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## **ASSESSING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES**

Emily Grams

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ASSESSING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION  
SERVICES

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

Hamline University

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this capstone to my family and husband, Tyler Peterson, for their continued support and motivation to complete this capstone. Thank you to my students, you are the ones that impacted me in a way that pushed me to further my own education to strive to be the best educator I can for you. A special thanks to the faculty at Hamline University for guiding and supporting me as I grew in my educational knowledge.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	2
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	4
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....	11
Special Education: Background, Disability Areas, and Assessment Procedures.....	12
Special Education History & Laws.....	13
Disability Areas in Special Education.....	17
Evaluation Procedures for Specific Learning Disabilities.....	18
Dually Identified EL & Special Education Students.....	23
Special Education Students: Descriptions & Demographics.....	23
Language Minority Students in Special Education.....	25
Hispanic Students in Special Education.....	28
Assessment of English Language Learners.....	30
Current Issues With Assessment of ELLs for Special Education.....	30
Second Language Acquisition vs. Specific Learning Disability.....	33
Assessing Language, Culture, and Disability.....	36
CHAPTER THREE: Project Description.....	42
CHAPTER FOUR: Conclusion and Reflection.....	51

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. 2018-2019 School Year Student Demographics.....	24
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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this first chapter is to introduce the readers to this capstone's research question: *What changes can be made to special education assessment for learning disabilities in EL learners to ensure there is not an overidentification and/or misidentification of ELs receiving special education services for a learning disability?*

The classroom in which I currently teach, while this chapter is written, is one that contains over 90% students who dually qualify for special education services and language support for being identified as English learners. With such a high population of students dually qualifying for special education under the disability area of specific learning disability on top of showing a need for language support, I felt compelled to begin researching this topic of assessing English learners (ELs) for special education services.

First, this chapter provides an overview of why this topic is important and relevant to the equity of ELs being assessed for special education services. Then, the chapter will leave the reader with a clear understanding of why this topic is important to me as an EL and special education teacher. In later chapters, I discuss the capstone project of a professional development training created to share the knowledge and recommendations learned from Chapter Two's literature review in order to provide special education evaluation teams with insight on how to best assess ELs for specific learning disabilities and avoid the misidentification of ELs for special education services.

#### **Personal Significance**

As of the 2019-2020 school year, I have been employed as a special education teacher for three years. In the fall of 2019, I gained my EL teaching licensure and continued moving forward in Hamline University's Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (MATESOL). Initially, when joining the program at Hamline I was looking for a change in my teaching area, but as I went through the program and saw how prevalent ELs were in special education in the district I worked, my two teaching areas fused together.

During the most recent school year, I provided reading and writing special education instruction to students with learning disabilities. Out of the twenty-eight students I worked with directly, twenty of them were also identified as ELs and were receiving language support through a co-taught model in one core content class. As the school year went on and I continued working with students, my research question grew from my curiosity about whether some students' second language acquisition, culture, and other factors were considered while they were assessed for special education services. Many of the students I have worked with qualified in upper elementary or early middle school for special education support and were transient between districts making it difficult to have consistent education and reporting of their learning. Other than a paragraph, in the students' evaluations, mentioning that the students also received EL support, the evaluations that I looked over did not seem to take the necessary steps to rule out language instead of a learning disability.

A specific student that comes to mind in motivating me to research this topic is a 9th grader I worked with, Evelyn (not her real name). Evelyn is a Mexican-American

student who speaks only Spanish at home. She is the eldest and is the family translator for all documents, bills, and any appointments. The only time she speaks English is at school and when talking with friends. She qualified for English Learner (EL) services in Kindergarten and continues to receive language support in high school. Evelyn qualified for special education services when she was in 2nd grade, it was determined that she met eligibility criteria for services in the areas of Specific Learning Disability for writing and Speech Language Impairment for both oral language and articulation. In this scenario, Evelyn's parents were interviewed and asked if they noticed any difficulties with her language skills in Spanish at home in which they did express concerns with her omitting letters when speaking in Spanish and others finding it difficult to understand her. However, this scenario is somewhat rare because far too often the home language is not taken into account when assessing a child for special education services. Fortunately, Evelyn received needed services early on and is at a point where she can be successful in school with minimal support; however, there are other students who I suspect are receiving special education services due to a lack of understanding between second language acquisition and specific learning disabilities. One of those students I suspected early on many of her difficulties were due to continuing to learn academic English and I pushed her into a co-taught general education English course. She continued to get A's both trimesters in this course and all other courses to receive a 4.0. Later on in this capstone, the importance of gathering home life and home language information is expressed in ensuring an accurate evaluation of an EL student.

