only in English. She demonstrated the value of this testing and a position was created, which she held at the time of the study. The school psychologist pointed out how staff communication improved under collaboration with the BiSped program because it created a common language with a shared understanding and facilitated learning the oral section of the [Woodcock-Muñoz] test. She also conveyed the heart-felt commitment of the BiSped educator to gain new knowledge in serving the needs of ELs:

It is easier to get on the same page with the school psychologist, Silvia, about issues that are important. She took my suggestion to conduct oral language screening and ran with it as well as reading and math achievement. Most teachers just do the math and reading but she does the oral part in Spanish. When I suggested it to her, she said, 'you think this is important?' and I said, "Yes." She then learned the oral component and began testing the oral section of the test. The school psychologist wanted to learn it when she did not have to. It is not an easy test to give. She wanted to learn it when she did not have to. She also does some of our pre-referral intervention groups in math... BiSped helped her differentiate between [special education] students' needs and general education needs. (School psychologist, personal interview)

The school district's EL coordinator who had been in the district a little over five years brought firsthand experience as an EL; with an extensive academic background in culture and language development for second language learners. She described the influence and involvement of the two BiSped educators at Corona:

There is lots of collaboration at the sites where BiSped [educators] are placed. BiSped [educators] sit at the table when the conversation is about ELs and special education. [One of them] conducts the district's English and Spanish proficiency assessments. This occurred because of her involvement in BiSped. More and more requests have been made for assessing ELs for special education... The requests sort of created an advanced organizer for her to look for a solution through the BiSped program. After she became a BiSped [educator] and developed an appropriate level of knowledge, she approached the district about the need for first and second language assessments prior to or during the special education evaluation process. As a result, [her] position was created. (District coordinator, personal interview)

This is an important observation. The fact that a paraprofessional in the district was able to advocate for a position she knew was needed, as a result of her training in the BiSped program, and demonstrated the district's recognition of the value she was adding to the district. Another illustration of the BiSped educators' interactions with school and district colleagues was provided by the district's EL coordinator. She reported on the integral role they played in a comprehensive staff meeting for EL students:

I saw them in the meeting we had at Corona. The two BiSped specialists were there for the entire meeting contributing their experience and knowledge to the decisions being made. They worked collaboratively with other key participants: ELD specialist, special education teachers, school psychologist, speech clinician, BiSped Program Director, etc. (District EL coordinator, personal interview)

These reflections from multiple perspectives suggest the BiSped educators filled needed roles within their schools in response to needs that matched their skills and expertise. Other school staff members valued their input to the extent that efforts were made to include them in decision-making meetings and individual planning for students. As BiSped educators gained specific knowledge and skills, they moved from positions of paraprofessionals (instructional aides)—often the lowest ranking staff members in a school—to genuine resources within the school. They were recognized as assets to the staff and strong advocates for ELs on teams that made critical decisions about ELs' educational experiences. Further, they reinforced the professional development that was being provided by the BiSped program to create shared understanding and practice regarding disproportionality.

Analysis of Student Achievement for Diverse Students: Putting It All Together For English Learners

Across the country, ELs fall behind their peers on assessments of academic achievement. Large disparities are found for both mathematics and reading on state and national tests. Gaps range from 19 to 34 percentage points, depending on the subject and grade for national tests (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011). However, proficiency levels for EL and non-EL students alike are much higher on state assessments than on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2009).

Corona Elementary School. ELs who remained in the Hillside School District for four years and took state standardized tests each year, were identified for an analysis of their academic achievement over time. These included 27 students, from three neighboring elementary schools in the district. Data were analyzed to determine the amount of growth shown by students on the state's English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) over the four-year time span.

Table 1

English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) Results for Cohort of Students in Grade 4 during 2009-2010 Academic Year

Point Score Difference Between First and Last Administration of ELPA	Corona Elementary N (%)	John Glenn Elementary N (%)	Buzz Aldrin Elementary N (%)
>30	13 (48%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
26-30	3 (11%)	2 (18%)	1 (14%)
21-25	4 (15%)	2 (18%)	0 (0%)
16-20	5 (19%)	2 (18%)	0 (0%)
11-15	1 (4%)	2 (18%)	4 (57%)
6-10	0 (0%)	3 (27%)	1 (14%)
<5	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	1 (14%)
Total	27 (100%)	11 (100%)	7 (100%)

Table 1 displays the score differences between the first and last administration of the ELPA for these students. For Corona Elementary School, about 74 percent of the identified students had a score difference of 21 points or above. As can be seen in Table 1, far fewer students made comparable gains over time in their acquisition of English at the other two schools. For example, about 36% of students in John Glenn Elementary posted a score difference of 21 points or above, and for Buzz Aldrin Elementary School, only 14% of the students had score differences of 21 points or above from their first to last ELPA.

