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English Language Learner Considerations For Equitable Identification Of Needs And Referrals To Special Education

Melissa Persons
Hamline University

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER CONSIDERATIONS FOR EQUITABLE
IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS AND REFERRALS TO SPECIAL EDUCATION

By

Melissa Persons

A Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in English as a Second Language

Hamline University

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Primary Advisor: Laura Halldin

Expert Reader: Pam Telleen

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education (2015) state that “... school districts must ensure that all EL (English learner) students who may have a disability, like all other students who may have a disability and need services under IDEA or Section 504, are located, identified, and evaluated for special education and disability-related services in a timely manner” (p. 24). “The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) address the rights of students with disabilities in the education context” (U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 24). Utilizing just the right method, strategy, and process for appropriately identifying and referring an English language (EL) student to special education is essential when ensuring that EL students are not underrepresented or overrepresented in special education. The collaboration that is needed amongst teachers (content, special education, and ELL), administration, and parents has been an unclear process in practice. Depending upon the student that is being discussed, the people involved in this collaboration may differ slightly. However, the communication process needs to be clear and efficient to have successful collaboration. Because of this, I am asking the following question: *What are considerations to take into account when an EL student begins the Student and Teacher Assistance Team (STAT)?*

I have been an ESL teacher in China, Costa Rica, and Peru. I found my passion for language acquisition for myself and others through my journeys in these countries, and I worked with students of many different background and that lived life with various

disabilities. When I returned home to the United States, I obtained my license to teach English as a second language. This is currently my second year teaching in public schools in a suburb of a Midwestern city.

As an ESL teacher, I found that when having a student in the middle of the Student and Teacher Assistance Team (STAT) Process for identifying their learner needs, I was often unaware of where I stood in the process and the role I should play in some or all of the steps. I had been given a checklist to complete on the behavior my student exhibited, but I had no background of what this sheet was used for and the steps that would follow the completion of this sheet. This uncertainty caused me to be an inefficient advocate for my student. For ESL teachers, and all educators, it is important that we know the district's and recommended process in identifying students' needs, whether that be a range from tier one interventions through special education needs, so that we can properly advocate for our students and their learner needs. The STAT process is put into place to identify what interventions are helping support the student. This is measured by if the student shows progress or little to no progress over a certain period of time. Finding the right learner needs is the goal of the STAT process. Knowledge and communication about each of the steps and the role of each of the educators in these steps will lead to effective communication, which goes hand-in-hand with properly identifying an EL student's needs.

Advocating for both my students' needs and the learner strategies that will serve them best in their academic and social journey within schools in the United States is what has inspired me to dedicate my capstone project to this topic. I believe it is an ESL

teacher's job to advocate for their students' needs especially in an area where the process is unclear to the students themselves, as well as their families or guardians. As my students' ESL teacher, it is my role to be their voice where they may not know they can or should have a voice. The STAT process is complex with many components that are designed to make it complete and efficient. It is my job to know where the voices of my students and their families are to be heard and taken into consideration.

Since the process of referring and determining if a student is appropriate for special education is complex, I feel there is a need to have a tool to break down the complexities and to help in communication. It will also help in knowing what steps are necessary to be completed. This tool also needs to be able to distinguish what resources are to be used and what educator roles are essential within each step. This tool can be used between the ESL department, Special Education Department, administration, counselors, psychologists, cultural liaisons, and interpreters. The intent for this tool would be for all that are involved in the STAT process to use for better communication throughout the process. It is also intended to be user friendly so that the resources are hyperlinked within the flowchart.

I feel it would be helpful to have a visual aid, or flow chart, that could be accessed easily by all staff members, would be extremely helpful when collaborating about a student during the STAT process. This flowchart would be supportive of collaboration because of all of the different departments or roles within a school could have one reference to use which would ensure efficient communication throughout the process. It would be helpful in the sense of seeing what has been done and what will need to be done, but it also will keep communication clear if all the people involved

throughout the process know which step they are on so they know when their role will come up next in play. This chapter introduces the factors that are needed to be taken into account when EL students are in the STAT process as well as the role of an EL teacher in these processes. It then describes my role and background before proceeding on to a description of the research question pursued in this project. A chapter summary and a preview of upcoming chapters are provided at the end of the chapter.

Identifying ELs for Special Education

There are many factors that need to be considered when identifying if an EL student is demonstrating a need for special education services or if there are other factors that can be accounted and accommodated for their success. As WIDA (World-class Instructional Design and Assessment) (2017) states, taking factors such as their environment, family life, culture, native language, educational background, and the student's progress compared to similar peers need to be taken into account. Some of these factors are the same for a non-EL student; however, these additional factors need to be ruled out as potential influences in order to have an appropriate referral for special education. It is important that the STAT process is not looked at as a way to get a student through to an evaluation for special education. The STAT process is put into place to identify learner needs by implementing interventions based on the behavior and academia the student is exhibiting.

According to Garcia and Alba (1988), there are identification models that cause an over identification of EL students to be placed in special education. In addition, Abedi (2006) supports that EL students are misplaced based on the assessments used for determining if a student should be provided with special education services. On the other

hand, Sullivan (2011) finds that EL students were underrepresented in some special education programs as well. Given this evidence of over and under identification, it is very important that an effective identification model is utilized when identifying EL students for special education needs. Hence, a STAT process that takes English language learner needs into consideration when implementing interventions is crucial.

Role of Researcher

For the purpose of this paper, the school district that I currently work in will be referred to as Suburban School District A. Another school district whose materials will be used, will be referred to as Suburban School District B. As the researcher, I have conducted informal interviews with Suburban School District A's psychologist, Suburban School District B's special education psychologist, Minnesota Department of Education Special Education Specialist, and various administration representatives throughout the Suburban School District A, such as counselors, deans and principals. Within these interviews, I have discovered the current way in which School District A handles their STAT process for EL. I have also researched various strategies and resources from literature, government documents and manuals, charts, and checklists to use when determining if an EL student needs special education.