**Why does this matter?**

The importance of understanding how to assess ELs for special education is a critical topic in the education field. In order to better assess ELs, evaluation teams need to consider the whole student including their English proficiency, culture, background, and their native language. Over the last decade, the amount of ELs and language minority students in U.S. public schools has continued to grow. As I discuss in Chapter Two, the demographics in schools continue to shift and it is crucial that educators become familiar with how to consider students' cultures, languages, and backgrounds during day-to-day instruction, interventions, and assessment. Students identified as ELLs are increasingly overrepresented in special education, one of the highest areas being specific learning disabilities (SLD) (Sullivan, 2011). Students who qualify as having a specific learning disability show a discrepancy between their intelligence quotient (IQ) and their academic achievement or have gone through multiple interventions; this means they have an IQ in the below average-high range but are achieving in academic areas far below where they should be achieving in comparison to their IQ, or they have not shown progress after going through multiple interventions. In 2014-15, approximately 665,000 ELL students were dually identified as also being students with disabilities; ELL students with disabilities represented 13.8 percent of the total ELL population enrolled in U.S. public elementary and secondary schools (Ramirez, 2018).

Unfortunately, many educators still lack the knowledge of second language acquisition and how to distinguish between second language acquisition and a learning disability (Ramirez, 2009; Samson & Lesaux, 2009). Many school professionals lack the appropriate understanding of testing tools to properly assess and evaluate ELLs; once



referred to an assessment team, the student has a greater than 50% chance of being identified as disabled (Becker & Deris, 2019). School districts in Minnesota continue to administer nonverbal intellectual assessments to students who speak a language other than English to measure intellectual quotient (IQ) because not many assessments are available in languages other than English.

The law behind how to qualify a student for a specific learning disability (SLD) can be confusing and cause inconsistencies between how states, and even districts, determine their eligibility standards between the discrepancy model or the response to intervention model, both which are discussed further in Chapter Two. The determination factors involved in qualifying for an SLD also prove to be problematic if the student's native language and culture are not taken into consideration during the evaluation process. Out of the eight academic areas that are measured during an SLD evaluation, six of them are areas that are monitored in English language development standards: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension. The extensive amount of research in the education field points to disproportionate trends and rates of students qualifying for SLD services, and that is why this capstone project is being created. The purpose of this project is to inform educators on best practices in assessing ELs to lower the disproportionate trends of ELs qualifying for special education services.

### **Purpose of Project**

The purpose of this capstone project is to create a professional development session to increase educators' awareness around how to best assess ELs for special

education services, specifically for learning disabilities, and to ensure that factors related to language proficiency and typical language acquisition processes are considered along with cultural factors. In creating this presentation, I am providing districts and educators with best practices for assessing ELs in order to lead to a more equitable school opportunity for ELs and fewer chances of misidentifying or over-identifying students for special education services. The professional development session provides assessment resources that staff members can begin to implement immediately into their assessment process and take back to their evaluation teams. It also educates them on the misrepresentation of ELs in special education in the area of specific learning disabilities and a very brief introduction to differentiating between second language acquisition and learning disabilities (Farnsworth, 2018; Klingner & Artiles, 2006; Krashen, 2000). The outcome of this project is to educate staff and change the way we assess ELs to ensure students who do not have a disability, but rather are continuing to gain in their second language acquisition, are not wrongly identified for special education services.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter One expanded on this capstone's research question, *What changes can be made to special education assessment for learning disabilities in EL learners to ensure there is not an over identification and/or misidentification of ELs receiving special education services for a learning disability?* The chapter gave a clear overview of why this topic is important and what motivated me to get to this point of asking the research question. Next, the chapter discussed the importance of this topic in the field of education and ended with the purpose of this capstone project. Chapter Two provides literature on

special education disability areas and assessment procedures as well as student demographics and how to best assess ELs. Chapter Three describes the capstone project in further detail. Finally, Chapter Four reflects on the development of the capstone project.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Chapter Overview

As English language learners (ELLs) become more prevalent in school populations, it is key that educators know how to identify the difference between second language acquisition and a learning disability. The growing number of learners from language-minority (LM) backgrounds, combined with the low achievement of a large proportion of these learners, raises several questions for researchers and educators (Samson & Lesaux, 2009). In this chapter, literature on special education disability areas and assessment procedures, as well as student demographics and assessing English language learners are discussed in order to address my research question, *What changes can be made to special education assessment for learning disabilities in EL learners to ensure there is not an overidentification and/or misidentification of ELs receiving special education services for a learning disability?* Through the insights gained from the literature in this chapter, the capstone project discussed in Chapter Three was created to provide special education evaluation teams with the knowledge needed to equitably assess ELs for specific learning disabilities without misidentifying second language acquisition and cultural differences as a disability.