Table 2 presents the English language proficiency levels between the first and last administration of the ELPA for these students. For Corona Elementary School students, 85% were at the Beginning level at the first administration. This percentage dropped to 19% in the last administration. On the first test, no Corona students were in the Early Advanced, or above, levels. By the last test time, 30% were at the Early Advanced level. For the students from other selected schools, only one student moved into this higher level of proficiency by the last test.

Table 2

English Language Proficiency Level by School and First or Last Administration of the ELPA

Proficiency Level	Corona Elementary N (%)		Glenn Elementary N (%)		Aldrin Elementary N (%)	
	First	Last	First	Last	First	Last
Advanced (Proficient)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Early Advanced	0 (0%)	8 (30%)	0 (0%)	1 (9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Intermediate	0 (0%)	3 (11%)	1 (9%)	3 (27%)	1 (14%)	3 (43%)
Early Intermediate	4 (15%)	11 (41%)	4 (36%)	4 (36%)	1 (14%)	3 (43%)
Beginning	23 (85%)	5 (19%)	6 (55%)	3 (27%)	5 (71%)	1 (14%)
Total	27 (100%)	27 (100%)	11 (100%)	11 (100%)	7 (100%)	7 (100%)

Clearly EL students at Corona were advancing their English proficiency more rapidly than students in neighboring schools. Attributing this success to any one approach or intervention is inappropriate. It is likely that a combination of factors, conditions, and resources combined to support EL students. Administrators and staff members recognized the BiSped educators as contributing resources.

Discussion

Evidence from different data sources used in this case study clearly show how BiSped educators helped disentangle language differences from disabilities among EL students. Undoubtedly the conditions at Corona Elementary School offered a context where the BiSped program and its participants could contribute a great deal to providing excellent educational experiences for ELs. At Corona, BiSped philosophy and principles aligned with the school culture and caring community, which allowed BiSped educators to flourish. Practices reinforced and built upon effective approaches in which BiSped educators were developing skills and knowledge. They became valued team members and resources within the school and contributed in concrete ways to accurately teasing out EL students' language differences from disabilities. Programs such as this hold promise to remediate the overrepresentation of ELs in Special Education. This is critical for both new and current teachers of EL students.

This study aimed to augment research from other school reform efforts, document implementation efforts of a novel program and partnership at one site, and capture authentic voices of educators immersed in reforming bilingual and special education. However, as with any case study, findings from this study are not meant to be generalizable to other populations or schools. The case study intends to prompt reflection, discussion, and ideas for future research on effective professional development and partnerships to provide ELs with an education that addresses their

language and learning needs. After examining the data, two important implications for practice emerged.

Student Focused

Local leadership, district professional development, and policies, all enabled teams to assess student progress on a case-by-case basis, keeping the attention on optimizing learning for individual students. BiSped educators complemented this work by contributing their expertise, serving as valued resources, and advocating for EL students and their families. Established protocols and procedures for placement of students promoted student-centered decisions and fostered a culture of care towards students and families.

Collaboration Across Programs

BiSped educators bridged systems that often act in isolation. Whole-school professional development through the district and BiSped further created a culture of collaboration across ELD, special education, and general education programs. BiSped participants, who were recruited from paraprofessional staff in the district, were uniquely situated in schools. They had the rare opportunity to work in different classrooms daily with different teachers and professionals. They often worked one-on-one with students and saw how different students responded to different learning environments. They held a wealth of knowledge rarely tapped within school systems. By further developing the knowledge and skills of paraprofessionals, already working in the schools, BiSped capitalized on their insider knowledge of students and families, as well as their own funds of knowledge. They shared knowledge as professionals within their schools. These home-grown specialists, embedded in the community physically and culturally, became valuable assets to the school community. They were recognized for their unique sets of skills and knowledge at the interface of EL and special education assessment and instruction. As our student population becomes increasingly diverse, it is imperative that teachers be uniquely prepared to provide rigorous instruction to all student groups as well as be able to connect culturally and linguistically with students and their families. Partnerships like BiSped that recruit from the paraprofessional staff, are able to build on the knowledge, skills and relationships these individuals have already acquired.