Background of Researcher. I am an ESL teacher at a high school serving students grades nine through twelve in a suburb of a large Midwest city in the United States. I found across the different departments in my school that there is not a clear understanding of the roles that are needed to be in each of the steps throughout the STAT process. As I want to serve EL students the best I can, I became compelled to research

the best practices to use in this process. As Diane Staeh Fenner (2013) suggests, advocating for our students is an important piece for ESL teachers and all educators to share the responsibility of advocating the needs of our EL students, and this is an area that I would like to educate myself and others so we can provide the best education for EL students' needs. The way she states we are going to do this is through getting to know each of our students so we can serve them in their own unique way and adapt our teaching to their needs.

Guiding Questions

The research question being investigated in this project is: *What are considerations to take into account when an EL student begins the Student and Teacher Assistance Team (STAT) Process?* Because there are various steps to this process, this question will guide what considerations need to be accounted for specifically for an EL student throughout the STAT process to identify the learner needs.

Gap in Research

As will be explored further in Chapter 2, there is a gap of communication in knowing the role each educator has in the STAT process for an EL student and what considerations to make. This gap does not serve our EL students who may have a suspected special education need. There are tools that can be utilized throughout the process that can ensure the various areas specific to EL students are taken into consideration. I believe that there can be a tool that helps Suburban School District A in the STAT process specifically for EL students. Such a tool needs to identify the roles all parties will play in each step to bridge this gap in communication in an effort to best

identify and/or refer our students appropriately and in a timely manner. It also will provide a checklist to guarantee EL considerations. The tool proposed in this project is a detailed flow chart depicting these steps, educator roles, resources, and strategies in the STAT process.

Summary

In this study, the research focuses on best practices used throughout the state of Minnesota obtained through informal interviews with an educator on the Minnesota Board of Education, psychologists throughout Minnesota, administration, and counselors. The research will also be based on resources used within my current district and other districts as well. I will examine the STAT process for Suburban School District A and give recommendations accordingly.

Chapter Overviews

In Chapter One, I introduced the topic being researched and the tool being created, the purpose behind the research project, and what the niche for the research topic is that the final product will fulfill. The role and background of the researcher were discussed as well. In Chapter Two I present a review of the literature that is applicable to the significance of identification processes (STAT), best practices, and the roles of educators. Chapter Three sets up the research methodology that was used in designing the final project, a flowchart of the STAT process for an EL student, as well as which educator roles are needed within each step. In Chapter Four, I summarize the results of the research and the recommendations for Suburban School District A along with reflections on how this project has progressed and can be adapted to other school district

processes for response to intervention. The Appendix provides the final product of the flow chart.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The question being researched is: *What are considerations to take into account when an EL student begins the Student and Teacher Assistance Team (STAT) Process?*

Although the question entails just the ESL teacher's role there are many aspects to consider when analyzing these processes. Some of the main topics that will be covered in this literature review are English language learner proficiency levels, considerations for identification of a referral to special education, educator roles, under and overrepresentation of EL students in special education, areas to consider when identifying an EL student, personnel involved in the processes, and strategies to appropriately identify their learner needs.

English Learner (EL) Proficiency Levels

It is important to know what factors can affect an EL's learning and how to adapt. The largest one, typically, is their language proficiency level. Thirty-seven states that have adopted the WIDA Consortium Standards for EL students. These are a set of standards that support EL students to be academically successful through language development and have access to their content classes through language features. WIDA provides a list of Can-Do-Descriptors that EL students can do within each domain: reading, writing, speaking and listening according to their language proficiency level. (The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, 2014). This allows content teachers to be able to adapt to their abilities based on their proficiency levels.

Having educators be aware of the abilities, learning styles and strategies of EL students is essential in their academic success. However, it is also important to be able to

identify different learning strategies for EL students to distinguish between a language proficiency challenge or a suspected disability (Connecticut Administrators of Programs for English Language Learners, 2011). The knowledge of knowing what an EL student can produce at their language proficiency level and strategies to help them be successful and gain knowledge of the content are required for EL students' success. Educators must be knowledgeable about each English language proficiency level within each of the four domains: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Without that base knowledge, EL students could be missed in the early identification stages for either interventions that support them in being successful or special education services that support them in being successful or they could be identified incorrectly.

ELL Misconceptions

Providing an efficient path when identifying an EL student to special education has been a blurry one for many educators, administrators, counselors, psychologists, content teachers, and ESL teachers. Since this line has been blurry, there have been various studies that show under and over identification of EL students within special education. There have been cases where educators believe it is best for EL students to be placed in special education for extra support; when in reality, their IQ test scores are observed to have dropped after being placed in special education because that is not the academic support they needed (Garcia and Ortiz, 1988). The supports these students needed were for their language proficiency level. The disproportionality of EL students identified for special education is largely stemmed from educators not having a full understanding of the academic and social needs of our EL students (Sullivan, 2011).

The ESL teacher's role is important when it comes to an EL student's academic and social path. Either educators obtain their knowledge of the academic and social needs for their EL students through professional development or ESL teachers themselves. The ESL teacher must advocate for her students academic and social needs. This in return will educate the mainstream teachers to know what supports and strategies work for their EL students. Once the teacher has knowledge of these needs, it becomes clearer what behaviors or academic challenges to look for when thinking of locating or identifying an EL student for suspected special needs.