This chapter begins by overviewing a brief background on recent years in special education law through the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), descriptions of the federal disability areas, and special education assessment procedures to identify a specific learning disability. This section looks at the special education side of my research

question in order to address what processes are currently in place when a student is assessed for special education services. The chapter then goes on to discuss current student demographics within special education in public schools, as well as demographics that are overly represented most often in special education. The purpose of this section is to discuss whether there are current overidentification and overrepresentation of language-minority learners in special education. The last section in this chapter looks at current assessment processes of ELLs when being assessed for special education services and recommendations for how to better assess students. This section will also discuss implementation of interventions prior to referring to special education to minimize the likelihood of misidentification of disability versus English language proficiency through second language acquisition.

To better understand discussions later in this chapter, it is important to note that overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of minority students in special education programs is greater than that in the school population as a whole; underrepresentation occurs when students with disabilities are not identified and do not receive appropriate services (Guiberson, 2009).

### **Special Education: Background, Disability Areas, and Assessment Procedures**

Special education is individualized instruction that addresses a student's needs from their individualized education program (IEP). In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed into law in order to make available a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to eligible children with disabilities throughout the

nation and to ensure special education and related services to those children (IDEA, 2019).

In order to better address the current research question, it is important to discuss a brief background of special education. This section will provide a brief overview of special education law. The second part of this section will provide a description of the disability areas identified and described in IDEA 2004. The third part of this section will discuss the assessment procedures in order to identify a student as needing special education services for a specific learning disability (SLD).

A specific learning disability is a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). I have decided to focus on the area of SLD since this is the disability area that services the highest number of students in recent years in education. In order to better address the assessment processes of English language learners, it is pertinent that a general background and process of special education is first understood.

### ***Special Education History & Laws***

In 1990, when amendments were made to the Education of Handicapped Children Act, the act's name was changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). The Education of Handicapped Children Act did not include specific learning disability as an eligibility category until 1975 with the passage of P.L. 94-142; initially leaving out SLD was largely due to lobbying by parents with children of other disabilities due to concerns

that SLD would be a “catch-all” for low-achieving students and resources for their children would be overlooked whereas the later passing of the Children with Specific Learning Disabilities Act of 1969 was the result of lobbying as well (Zumeta, Zirkel, & Danielson, 2014). The passage of Public Law 94-142, which then expanded the Education of Handicapped Children Act to IDEA, was a massive success for children with disabilities; the two legal cases, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth* (1971) and *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972), were also pivotal to the additions made to IDEA (Zumeta, Zirkel, & Danielson, 2014). By applying the Fourteenth Amendment’s due process and equal protection clauses, these two court cases set the precedent that state and local education agencies have the responsibility to provide meaningful educational access to children with disabilities (Zumeta, Zirkel, & Danielson, 2014). The disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education has been a controversial issue for more than 30 years; in the early 1970s, *Diana v. State Board of Education* (1970) and *Larry P. v. Riles* (1972) were two cases alleging the inappropriate placement of culturally and/or diverse children in special education programs (Ramirez, 2018). These two court cases led to the addition of IDEA requiring schools to assess ELLs in their native language.

IDEA has since been amended in 2004, and it is more than a funding statute; for state and local education agencies, it is both a source of funds and a source of obligations (Center for Law & Education, 1994). Moreover, the Act guarantees parents and guardians of children with disabilities the right to secure the provision of a free appropriate public

education (FAPE) through both administrative and judicial remedies. [20 U.S.C. §1412(b)(2),(e)(4)]. The state educational agency is ultimately responsible for:

- a) ensuring that all educational programs for children with disabilities, including those of local educational agencies and other state agencies, meet the requirements of federal law;
- b) monitoring and evaluating such programs and providing written complaint procedures;
- c) correcting deficiencies in program operations that are identified through monitoring and evaluation;
- d) ensuring evaluations of the effectiveness of each program in meeting the needs of children with disabilities, including evaluation of IEPs at least once every three years;
- e) ensuring proper disbursement of and accounting for federal funds paid to the state under the IDEA; and
- f) making annual reports on children served.

