

## Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how school professionals' personal and general efficacy beliefs when assessing ELLs and availability, or lack of proper program options may affect the overrepresentation of Hispanic ELLs in special education. When children are successful in an environment where a language difference is acceptable, they are not erroneously, and often in violation of state and federal guidelines, targeted for special education evaluation, assessment, and subsequent labeling by school professionals (Drury, 2007; Harry & Klingner, 2006). This qualitative study extended the research on bilingual children in special education, and incorporated the input from speech pathologists, social workers, and learning disabilities teacher-consultants as members of this decision-making process.

## Participants

Fourteen child study team members were interviewed in this study after responding to a survey that was distributed to all 38 child study team members and speech therapists in the district. There are a total of nine schools in this urban district; seven schools house preschool classrooms. The 14 participants include three social workers, four learning disabilities teacher-consultants, four speech language pathologists, and three school psychologists.

## Materials

Both a survey and in-depth interview process were used to collect information for this study. Interviews took place at mutually convenient locations and times. The first measure, a survey adapted from the Speech-Language Services to Bilingual/Bicultural Individuals (SLSBBI) originally developed by Kritikos for a mixed-method study, was used to capture the efficacy beliefs of school professionals working with ELLs (Kritikos, 2003). The survey was disseminated to all child study team and speech/language pathologists whose direct responsibilities include assessing and evaluating ELLs. The survey responses reflected their personal and professional efficacy beliefs and knowledge regarding ELLs, language acquisition, and testing and evaluation.

## Participant Voices

- I have come to learn that we need to give ELLs time to develop. We need to allow them that silent period of time to take it all in, be exposed to it, digest it, and the new language will come through. Many of the parents do not speak English; the children go home to their native language. At meetings, a bilingual coworker would tell parents, "We want your children to speak in English in school so you really shouldn't"... and that's completely incorrect, completely incorrect. We should want children to maintain their native language while developing their second language. The biggest difficulty comes from everyone having philosophical beliefs of what is correct. (Learning Disability Teacher Consultant-#3)
- The relationship between culture and language is strong, very strong. I believe that your experiences in language are based on your culture. For example, what's up with this selective mutism diagnosis of 3-year-old ELLs who have two emergent languages? Should we really believe they have psychological issues? Or rather, should we explore the cultural aspects of what a child is taught at home? (Learning Disability Teacher Consultant- #1)
- The dual language preschool program was a great addition, but it would not be helpful in the upper grades. Students enter middle and high school with zero English. Now that's a real challenge. Keeping sheltered immersion is helpful, providing summer programs too. Yet, the need to move them out the door quicker than they are ready doesn't make sense to me. I worry about the number of dropouts and the threat of gang membership when children have no options. (Social Worker- #3)
- I am not confident in my knowledge of second language acquisition. With the way the district has changed, even general education teachers should be provided training on this topic. (Learning Disability Teacher Consultant-#2)
- Face it- there is not enough in place in each classroom to facilitate enough infusion of the native language into the program. They are going to acquire English but they are not going to get to the level they need to be as English learners until you can assess accurately what they know in their own language. And build on that. This goes back to the other question- when you look at economically challenged areas, it is not just a language barrier, it's economical, and it's the education level of the parents, the age of the parents. (Speech Language Pathologist- #1)
- I think because I went to an in-state college and the needs are higher here, my graduate program was very culturally involved. I did have a bilingual assessment course and hands-on assessment in the classroom as part of my practicum, but I never had a class on second language acquisition. I do not feel competent making a decision regarding a language disability versus a language difference without consultation with a trained bilingual psychologist or learning consultant. (School Psychologist-3)

## Implications

- Many states remain unprepared to provide substantive early intervention bilingual preschool programs that reflect the needs of children currently in their school districts (Barnett et al., 2009).
- Schools are providing culturally unresponsive interventions (Blanchett et al., 2009).
- When students appear successful, school professionals are not being asked to consider special education placements (Garcia & Jensen, 2007; Harry & Klingner, 2007).
- Inappropriate labeling is discriminatory and has been correlated to decreased outcomes during and after the school years (Florian, 2010). Given these persistent variations, underrepresentation, overrepresentation, and misidentification of certain groups may lie in the hands of the assessment and the evaluator.
- A gap in the literature about how ELLs' language assessments are administered, by whom, and whether an informal and formal multimethod approach is consistently applied (O'Bryon & Rodgers, 2010).
- If students are viewed as capable and successful in high quality programs, and this success is sustained, there will be a decrease in the overrepresentation of Hispanics as ELLs in learning disabled special education programs (Sullivan, 2011).
- Teachers are more sensitive to referring primary ELLs to special education and prefer to wait until third grade (Samson & Lesaux, 2009).
- A delay could provide opportunities for proper interventions and promote adequate opportunity to learn in the formative years within a high quality bilingual program (Espinosa, 2010).
- A delay may also indicate a failure to address the special needs of a student or it may be an indication that teachers lack of understanding of the crossroads of second language acquisition and being learning disabled (Artiles et al., 2005).
- Early intervention continues to be a worthwhile investment to enhance learning opportunities for Hispanic children (Cunha & Heckman, 2010; Garcia & Jensen, 2009).

## Procedure

Of the 38 surveys disseminated, 27 or 61% were returned. Of the 27 returned surveys, 21 individuals volunteered to participate; however, 14 individuals were interviewed when saturation of themes became evident. As the surveys were returned, interviews were scheduled. Depending on participant preference, interviews were either recorded with a tape recorder or done by longhand. Broad ideas and themes were drawn from this data and interpreted to reflect the new information.

## Themes

ELLs need time to develop language skills	Need for bilingual personnel in the classroom
Importance of fostering home language in school	Need for training in 2 <sup>nd</sup> language acquisition
Need for staff to have cultural competency skills	Need for collaboration in eligibility decisions fostering global consideration
Importance of family involvement	Need for tests that are reasonable for Spanish students and bilingual students
Over identification in special education	Advantages of bilingualism
Under identification in special education	Need for bilingual/dual language programs that are well thought out and planned

## Abbreviated References

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