EL Considerations

There are many factors to consider when an educator is in the early identification stages for special education. Many of these factors apply to EL and non-EL students alike, but there are more aspects to take into full consideration that could be influencing the behavior exhibited by an EL student such as their English proficiency level. The Minnesota Department of Education (2012) provides the Prereferral Checklist for ELL (see Appendix A) when identifying whether an EL student is to be referred to special education including five areas: educational history, English language progress compared to similar peers, native language development and progress, family background (culture, health, and developmental history), and current educational environment and issues. The Prereferral Checklist for ELL (see Appendix A) is a tool provided by the Minnesota Department of Education for school districts to use to ensure they have covered the five areas that could be affecting the behavior of the EL student.

This checklist is a great way to ensure coverage of all of the areas to consider in the STAT process. With that in mind, when a student has begun the STAT process, there are many different roles of various educators that need to be in place for the proper coverage of each of these areas to ensure an appropriate identification of needs, whether they include special education services or other interventions or accommodations.

Educator Roles

The ESL teacher is the one that typically knows the background of the student well, considering the time they have been in their classroom, of course. The team that meets during the early identification stages of the STAT process usually consists of an administrator, counselor, ESL teacher, content teacher, and sometimes either a staff member from special education even though the identification process is the general education's responsibility (Ortiz, 2005). The school psychologist is also another role that is influential (Klingner and Harry, 2006). They have had trainings on which research-based interventions to implement based on what behaviors or academic challenges the student demonstrates (B. Nierengarten, personal communication, July, 2017), . This is exactly what is needed to find if progress can be made with research-based tier one and tier two interventions.

When the educators meet with one another, they discuss the behaviors demonstrated by the student and any background information known. After the educator group has identified the student's challenges, they will discuss and implement interventions to be done in the mainstream or ESL classes. According to Collier (2016), her Sociocultural Checklist (see Appendix B) "... provides you with a brief profile of the

student of concern in five sociocultural areas: acculturation, cognitive learning style, culture & language, experiential background, and sociolinguistic development” (p. 6). The educators working with the student from either a “... culturally or linguistically diverse background” (Collier, 2016, p. 6) fill out the Sociocultural Checklist (see Appendix B) by marking next to each statement that is true for that student. If any of the five sections have fifty percent or more of the statements marked true, then the Sociocultural Checklist (see Appendix B) directs you to interventions specifically for that section.

Strategies are used in the STAT process so that EL students have a proper identification of academic or social needs, which may or may not lead to a referral to special education. These strategies are put in place to eliminate the acculturation and language proficiency level factors during the identification process. Klingner and Harry (2006) found that during the middle stages of the identification process there were not substantial strategies discussed or implemented in the classroom. Matching the correct research-based strategies with the student’s behavior they are exhibiting is crucial when a given student for referral to receive special education support. Collier (2015) has identified numerous strategies based on the scoring of each of the five sections. Here are some of the interventions she suggests based on each section:

- Acculturation: cross-cultural counseling and reduced stimuli
- Cognitive learning style: organizers and visualization
- Culture and language: peer tutors and sheltered instruction
- Experience: accountability and positive reinforcement

- Sociolinguistic development: bilingual texts and experience-based learning

If a system, such as the Sociocultural Checklist (see Appendix B), is in place to identify which area the student's needs are coming from, then it can "...assist you in identifying and prioritizing student needs" (Collier, 2015, p. 6). "The purpose of pre-referral strategies is to provide students with assistance within the general education environment before an official request is made for an evaluation for possible special education placement" (Klingner and Harry, 2006, p. 2250-2251). These strategies help to eliminate underrepresentation and overrepresentation of EL students in special education.

Underrepresentation and Overrepresentation

There are a few major reasons for which EL learners are under and over-identified for special education. The first one is differentiating between whether the issue observed is due to a student's language proficiency level or a learning or behavioral disability. The second explores cultural factors that may impact an English language learner. Finally, the third factor, referring back to Klingner and Harry (2006), deals with the lack of identifying appropriate strategies to implement in the classroom in the identification, or pre-referral, stage.

Language vs. Education Issues

Since there are many factors to consider when looking at the needs of an EL student, there need to be guidelines to be followed. There are a few extra steps that can be taken to efficiently analyze what the EL student is demonstrating.

According to Ortiz (2005), if a student has been in the country for less than one year they should not be referred to special education for a specific learning disability (SLD), language, or a mild behavior unless one of three things occur:

1. The parent has concerns regarding their child's rate of development or progress of learning.
2. There are risk considerations in the student's health, education or development.
3. The ESL teacher reports compelling differences of language progression in English compared to like peers.

Following the criteria given in this list in itself should reduce the amount of referrals for an evaluation for special education services. One can eliminate those that are made simply due to lower language proficiency levels. However, that does not seem to be happening. For example, when Latino students were tested in English in California and Texas, they were more likely to be labeled disabled; that is, referrals due to language proficiency level increased (as cited by Sullivan, 2011). Another study conducted by Samson and Lesaux (2009) found both underrepresentation and overrepresentation; the difference lying in the grade levels. School teachers of kindergarten, grade one, and grade two were less likely to refer an EL student for special education due to lack of knowledge of characteristics of both EL learners and students with disabilities. They also found that third grader EL learners were more likely to be referred to special education than their non-EL peers. This demonstrates the need for knowledge of both EL learner

characteristics as well as specific learning disability (as along with all special needs cases) characteristics and factors to consider.

As discussed, the EL learner characteristics and teaching strategies are either learned through professional development opportunities or ESL teachers speaking with educators. In Dunn and Walker's (2007) case study, the co-teaching between the civics class teacher, and the assigned ESL teacher for the one student being studied, required that "together they address the three major components of co-teaching: planning, instruction, and assessment" (p. 107). When this model occurs, the content teacher is then educated by the ESL teacher of planning, instruction, and assessment strategies specifically used for EL students. The classroom teachers also learn why these strategies are different and the importance of knowing more about the backgrounds of their EL students and their acculturation process.

