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Learning Disabilities in English Language Learners: Identifying the Issues

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America's non-English-speaking student population is diverse, multicultural, multilingual, and academically challenged. Although the students bring a wealth of culture, tradition, diverse languages, and rich heritage into our classrooms, they are also the student group with the highest drop-out rate, lowest achievement scores, largest mobility rate, and highest poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2004; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004b). The challenge for non-English-speaking students, or English language learners (ELLs), is not only overcoming the language barrier, but also overcoming low expectations and low academic achievement. Therefore, there is a great need to better understand how to best teach ELLs; even more challenging is to sort out how to identify and teach ELLs who have learning disabilities (ELL/LD). The focus of this special issue is to examine these complex issues within a research context. The articles are an outgrowth of a symposium on ELL/LD that took place in October 2003, the goal of which was to begin to identify research priorities for ELL/LD. The U.S. Department of Education and the National Institutes of Health jointly organized this symposium, which was also supported by several other agencies and organizations.¹ The introduction

provides a brief overview of the context for the symposium, as well as available federal data on the number of ELLs in the United States and the services they receive; the rest of the special issue is devoted to articles by symposium participants on the specific research topics and approaches to studying ELL/LD.

ELL/LD IN THE UNITED STATES: FACTS AND FIGURES

According to the Census 2000 Brief (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004b), nearly one in five Americans speaks a language other than English at home and the proportion of language-minority² individuals in the United States grew by nearly 50 percent during the past decade. Of the language minority individuals in the United States, the Hispanic community is the largest, exceeding 39.4 million (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004a).

Given the dramatic increase in language-minority individuals in the United States over the past decade, it is not surprising that non-English-speaking students are the fastest growing subgroup of children among public school populations, with an annual increase of approximately 10 percent. In fact, the number of students designated limited English proficient (LEP)³ in grades K-12 increased by 72 percent from 1992 to 2002 (Donovan & Cross, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2003). Further, while in 1992 only 15 percent of U.S. teachers had one or more LEP students in their classrooms, by 2002 that figure had risen to 43 percent (Zehler, Fleischman, Hopstock, Stephenson, Pendzick, & Sapru, 2003). Currently, there are approximately 5.5 million students attending U.S. public schools whose native or first language is not

The assertions and opinions contained herein represent those of the authors and of their symposium participants as recorded and interpreted by the authors; they should not be taken as representing official policies of the NICHD, NIH, OSERS, OELA, or the U.S. Departments of Health & Human Services and Education.

Note that Dr. Cutting participated in the symposium planning, implementation, and the writing of this article during her tenure as a Society for Research in Child Development fellow at the NICHD.

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English. Of the students whose native language is not English, 80 percent speak Spanish. The other 20 percent of language-minority students represents a total of 440 diverse languages. Vietnamese is the second most prevalent language spoken, totaling about 4 percent of language-minority students.

The increase in the ELL population in U.S. schools presents a particular challenge for the school systems, as the academic achievement of students who are culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse historically has not kept pace with that of their White, middle-class peers. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has demonstrated that there is a large achievement gap between minority students, many of whom are ELLs, and White students. In 2003 only 15 percent of Hispanic students, 37 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 16 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native students in fourth grade read at the proficient or above levels, in contrast to 41 percent of White students. All of the above figures are based on assessments administered with accommodations (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). These figures are gaining increased focus as the *No Child Left Behind Act* (PL 107-110, January 2002) requires all states to consider the academic achievement levels of all student groups separately, including ELLs, and mandates that the educational needs of all students be addressed.

Just like their non-language minority peers, some ELL students qualify as having a disability as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997). ELLs who do not easily acquire the English language or do not perform well academically after several years of instruction in both language acquisition and academic content are often referred for special education services. However, ELLs who qualify under IDEA must have at least one of the impairments specified under IDEA and, because of that condition, need special education and related services.

Until recently, the prevalence of LDs in children with ELL in the public school system had been unknown. Despite the fact that these estimates are somewhat compromised because neither a method for accurate identification nor a consistent definition of LDs across states and school districts exists, the figures available do offer some sense of the magnitude and complexity of this important but neglected issue. National data reveal that ELLs are underrepresented overall on special education rosters, meaning that a smaller percentage of ELLs are receiving services than would be expected, given the proportion of the overall population that they represent (U.S. Department of Education, 2003; Zehler & Fleischman, 2003). Specifically, while data on LEP students in special education were not readily available because many districts do not routinely identify these students as a distinct subgroup, through the concerted efforts of many school district personnel and those conducting a descriptive study for the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition, a high response rate was obtained, and accuracy was confirmed through cross-referencing information with school personnel and student files (Zehler & Fleischman, 2003). Thus, we can have confidence that the estimates are accurate insofar as they report the number of students currently being served in

special education. However, a frequently recurring interview comment was that district personnel found it challenging to distinguish language differences from disability as the source of academic difficulties for ELLs. They reported not having the tools, procedures, or qualified staff to adequately identify these students.