(IDEA, 2004, 20 U.S.C. §§1411(a)(3), 1413(a)(11) and 1412(6); 34 C.F.R. §§300.146, 300.600, and 300.750-.754; 34 C.F.R. §§76.101(e)(1)-(7) and 76.780-.783.)

IDEA guarantees children with disabilities the right to participate in the regular classroom and extra-curricular activities with non-disabled students to the maximum extent appropriate in view of their individual needs, with the use of supplementary aids and services and/or modification of the regular education curriculum if necessary (IDEA,



2004, 20 U.S.C. §§1412(5)(B) and 1414(a)(1)(C)(iv); see also 34 C.F.R. §§300.132, 300.227, and 300.550-556). The right applies to the full range of academic-program options, nonacademic services, extracurricular activities, and physical education (IDEA, 2004, 34 C.F.R. §§300.303-307). This is called the student's least restrictive environment (LRE). Once a student qualifies for special education services, an IEP is written for that student to document the specialized instruction, least restrictive environment, accommodations or modifications, assistive technology, present levels of performance, and any related services to address the student's needs that result from the student's disability. Under IDEA, FAPE requires, among other things, that provision of special education and related services are provided at no cost to the parents in conformity with an IEP discussed upon qualification for services (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

According to Zumeta, Zirkel, & Danielson (2014),

“historical analysis of P.L. 94-142 reveals three fundamental issues related to SLD identification in the earliest form of the law: (a) tenets of the federal definition, (b) problematic trends in identification, and (c) identification timelines that may delay provision of appropriate services for students with disabilities” (p. 11).

The beliefs behind how to qualify a student under SLD are differing in the law and how states determine their eligibility standards between the discrepancy model and the response to intervention model, both of which are discussed later in this chapter. The extensive amount of research in the education field also points to disproportionate trends and rates of students qualifying for SLD services, and there is a large overrepresentation

of students of color qualifying in this area. The last area that is problematic for SLD criteria is the delay of services when districts and states follow the discrepancy model since the student has to show a standard deviation difference of 1.75 or higher from grade level standards. Oftentimes, this leads to students not receiving services for a learning disability until upper elementary grades, and with this comes the issue of under-identification of learners due to timeline requirements. These issues will be discussed further in the upcoming section called Special Education Students: Descriptions & Demographics. In the next two subsections, I discuss the disability qualification areas in special education and the evaluation procedures for assessing whether a student has a specific learning disability.

### ***Disability Areas in Special Education***

For purposes of IDEA, the Center for Law & Education (1994) defined the term "children with disabilities" as

...children...with mental retardation, hearing impairments including deafness, speech or language impairments, visual impairments including blindness, serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities...who by reason thereof need special education and related services. (p. 2)

In the state of Minnesota, a student can qualify for special education services under the following thirteen categorical disability areas (MDE, 2019): Severely Multiply Impaired, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Blind-Visually Impaired, Deaf-Blind, Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Developmental Cognitive Disabilities, Developmental Delay, Emotional or

Behavioral Disorders, Other Health Disabilities, Physically Impaired, Specific Learning Disabilities, Speech or Language Impairments, and Traumatic Brain Injury. Each disability area has its own set of qualification criteria that must be met in order for a child to receive special education services for a disability.

### ***Evaluation Procedures for Specific Learning Disabilities***

Once it is determined that a student will be assessed for special education services due to teacher or parent referral, the initial evaluation must be conducted within 60 days of receiving parental consent, unless the State establishes a different timeframe, and it must consist of procedures to determine if the child is a child with a disability under 34 CFR 300.8 and to determine the educational needs of the child § 34 CFR 300.301(c) [20 U.S.C. 1414(a)(1)(C)]. Schools and other local educational agencies included in the assessment must ensure that assessments and other evaluation materials used to assess a child under Part 300 are provided and administered in the child's native language or other modes of communication and in the form most likely to yield accurate information on what the child knows and can do academically, developmentally, and functionally, unless it is clearly not feasible to provide or administer according to 34 CFR 300.304(c)(1)(ii), 20 U.S.C. 1414(b)(3)(A)(ii). Many school districts will administer nonverbal intellectual assessments to students who speak a language other than English, to measure intellectual quotient (IQ), because not many assessments are available in languages other than English which result in interpreters needing to be used in the evaluation process for EL students and their families. As part of the initial evaluation (if appropriate), the individualized education program (IEP) team and other qualified professionals must

review existing data on the child and on the basis of that review, and input from the child's parents, identify any additional data needed to determine whether the child is a child with a disability as defined in 34 CFR 300.8, and the educational needs of the child; the present levels of academic achievement and related developmental needs of the child; whether the child needs special education and related services; and whether any additions or modifications to the special education and related services are needed to enable the child to meet the measurable annual goals set out in the IEP of the child and to participate, as appropriate, in the general education curriculum, 34 CFR 300.305(a), 20 U.S.C. 1414(c)(1)-(4).