Acculturation Process

The acculturation process for EL learners is quite different than their non-EL peers. When taking cultural factors into account, the assessments given to EL students to test their suspected areas of special needs typically do not provide controls for cultural bias (Law, 2012). This then leads to the assessments of the students' special needs to stand invalid. Because of this, the standard tests used within the special education assessment process do not provide quality data when used for EL students. Having the EL students' culture and language in mind is crucial in this determination. Educators need to take their abilities within their own culture into consideration. Accounting for cultural factors by using a Sociocultural Checklist (Appendix B) is an effective way to

correctly identify if the behavior the EL student is exhibiting is stemming from the various other factors or not. It also helps in determining the “... accompanying behavior and learning factors that are indicative of learning behaviors needs...” (Collier, 2015, p.7). In other words, after being able to identify which area is in need for adjustment, the Sociocultural Checklist (see Appendix B) provides interventions to accommodate for the learning and behavior needs for the EL student.

Identification Process

During the beginning identification process, educators are to conduct a meeting to go over and cover all the areas to determine the proper interventions that are needed for the student’s success. “At this meeting, team members are supposed to suggest strategies for the teacher to try to help the student...” (Klingner and Harry, 2006, p. 2250). These strategies are referred to as tier one and tier two interventions. “The first tier, usually referred to as the *preventative tier*, involves whole-group instruction and universal screening” (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, p. 86, 2009). Thus, the tier one interventions are at the school and classroom level. Tier two interventions have a more narrow focus and that tier one interventions. “Here, students who are at risk are served with more intensive, research-based interventions with close progress monitoring in addition to the primary instruction received by all students” (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, p. 86, 2009). Therefore, in this meeting, research-based interventions are to be determined and then implemented within the content of ESL classrooms prior to a referral being sent, typically within the first two pre-referral meetings (T. Zitzow, personal communication, August 7, 2017). Wilkinson, Ortiz, Robertson, & Kushner

(2006) provide an example where this was lacking in the identification process: Spanish-speaking EL students were provided with special education services due to not being provided proper response to intervention strategies. Classroom strategies were not implemented during the identification process to see if mainstream classroom teaching strategies could be adjusted for the student's academic and social success. Response to intervention (RTI) has been found to be a reliable process during the identification process for EL and non-EL students that are suspected for special education needs. As Dunn and Walker (2007) found in their case study, proper RTI strategies such as orally reading directions or problems and typing responses in words rather than writing them were found to be the appropriate ones for a student called Abdullah (a pseudonym), who was an EL student in the identification process for special needs. This is a mainstream adaptation that can be implemented by any content teacher for any of their students' learning styles.

Implementing these strategies in the content classrooms during the identification process allowed the student to not be inappropriately referred to special education. Having this response to intervention set up in the identification process is also very important when considering a referral to special education. As speaking with the school district psychologist for Suburban School District A, the RTI strategies should be implemented and documented accordingly during the identification process as stated above. The educator who is responsible should also document the progress the student makes during the implementation of these strategies. This is in order to have an appropriate referral to special education. This is very important information that the team

as a whole needs when determining a proper referral to special education. The documentation of the results of the interventions can help determine what area of challenges the EL student is experiencing.

Areas to Consider in the Identification of Learner Needs Process

The Minnesota Department of Education (2005) supplies educators with a Prereferral Checklist for ELL (see Appendix A) consisting of five areas to cover prior to a referral to special education. Making sure all of this data is collected and analyzed properly is essential when making an appropriate referral to special education. The five areas covered in the Prereferral Checklist for ELL (see Appendix A) are: educational history, current English language skills and progress compared to similar peers, first language development and current skills, family and cultural background, basic health and developmental history, and current educational and environmental issues.

The first considered is the student's education history (Minnesota Department of Education, 2005). For example, questions such as the following need to be posed: Has the student had structured education from the time they have arrived in the United States? If so, this will have a different impact on their learning compared to another student who has an interrupted educational history. If a student is literate in their native language, this will allow them to transfer their literacy skills to learning English as a second language (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Since it has been found to be common to refer students based on low English proficiency, it is important to assess the student's basic skills in their native language as well as in English, which may be their second language,

along with what their level of basic skills were in their native language when they moved to instruction in English (Garcia and Ortiz, 1988).

The second on the checklist is English language proficiency and progress compared to similar peers (Minnesota Board of Education, 2005). If a student is not progressing at the same rate in acquiring the English language compared to similar peers, then other considerations or response to interventions need to be made. The criteria for *compared to similar peers* is left to be defined by the district (Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, 2017). Along with the response to interventions that were determined to be implemented in the early identification stages of the process, there needs to be observations and documentation of the student's progress or lack of progress. If the student is showing consistent progress, then there is no referral needed for special education. This is what the STAT process is in place for- to determine the interventions, academic, and social needs of students. However, if the progress is irregular or no change has been observed since the research-based interventions were implemented, then may be a need for a referral (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016). Once again, thoroughly going over the different areas to take into consideration need to be examined to find other areas of opportunity for needs.

Next on the checklist is native language development and current skills (Minnesota Department of Education, 2005). The EL student's educational background also comes into play, in particular, their literacy skills in their native language. If the student has had a formal education, then the student's skills in reading and writing in their native language will be taken into consideration (Ortiz, 2005). If the student is found

to have difficulties in reading with both their native language and English as their second language, then this would be a factor to take into consideration to make a proper identification or referral (Dunn and Walker, 2007). On the other hand, if the student is not literate in their native language, this does not imply they have a learning disability. It only implies that they do not have literacy skills obtained from their first language acquired. If possible, a bilingual staff member should be a part of observations to assess their capabilities in their native language; the ESL teacher can take note of certain behaviors presented by the EL student, such as if the student is understood by their peers when speaking in their native language (Ortiz, 2005). This can be a difficult thing to distinguish between a language proficiency level and a learning disability so having research-based interventions to implement accordingly will help in properly identifying. Determining if this is a literacy challenge or a learning disability can be further explored through Collier's (2015) Sociocultural Checklist (see Appendix B) and intervention recommendations based on the results of the checklist.