Despite these limitations, the study estimated that, overall, there were 357,300 LEP students designated as requiring special education services in grades K-12 in school year 2001-2002, representing 9 percent of all LEP students in U.S. public schools, compared to an overall 13.3 percent of children enrolled in U.S. public schools in 2000-2001 (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, 2002).

The data further indicate that, in school year 2001-2002, an estimated 4,774 school districts, out of the approximately 6,500 school districts sampled, reported providing special education services to at least one LEP student. However, out of the total number of students who were identified for and received services across the 4,774 districts, the majority was concentrated in 3.4 percent of the districts. More specifically, this small proportion of districts (3.4 percent) served 57 percent of the LEP special education population, while most districts (more than half, or 55 percent) served only 2.6 percent of the LEP special education population. Further, the highest concentration of LEP students receiving special education services was in urban areas.

It is clear that issues involved in identifying ELLs with LDs and providing services to them are complex. The majority of students are concentrated in specific areas, which means that teachers and specialists with specific expertise should be able to be recruited and fully employed; however, the areas of concentration—urban—often offer less attractive employment opportunities and conditions. On the other hand, despite the concentration of numbers of students in a small proportion of districts, few, if any, school districts will not have to deal with the special issues of ELL students, and when very few such students are found, the cost and logistics of obtaining individuals with appropriate expertise to serve them can be daunting.

Further complicating the picture is the fact that, while ELL students appear to be underrepresented overall on special education rosters, ELL students tend to be overrepresented in certain special education categories: Speech-Language Impairment, Mental Retardation, and Emotional Disturbance. Adding to the complexity of this picture is the fact that the percentage of ELL students who receive special education services in urban localities *surpasses* the national special education percentages for students who speak English as a first language (Donovan & Cross, 2002). This highlights the need for better tools and methods for accurate identification of those with special needs.

Another important issue is teacher preparedness to both identify and instruct LEP students with special education needs. Zehler and Fleischman (2003) noted a lack of qualified instructional staff available to provide special education services to LEP students. They found that 24.4 percent (729,603) of all U.S. public school teachers worked with at least one LEP special education student in 2001-2002.

However, based on educational background and certification, three-quarters of all districts report a deficit in the number of teachers qualified to serve these students. Those teachers working with the students were more likely to have training specific to special education than to LEP intervention. Overall, 60 percent of the teachers whose primary responsibility was special education and who worked with at least three LEP students had received a median of only 3 hours of training specific to LEP education, compared to a median of 40 hours of training in special education for such teachers. It is thus reasonable to assume that these teachers would be more likely to fail to recognize language differences and to assume children struggling in school would benefit from special educational services; this could lead to overreferral of students for special education in those schools.

While there are few data on changes over time in the number of ELLs with disabilities, there are some data to suggest that there has been an increase. In 2002 the National Research Council (Donovan & Cross, 2002) reported that from 1987 to 2001, the proportion of students with disabilities for whom English was not the primary language spoken in the home had risen from 3.3 percent to 14.2 percent; concrete data on the identification, services received, and progress of the students were sparse, and many of these increases were consistent with the increases in the proportion of Hispanic students in general in public education (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2002). However, the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS-2) (Wagner, Cameto, & Newman, 2003) reported changes in the racial/ethnic backgrounds and language-use demographics among students with disabilities, which parallel the data in the NRC report. There was a four-fold increase in the proportion of youth who did not use primarily English at home—a greater increase than seen in the general population during that reporting period 1987–2001. The proportion increased from 3 percent of youth with disabilities who did not use primarily English at home in 1987 to 14 percent in 2001. It is interesting to note that this reflects only Spanish speakers; children who speak primarily other languages are underrepresented in NLTS and NLTS-2 because those implementing the study could not interview in all languages.

While states annually report data on minority students with disabilities to the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education, given that the methods of identification and referral criteria vary from state to state and even in some cases between districts within states, there is reason to question the quality, consistency, and therefore the usefulness of the data obtained in establishing more accurate prevalence estimates. There are many reasons for the paucity of specific and useful information regarding this particular group of students, including the difficulty in disentangling language learning from learning difficulties. What little data we do have reveal an apparent paradox in the appropriate identification of ELLs with LDs. Some ELLs with LDs are assumed to have only language-learning difficulties while other ELLs with learning difficulties due to language differences are assumed to have LDs. Thus, many ELLs may be either over- or underidentified as having a LD that qualifies for special education services under IDEA.