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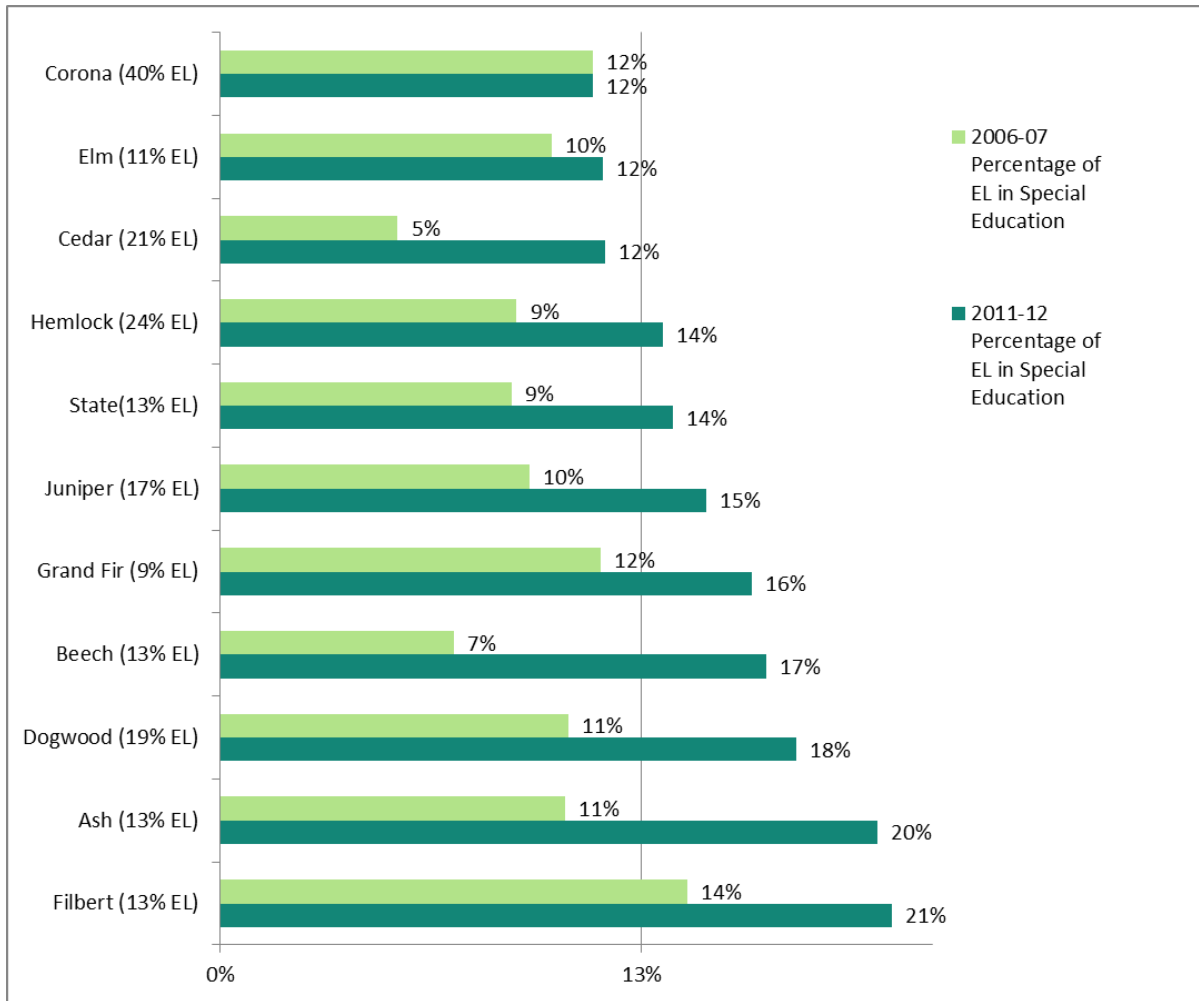
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Appendix

Percent English Learner (EL) Students in Special Education 2006-2007 and 2011-2012 among 10 Oregon School Districts



Note. The percent of EL students in the district and state is shown in parentheses (Source: Oregon Department of Education, 2011). NCES (2011) reports that in 2010-2011, 13 percent of all students received special education services in the U.S. (Source: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013037.pdf> p. 58.)

Endnotes

ⁱ Pseudonyms have been used.

ⁱⁱ In fact, this was confirmed by state data. Changes in the percentage of Hillsdale (Corona's district) ELs receiving special education services remained fairly stable from 2006-2007 to 2011-2012 as shown in Appendix A.