The fourth identification factor to consider is family background, including culture, health, and developmental history. Some behaviors may not be considered acceptable to the society in which the student is currently placed. However, it may be what the EL student has accepted their entire lives up until moving to the United States. Educators need to be knowledgeable about the cultural backgrounds of their students because the behaviors they may be demonstrating could very well be considered normal to them and their communities (Garcia and Ortiz, 1988). How schools are run are different among different cultures. Having the knowledge of what their previous

education looked like would be an important piece of the culture to consider when assessing their behavior and academic success. If such cultural considerations are not considered, an inappropriate identification could result. Conducting an interview in which the family is comfortable (i.e., in their native language and in a comfortable physical location for them) is important for obtaining the student and family's health and developmental history (Ortiz, 2006). This information is useful for special education specialists and school psychologists in determining a proper referral (B. Nierengarten, personal communication, July, 2017). The acculturation section on Collier's (2015) Sociocultural Checklist (see Appendix B) and the documentation provided by the educator who implements the recommended interventions can help support the determination.

Lastly, on the Prereferral Checklist for ELL (see Appendix A) are current education and environment issues. Determining the EL student's proficiency level and amount of pullout or push-in time should be documented along with the instructional strategies of the ESL and content teachers in these classes (Ortiz, 2005). This is where the RTI strategies described above and their results would fit in the identification process and are discussed at pre-referral or early STAT meetings. The entire identification process is legally the general education's responsibility. Special education does not need to step in until the referral process. However, the role of the psychologist has been found to be the most influential in the decision-making when making a referral (Klingner and Harry, 2006).

Personnel Involved

Thus far numerous educator roles have been discussed. Depending upon the stages of the identification or referral processes, the educators hold different roles. It is the general education's responsibility to uphold the identification process, but special education's roles and psychologists roles can be of great help in analyzing the behaviors of the student that are exhibited. However, they are required to come in the referral process. The initial concern typically comes from a classroom teacher, either a content teacher or ESL teacher, which would usually be followed by a prereferral, or STAT, meeting with administrators, content teachers, special education teacher, parent or guardian, and sometimes a counselor, psychologist, or social worker (Klingner and Harry, 2006). Collaboration amongst all of these educators is essential to an appropriate identification. Finding proper RTI strategies and EL learner strategies lead to an appropriate identification, as indicated by Dunn and Walker (2007). Therefore, that is an appropriate referral or no need for a referral is found. Doing so takes effective communication among the team of educators at these meetings as well as any other new findings that arise. Much of this type of communication can be done via email, phone, or in person.

Strategies to Help Appropriately Identify Learner Needs

One of the most influential components in making an appropriate identification of an EL or non-EL student for special education needs is finding and implementing strategies that are tailored to the characteristics and behaviors the student is exhibiting (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988). For instance, Dunn and Walker (2007) found that through pre-

referral meetings they were able to identify an EL student with suspected special education needs as not needing the special education services after implementing strategies such as orally reading math word problems, oral reading assignments, typing instead of writing, and a peer tutor helping with vocabulary support. Each student has their own set of characteristics and it is up to the teachers to assess these and discuss appropriate strategies to use within the classroom during the identification process. As Collier (2015) has the Sociocultural Checklist (see Appendix B) to implement during the identification process for educators to complete based on the students' behaviors they demonstrate, finding the appropriately strategies based on the student's needs will lead to appropriate strategies to help identify appropriately.

Conclusion

There are various steps and factors to take into account when properly identifying EL students with suspected special needs, as well as certain roles different educators need to play throughout the identification process. Ortiz (2005) provides a well laid-out manual as part of *ELL Companion to Reducing Bias in Special Education Evaluation*. This is what Suburban School District A uses as a guide to assist in the STAT process for EL students with suspected special education needs. However, the Prereferral Checklist for ELL (see Appendix A) has not been utilized throughout identification processes of EL students with suspected special education needs in the past three years (A. Piotrowski, personal communication, September 8, 2017). I recommend that the Checklist be put into action in the identification process, specifically because ensuring these five areas are covered in the data collection of the identification process, are essential information for

determining between an EL student needs and a disability. This tool is great for all educators who are involved in the STAT process to know what data has been gathered, significant findings, what is complete, and what needs to be completed.

As the literature review above suggests, it is crucial to have a plan through this process and collaboration among content teachers, ESL teachers, administrators, cultural liaisons, counselors, and psychologists surrounding the student in question. Each educator needs to know his or her role for each step of the way because each role has a different piece in gathering all the information necessary to make an appropriate referral.

Preview of Chapter Three

In Chapter Three I will discuss the methodology used when conducting the research for my capstone flowchart. It will include my intended audience for the use of the project, the context in which the project was produced, and describe the framework it was created under. The studies and resources that were used in the creation of the flowchart will be examined as well.

CHAPTER THREE: PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Overview

In this project and the write-up, I am exploring the most effective design for the STAT process for an EL student that is suspected to have special education needs. I have examined Suburban School District A's STAT (Student Teacher Assistance Team) process, and developed a flowchart with recommendations embedded within the flowchart. Delivery methods of the recommended research vary with their pros and their cons (Northwest Center for Public Health Practice, 2012). I have decided to do an in person delivery method because it is going to be implemented in my district as a tool to use when an EL student enters the STAT process. I gave a presentation at our district meeting to show all of my findings and resources. Because this is geared towards all educators a part of the STAT process, my guiding question is *what are considerations to take into account when an EL student begins the Student and Teacher Assistance Team (STAT) Process?*

Project Creation

Intended Audience

The audience for this project is for all educators who participate in the STAT process for an EL student. The project is specially aimed at specifying the roles that are needed to complete each of the various steps of this process along with appropriate resources to take EL considerations into account. With this goal in mind, educators who are a part of the STAT process would be the audience who benefits most. This flowchart has been proposed to be used as a communication and visual tool for the educators on the

STAT team to communicate effectively between one another during an identification of needs process of an EL student. All of the staff involved with each of the STAT meetings are intended to use this flowchart to all be on the same page as one another in the process for each student being discussed. It also displays which educator roles are to be in action during each step.