Because appropriate classification, identification, and intervention methods have not yet been established for ELL/LDs, there are problems both in identification and in assessment/measurement of students in the U.S. educational system whose native language is not English. Therefore, it will be important for researchers examining these critical issues to independently assess and categorize ELL students in general and ELL special education students, rather than relying on school-identified samples. Indeed, how to identify and assess the ELL/LD population is one of the fundamental research questions that must be answered in order to know how to best serve them. Nevertheless, given that a large proportion of these students are enrolled in a very small number of districts, research on the identification and classification of learning difficulties in these students is highly feasible.

TOWARD A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR ELL/LD

While little is known about the identification and treatment of learning disabilities in ELLs, there is a substantial knowledge base about the identification, assessment, and intervention of learning disabilities in native English-speaking students. Therefore, it is important to explore how we can build upon this knowledge to inform future work with ELL students. We must consider what methodologies can be used to determine the best ways of distinguishing between learning disabilities and language differences that appear as these students are learning English. Researchers must delineate the critical steps needed to accomplish these goals.

The goal of the symposium that took place in October 2003 was to bring together researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and university educators to consider the current state of knowledge about the identification, classification, and intervention for learning disabilities in ELLs. This group was brought together to discuss the gaps in current knowledge and to provide information to inform a national agenda for both research and practice in this important area.

This special issue of *LDR&P* is based on the presentations, interactions of the participants, and discussions at that symposium. This introduction provides a brief summary of the available federal data on the number of ELLs and ELLs with LDs identified by the school systems in the United States and the services they receive. The next four articles focus on approaches to research. The article by Wagner, Francis and Morris addresses the importance of classification research to identifying learning disabilities, developing a definition of learning disability, building on research methods and findings that have addressed these issues in monolingual populations, and discussing the added complexities that must be taken into account in such research aimed at ELLs. The second article, by Demmert, addresses cultural issues that must be considered in research and assessment. The third and fourth articles address neuroimaging: Pugh, Sandak, Frost, Moore, and Mencl discuss functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and its use in imaging the brains of successful and dyslexic readers, while Simos, Billingsley-Marshall, Sarkari, Patariaia, and Papanicolaou discuss use of magnetoencephalography (MEG) in imaging the brains of

bilingual individuals. Together these articles explain the two prominent neuroimaging techniques used to document the brain-behavior link in reading and reading disabilities, with attention to how they are being applied and might be applied in the future to studies of language and learning in ELL individuals.

The articles on approaches to research are followed by four articles on research implications from current work. The first, by Lipka, Siegel, and Vukovic, presents information on bilingual reading research in Canada and other nations; despite differences between U.S. bilinguals and their educational situations and opportunities, there are also similarities, and much can be learned from these studies. The article by August, Carlo, Dressler, and Snow and that by Vaughn, Mathes, Linan-Thompson, and Francis address studies being conducted at present in the United States. These articles are meant to illustrate the types of studies that are needed to help us understand the differences in the process of learning to read for native English speakers and ELLs and to examine the efficacy of interventions to improve the reading and language knowledge of ELLs at risk for LD. Finally, the article by McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, and Leos, the three federal representatives who organized and coordinated the October 2003 symposium, presents the research agenda that was developed through the symposium and through responses to the symposium summary. The research needs are essentially those that were developed in the symposium and from input obtained at the Office of English Language Acquisition Summit in December 2003, at a special session held for this purpose.

Given the great need for research in this area, it is important that teachers, education administrators, and researchers be open to working with each other as they seek methods to more accurately distinguish those students whose learning difficulties stem from language needs and those who truly require special education services in addition to language services. They must collaborate on the development and testing of effective whole-class, as well as small-group, instructional approaches and interventions for both groups of students. Building bridges between the research and education practice communities is crucial to more accurate identification of and provision of language intervention and special education services to U.S. students whose native language is not English. Such collaborations are also crucial to the development of better, more effective teaching methods, more effective special education interventions, and more fruitful teacher training and professional development programs, which will equip teachers to better identify, teach, and treat our English language learning students, both with and without special education needs.

NOTES

1. Co-sponsors for the October 2003 symposium included NICHD, OELA, OSERS, and (alphabetically) American Federation of Teachers, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Council for Exceptional Children, International Dyslexia Association, In-

ternational Reading Association, National Center for Learning Disabilities, National Education Association, and the National Institute for Literacy.

2. "Language minority" is a term used to describe those who are native speakers of a language other than the native language of the majority population, in the U.S., English. For purposes of this article, the term is in the U.S. essentially equivalent to the term "English language learner."
3. The term "limited English proficient" is used where that is the language specified in laws and regulations cited; otherwise the term "English language learner" is used.

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