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# Bilingual Special Education: Investigating and Implementing Evidence-Based Practices in Schools

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# *Editorial*

## **Bilingual Special Education: Investigating and Implementing Evidence-Based Practices in Schools**

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**Keywords:** bilingual special education

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Bilingual special education continues to be an important field to explore and understand in order to improve services for diverse students. Baca and Cervantes (2004) defined bilingual special education as “the use of the home language and culture along with English in an individually designed program of special instruction for the student in an inclusive environment” (p. 18). As educators, we must examine what we know, how we know it, and what we must learn about bilingual special education (Spooner, Algozzine, Woods, & Hicks, 2010) in order to advance the current state of teaching in the bilingual special education field.

There is no short cut for addressing the needs of English learners who have a disability. Importantly, all English learners who have been aptly evaluated and identified as having a disability have the right to an appropriate free and public education that provides a comprehensive individualized instruction in English and the native language. Assessment and interventions for English learners with disabilities must match their unique needs and must be consistent with federal laws and regulations. All stakeholders in education must be aware of the disproportionate number of English learners represented in special education. Current assessments that do not differentiate between disabilities and linguistic differences can lead to misdiagnosis of ELs. For example, during the 2013-14 school year, ELs account for 14.3% (or 139,843) of the overall New York City Department of Education student population and of those 36,286 (or 23.3%) ELs were identified as having a disability and received some type of special education services. As stated, by the report, “of all ELLs in the DOE that had an IEP, 29.3% attended schools in the Bronx, while Queens followed closely at 26.3% of all ELLs having an IEP. Staten Island had only 3.7% of the city’s ELLs with an IEP, but made up a sizeable proportion of all ELLs in Staten Island at 38.3%.” (New York City Department of Education, 2014, p. 23) These figures document the overrepresentation in the only state in which Bilingual Special Education requires a state licensure, double from that of the nation (New York City Department of Education, 2014).

Given this background, I argue that it is imperative to pay attention to the multiple issues concerning English learners with disabilities so that their instructional

needs are met. Seeking to meet this need, I guest edited the special issue *Bilingual Special Education: Investigating and Implementing Evidenced-Based Practices in Schools*. The articles in this volume examine the following essential topics in the field of Bilingual Special Education: (a) language and learning literacy, (b) trends and issues, (c) attitudes towards inclusion, (d) families of children with disabilities, (e) teacher preparation, and (f) dual language programs for children with disabilities.

In the opening article, "Reframing Venerable Standpoints About Language and Learning Differences: The Need for Research on the Literate Lives of Latina/o Language Minority Students," González and Artiles (2015) discuss evidence based research. They posit that we may gain new insights into the literate lives of Latina/o Language Minorities with Learning Disabilities by reframing three venerable standpoints to provide a more comprehensive view of literacy and the complexity of the population. The three venerable standpoints pertain to the (a) crucial role of individual factors, (b) the sociocultural approach, and (c) culturally responsive pedagogies. This article increases understanding of the cultural aspects of issues within special education.

Wang and Woolf 's article, "Trends and Issues in Bilingual Special Education Teacher Preparation: A Literature Review" provides an insightful examination of the current state of bilingual special education. The authors identified nine particular studies on bilingual special education and recognized that "researchers have consistently emphasized the need for children who are English Language Learners and those who have disabilities to be taught by teachers who are knowledgeable about and competent in the critical bilingual and special education pedagogies identified by the professions." Wang and Wolf conclude by declaring that, "research is needed to clarify which practices have the strongest evidence base for effectively preparing teachers to meet students' diverse social, language, academic, and learning needs" (Wang & Woolf, 2015, p. 54).

The Harkins and Fletcher (2015) article, "Survey of Educator Attitude Regarding Inclusive Education within a Southern Arizona School District" addresses the phenomenon of inclusion. The study examines the attitudes held by educators, their foundations of knowledge, attitudes, perceptions and opinions that shape their attitude and potential recommendations for implementation strategies that are likely to be successful. They consider the intricacies of inclusion or inclusive education. Their study reveals concerns among participants about the implementation of inclusive education with respect to inadequate training for teachers and paraprofessionals; differentiation of instruction; limitations on time, resources, and supports; and inadequate planning, collaboration, and communication.

Ijalba (2015) elaborates in depth on a particular approach to special education in her article, "Understanding Parental Engagement in Hispanic Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Application of a Process-model of Cultural Competence". Engagement in the comprehensive process revealed traditional cultural beliefs on parental engagement in many Hispanic immigrant families with children with autism. The LEARN process model involving analysis through listening, explaining, recommending, and negotiating was unique because it provided a cultural understanding of families with children with autism.

In the article “Disentangling Language Differences from Disability: A Case Study of District-Preservice Collaboration Empowering Paraprofessionals/Bridging Practice,” Brown and Ault (2015) describe a unique pre-service teacher education program developed to prepare bilingual special educators in collaboration with a consortium of local school districts. In the concluding section, the authors offer a unique blend of student achievement, diverse needs, and diverse students.

In “Dual Language Programs Meet Integrated Co-teaching,” Hatheway, Shea, and Winslow (2015) describe a practical approach to delivering instruction in a dual language classroom that incorporates co-teaching. Their approach includes English learners with disabilities in dual language programs. The authors stress the importance of the benefits of dual language programs for students with disabilities.

Martínez-Álvarez (2015) reviewed the book *English Language Learners: Differentiating Between Language Acquisition and Learning Disabilities* by Janette Klingner and Amy M. Eppolito published in 2014 by the Council for Exceptional Children. Martínez-Álvarez reports that the authors challenge the reader to realize that while popular conceptions are reinforced through historical beliefs and anecdotal observations, the fields of bilingual education and second language acquisition have accumulated a sound body of educational research over the last few decades. Martínez-Álvarez concludes by acknowledging that the authors excelled in summarizing important research related to identifying and working with bilingual children.

### **Concluding Remarks**

To prepare students for life in a global society, successful teachers can help diverse learners by implementing a variety of strategies, including, but not limited to, promoting respect for diverse people; motivating diverse students with special needs, as well as challenging and encouraging them; partnering with families of diverse students; and seeking mutually beneficial relationships among people in diverse communities. As discussed in this special volume, researchers in the field of Bilingual Special Education continue to seek and to refine theories and pedagogical methodologies in second language acquisition and special education. Implementing effective practices to address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners with disabilities in Pre K-12 schools is a challenge for many educators, but with challenge comes opportunity. By developing effective and efficient practices in a linguistically and culturally diverse classroom, a 21st century teacher is poised to become a major catalyst for positive social change.

The main goal of this special issue is to shed needed light on teaching and research practices currently implemented and explored in this field. As readers ponder the issues posed in the different articles we encourage them to reflect on the following questions:

- (1) What is the student language proficiency in both home language and English?
- (2) How well does the student understand expressive and receptive language?
- (3) How different is the language at home from English? What are the student’s preferred learning strategies?

- (4) What cultural aspects must be taken into consideration when planning and implementing the student's individualized education plan? and
- (5) Has the teacher addressed all specific educational areas, including cognitive factors, social/emotional factors, motor development, and language factors?

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