Context

The resources and students that the flowchart project is created for came from a suburban school district of a Midwestern city, Suburban School District A. The majority of EL students are native Somali and Spanish speakers. The next prominent native languages are Amharic, Arabic, Vietnamese, and Laotian. There are a total of eighty-four different home languages spoken across the district.

Framework and Information

In creating my product, which includes a flow chart, educator roles, and resources to be used to gather data, I used the literature review provided in chapter 2, resources that have been provided to Suburban School District A through trainings, documents already utilized within Suburban School District A, State Department of Education documents, and personal communication with professionals in the included fields. The Minnesota Board of Education also has numerous resources that are accessible online. A Special Education Specialist on the Minnesota Department of Education has provided me with some resources as well. With this professional knowledge obtained through my interactions and experiences along with the findings based on the literature review, I created a step- by-step flowchart for STAT process regarding specifically EL students.

The gathering of resources available and being utilized by the Minnesota Board of Education and other educators is an effective way to combine processes and resources that effectively take EL considerations into account when identifying their needs.

Literature Review. The literature review helped in guiding the various steps that are needed when finding the learner needs of a student that has demonstrated some sort of challenges either academically or socially. I also used the findings of the research done to give recommendations to the current process done at Suburban School District A. The literature provided successful and unsuccessful frameworks for identifying the learner needs of an EL student. The most influential findings the literature review provided are the factors that need to be taken into account specific to EL students in contrast to non-EL student.

Within the literature review, there are resources that were reviewed that serve a purpose throughout the STAT process. Suburban School District A's documents serve great purpose in obtaining information that is needed to differentiate between acculturation or language proficiency and needing additional support.

Suburban School District A Resources. There are a number of resources that Suburban School District A currently uses that serves the process for EL students entering the STAT process. In the beginning process, they utilize the parent letter in English, Spanish, and Somali. They also have a home questionnaire that is sent home in English, Spanish, and Somali. There is also a Sociocultural Checklist (see Appendix B) that is to be distributed to all of the teachers of that student to assess the area in which they may need intervention support. Another resource they have implemented is the AQS

(Acculturation Quick Screen) for when a student may be demonstrating challenges adjusting to the new culture. This is used for students that are in a non-dominant culture. During the mid-point check-in they have a Mid-point Check-in Form to assess if there is progress or little to no progress. The Student Intervention Plan Problem ID and Analysis Plan is also a form part of the process to document the intervention(s) implemented and to document progress or little to no progress.

Though these documents serve great purpose throughout the STAT process for all students, including EL students, there are other documents and resources available through the State Department of Education. Because it is their job duty and obligation to find the best practices for education and to oversee the districts throughout the state, their resources are heavily relied on.

State Department of Education Documents. The Minnesota Department of Education (2012) has provided the *ELL Companion to Reducing Bias in Special Education Evaluation*, as a reference to guide educators in their analysis of an EL student's learner needs. Within in this ELL companion, there are various documents to help support in the data collection needed during a STAT process. Suburban School District A has their own district published documents as discussed above which have their own versions, the parent form and the home questionnaire, that the Minnesota Department of Education provides as well. The document with most importance is the PreReferral Checklist (Appendix A) which ensures each of the five areas to cover for an EL student that were discussed in the literature review by Minnesota Department of Education (2012): educational history, current English language skills and progress

compared to similar peers, first language development and current skills, family and cultural background, basic health and developmental history, and current educational environment and issues.

Many of the State Department of Education documents that were reviewed and implemented throughout the write-up and project were due to speaking with the Special Education Specialist in the department. She has worked with EL students that have also been identified as having a disability. Through her experienced background, she was a part of creating the documents and in educating future educators on different factors affecting EL students' ability to be successful academically and socially.

Personal Communication. I spoke with various school and district psychologists both in and out of Suburban School District A, I also spoke with Special Education Specialists from Minnesota Department of Education as well as from Suburban School District A. The Special Education Specialist from the Minnesota Department of Education who has worked with the identification of EL students' learner needs and their assessment within special education needs. The conversations with the various professions in the different field areas contributed to the resources found to serve this identification of needs process best.

Choice of Method

I chose my method of research in order to obtain best practices and the system already set in place by Suburban School District A. Obtaining the resources already set out by different states' recommended processes, Suburban School District A's process, and literature to provide proof to these different practices allowed the STAT process step by step come to be efficient using all of this knowledge. Finding best practices and

resources utilized when determining the learner needs of an EL student combined is a researched-based way to improve a current method of practice.

Summary of Findings

Throughout the different literature, resources, and personal communication, a process to follow for EL students entering an identification of needs process, STAT process for Suburban School District A, for best practice has been identified and in the process to be implemented within the school district. The documents provided by Suburban School District A will remain in the STAT process for EL students. However, there are resources and recommendations that are within the flowchart that are recommended to utilize during the STAT process for an EL student due to communication and efficiency to take EL considerations into account when determining what the best interventions are for the student.

Ethics

I will refer to my school district and their information as the Suburban School District A as previously discussed. I will keep their anonymity by referring to the data and resources of the district by name it Suburban School District A. I will also refer to the school district that shared their resources through a training as Suburban School District B. I will call the people by their title instead of their names for which the roles are throughout the STAT process.

Chapter Summary

Chapter three describes the way in which the project was created. The audience that is most beneficial for the project is the STAT team that implements the procedures

for the process to be most efficient. The context of Suburban School District A has been described for the various types of EL students. Then, the framework that the project's research was based on was described in detail. Literature review, Suburban School District A's resources, state department of education's documents, and personal communication were reviewed for implementation. The choice of method was described for efficiency of the flowchart's process of taking best practices and Suburban School District A's process into account.

Chapter Four Preview

In Chapter Four, I will discuss the findings from the research and best practices inquiry through case studies and current Suburban School District A's procedures for the STAT process. I will also reflect on the process as far as what I could have done differently and my restrictions within this capstone project process. Lastly, I will discuss how this can be adapted throughout different school districts.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The question throughout the research process and development of the flow chart has been *what are considerations to take into account when an EL student begins the Student and Teacher Assistance Team (STAT) Process?* There are many different elements that have been included in the write-up and to produce the flow chart. All of the various findings and resources that have been analyzed have played important roles. Also, the different experiences by researching, reading, writing, communicating, contemplating, and deciding have been the creation of the write-up and the flow chart. The research process in formulating the flow chart created for this project has shown learnings as a researcher, reader, and writer, had literature review influence, possible implications, limitations, possibilities of adaptations to different districts, results, and benefits to the profession.

Learnings

There have been unsurprising and surprising experiences throughout the process of researching and creating the flowchart. When I was beginning the venture of researching EL students who may or may not have been identified with special needs, I thought I would equally be focusing on the “pre-referral” portion as well as the referral portion. However, throughout the literature review and personal communication I found there to be a significant gap of appropriate identifications of EL students within special education.

As a researcher, I found myself analyzing the credibility of the literature review I was analyzing. I wanted to know how the bias of the participants played a role in each of the studies. I found the studies to be authentic in their presentation and findings. Samson and Lesaux's (2009) findings were that there were both over and under-representation of EL students within special education. I wanted to find reliable factors to take into account when examining the learning behaviors of an EL student. I found commonalities through the literature and documents provided by the Minnesota Department of Education (2012). There were certain factors that needed to be accounted for prior to identifying a special education need. Finding a useful tool through Minnesota Department of Education (2012) that ensured the various factors were accounted for by all personnel involved within the identification process was a great research experience. Especially for Suburban School District A who already has all of the areas suggested implemented, but it is a way of communicating and efficiently ensuring all factors are accounted for. Also, as a researcher, I have had many professional conversations regarding this identification of needs process. The surprising experiences were that it led to me adding this final flow chart, EL Considerations for STAT Process, to Suburban School District A's STAT process for EL students. As I was communicating with various colleagues, this was an area that was of high interest. The communication of my research and flow chart following the research led to an adaptation of the flow chart.

Secondly, as a reader, there are many different studies that have been done that have proven effective ways to implement interventions within the classroom prior to sending a referral to special education. As Dunn and Walker (2007) found simply orally

giving directions and assignments as well as having the student type their response instead of handwriting it, the student showed progress. Analyzing the data that showed progress and that showed little to no progress was a skill that became mastered after reviewing the different findings. Also, I found that reading through literature and documents, such as manuals, many different state departments of education had already contained this data within their manuals. Connecticut Administrators of Programs for English Language Learners (2011) found the importance of EL learner strategies in order to tell the difference between a language proficiency or a special education need.

Lastly, as a writer, the process has been even further deepened. Deciding what pieces of data are more influential and effective than others is a process within itself. Finding different ways to formulate semantics and syntax in order to convey the meaning that is intended was an in and out of body experience. I wanted to ensure I was demonstrating my knowledge on the data researched. However, on the other hand, I wanted to put myself in the perspective of readers with various backgrounds to make sure the discourse was sound.

Through the lenses of a researcher, reader, and writer the experience has been more than rewarding. The question of properly identifying EL students' needs that may have suspected special needs had long been a wondering in my mind. Taking the time and depth of examining various literature, analyzing documents, and communicating with professionals on the subject has made this flowchart a reliable resource to efficiently analyze an EL student's learner needs taking their potential factors into account.

Literature Review's Influences

The literature review was a base foundation in creating the flowchart. Much of the literature's findings were that EL students were inappropriately referred to special education and were not implementing a relevant intervention to the actions they were demonstrating. As Dunn and Walker (2007) suggest, an appropriate identification is through finding an authentic RTI strategy and EL learner strategies. The literature review is what led my research to communicate with colleagues and others in the profession about resources to utilize when determining an intervention. I then communicated with the Associate Principal of Suburban School District A because her previous experience was as a school psychologist. She suggested Intervention Central Website as a resource for interventions to implement to measure if there is progress or little to no progress after implementing the intervention (A. Pohl, personal communication, October, 2017). Ensuring that all teachers have quick and easy access to these interventions to implement and collect data on will hold the next steps to more authenticity due to the authenticity of the interventions.

The literature review is what has guided the production of this flowchart to be effective and have resources easily accessible for research-based interventions based on the needs the student is demonstrating. The flowchart has the Intervention Central Website as a resource within the first step for all teachers to reference when looking to implement tier one and tier two interventions in their classroom for EL students' learner needs. As an ESL teacher, I have included the WIDA Candos of EL students clustered into grades and each PDF is broken down by domain: reading, writing, speaking, and

listening. This allows mainstream teachers to know what they can expect by grade level and language proficiency level of an EL learner. Because of having these resources a part of the process and easily accessible through the flow chart via hyperlinks, this would imply that there should be more appropriate referrals to special education. At the same time, there will be proper identification of learner needs geared towards EL students.

Possible Implications

As the goal of the flowchart was set out to have an efficient process put into place for Suburban School District A's EL students within the STAT process and to utilize this flowchart as a communication tool to know where the EL student is at in the process and which educator roles can play a role within each step now has the research to back it up as well as Suburban School District A's process that is currently in place.

The possible implications are that more staff members a part of the STAT process are aware of what is needed to be considered for an EL student prior to having a referral to special education as a solution. Having a flowchart that all staff members, especially mainstream teachers, can access and have a hyperlink easily accessible to resources for an EL student within that STAT process will make the process more efficient. Therefore, the measures taken throughout the steps to identify an authentic intervention will create a pathway to an increase in appropriate referrals to special education and a decrease in inappropriate referrals.

Though there are great possible implications for this flowchart for EL students and their learner needs, there were limitations within the research and the development of the flowchart. Because I wanted this flowchart to be utilized to support EL students'

learner needs, I adapted the research and personal communication knowledge to Suburban School District A's STAT process already put into place.

Limitations

There were a few limitations throughout this research and flowchart production. Ensuring that it will work within the system that is already put into practice is very important to make sure it is adaptable. That is if the procedure follows federal and state laws. Otherwise, it will need to be redone. The three limitations I found through this research are adapting it to Suburban School District A, time, and my personal background experience.

Adapting the knowledge of other state and district's findings for best practices of an EL student within an identification of learner needs process is a limitation that is necessary for it be utilized. Because Suburban School District A already had a STAT process in place prior to this research, it is important that the base of the process remain the same, but overall, the steps varied in content due to the factors to consider for an EL student.

Another limitation is time. The time constraint was five months to conduct the research for literature review as well as personal communication. I believe there are more resources that I could have analyzed and found useful documents to help assist in the process of obtaining information specifically geared towards and EL student and their learner needs. There also could have been more conversations with colleagues involved within the STAT process to get their perspective on what is being practiced within Suburban School District A.

A third limitation is that I have been an ESL teacher in the United States for only one and a half years. Learning the process was starting from the beginning for me because I was never officially a part of the STAT process for my EL student, nor did I have the knowledge of how to advocate for my student. In addition, I was not educated on the process and what the purpose of the process in place for. Exploring this topic now is the first I have researched the STAT process and its purpose.

With each of these limitations, there is an area of growth or opportunity in the research and flowchart. However, I do believe the first limitation is one that is unavoidable when putting the flowchart into practice. This flowchart can be adapted to other school districts to provide learner strategies and a process to go with implementing the strategies or interventions.

Adaptations to Different Districts

This flowchart can be adapted to different districts through various avenues. The steps that are in place, the district could rename according to the language used within their district. The district could simply use it as is and provide their district's documents where Suburban School District A's specific documents are. If the district has different resources, they could substitute or add their resources that they use within their identification of learner needs process.

The results of each EL student going through the process at Suburban School District A will be varied based on the individual student's needs. If the process also has different variations at different school districts, then the results can also be quite different.

Communicating Results

The results of this flowchart at that it is now intended to be implemented as a district tool for Suburban School District A when taking EL considerations into account through the STAT process. I had a meeting with the ELL Coordinator and STAT Lead to adapt the flowchart to Suburban School District A's process they already have in place. During our meeting, we discussed what pieces were what we wanted, pieces we wanted to reword, and resources we wanted to add.

Through our collaboration, we decided on a final product for the *EL Considerations for STAT Process Flowchart*. We have a meeting at the end of 2017 to go over the final product and how to present or share with the STAT team at the next meeting in 2018.

Because I was able to collaborate with my colleagues throughout this process and ultimately the ELL Coordinator and STAT Lead, the impact this flowchart can have on potentially decreasing EL students having inappropriate referrals to special education is higher than if there was not any collaboration. Having Suburban School District A's collaboration has made it so that this flowchart can be a benefit to the profession.

Benefit to the Profession

This flowchart is a tool that has the potential to being a benefit to the profession if everyone involved through the STAT process is educated and trained on this process. In the first step, it is the teachers' responsibility to implement tier one and tier two interventions in their classroom and record data on the student. On this flowchart, there is a hyperlink to a website with research-based interventions based on the learner need. It describes the strategy and how to

implement it in the classroom. There is also a hyperlink with research-based EL strategies. In addition to these resources to help implement tier one and tier interventions in their classroom, there are WIDA Cando Descriptors for grade clusters and then divided by language proficiency level. This information will start all teachers with a base knowledge of what products to expect from their EL students in a particular grade with specific language proficiency levels.

With these foundational teaching strategy resources, identifying the needs of a student should become clearer after being put into practice. Then, after further evaluation of the EL student's background beginning the STAT process, more information regarding the EL student's needs may guide educators to an alternative intervention. Utilizing the Sociocultural Checklist (see Appendix B) will support in determining an alternative intervention. Having the intervention accommodations that are recommended based on the results of the Sociocultural Checklist (see Appendix B) easily accessible through the hyperlinks will ensure the communication among educators to be timely and efficient.

Conclusion

Through the entire research, writing, and producing journey this endeavor has brought forth, the learnings as an ESL teacher are colossal. Because of all the elements that need to take place in an intervention system, it is crucial for an ESL teacher to be knowledgeable of them in order to advocate effectively for their EL students. The ESL teacher is knowledgeable of what should be expected for an EL student to produce within certain content areas within certain domains. This is

extremely important in determining what interventions are appropriate based solely on their language proficiency level. Other tools may be utilized to determine if this is more than a language proficiency demonstration of the EL student.

The flowchart is a tool that can be encouraged by any school district to make sure that all factors that can affect an EL student's academic and social development is taken into account. Having the hyperlinks creates an easily accessible tool for all educators to be able to access these resources in a matter of minutes. Having these research-based tools a click away will improve the efficiency of determining the learner needs of EL students.

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