After the evaluation is complete, the IEP team, including parents and other qualified personnel, may determine that a child has a specific learning disability, as defined in 34 CFR 300.8(c)(10), if:

(a) the child does not achieve adequately for the child's age or to meet State-approved grade-level standards in one or more of the following areas when provided with learning experiences and appropriate instruction for the grade level standards in the following grade-level standard areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension, mathematical calculation, and mathematics problem solving;

(b) the child does not make sufficient progress to meet age or State-approved grade-level standards in one or more of the areas identified in 34 CFR 300.309: (a)(1) when using a process based on the child's

response to scientific, research-based intervention (Response to Intervention - RtI); or the child exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or both, relative to age, State-approved grade-level standards, or intellectual development, that is determined by the group to be relevant to the identification of a specific learning disability, using appropriate assessments, consistent with 34 CFR 300.304 and 300.305; and the group determines that its findings under 34 CFR 300.309(a)(1) and (2) are not primarily the result of a visual, hearing, or motor disability; mental retardation; emotional disturbance; cultural factors; environmental or economic disadvantage; or limited English proficiency.

To ensure that underachievement is not due to lack of appropriate instruction, IDEA legislation requires that eligibility teams consider data demonstrating that a child received appropriate instruction in regular education settings typically through a Response to Intervention (RtI) model, which is discussed in further detail in the Response to Intervention section below (Zumeta, Zirkel, & Danielson, 2014).

In regards to ELLs, the determination factors involved in qualifying for a specific learning disability could prove to be problematic if the student's native language and culture are not taken into consideration during the evaluation process. Out of the eight academic areas that are measured, six of them are areas that are monitored in English language development standards: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension. Later on

in this literature review, I discuss ways that researchers recommend assessing in a way that the evaluator is looking at language development versus a possible learning disability in processing deficits. Two additional areas that evaluators need to pay attention to when evaluating students who have a native language other than English are cultural factors and limited English proficiency. These are two areas that can often be overlooked when a student is seeming to show a need for extra support at school. With that said, there are many qualifying areas for a specific learning disability that if limited English proficiency and cultural factors are not taken into consideration it can result in misidentifying children as having a disability leading to an overrepresentation of certain populations.

**Response to Intervention.** The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA expanded the SLD identification options to include response to intervention (Zumeta, Zirkel, & Danielson, 2014). Although Congress passing this change was meant to allow for more students to receive support without needing to show a severe discrepancy between IQ and achievement, some professionals argued that this approach creates uncertainty regarding how best to determine eligibility (Zumeta, Zirkel, & Danielson, 2014). Others argued that RtI potentially provides a way to support English language learners and other students when they first show signs of academic struggles (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Donovan and Cross (2002) and many others suggested that using the RtI model before assessing students for special education was a process that would do away with the IQ achievement discrepancy model and instead focus on how students respond to valid scientific method instruction (RtI) when determining whether they may have a learning disability (Zumeta, Zirkel, & Danielson, 2014). RtI is a tiered model approach where students are first

provided with evidence-based instruction within their classroom by their classroom teacher, and after the data is collected if there is still no improvement then the student would move on to a tier 2 intervention. A tier 2 intervention can be an intervention that is supporting even further the skill(s) that the student is not proficient at, given by the classroom teacher or another staff member who monitors progress throughout. If the student continues to show difficulties they would move to tier 3, the final tier before special education referral. As students move through these tiers, the interventions get more intense and that is why a student is typically referred to special education during tier 3 interventions. Ideally, this would be a strong model for filtering out cultural, linguistic, and other factors that may be causing difficulties in a school other than a learning disability; however, not all buildings have access to scientific and research-based interventions which can lead to students moving to a special education referral instead. Current federal regulations do not require a specific response to intervention programs or models in determining eligibility; due to this many schools and districts continue to rely on the discrepancy model rather than the RtI model when determining eligibility for a specific learning disability (Zumeta, Zirkel, & Danielson, 2014).

Most Minnesota school districts continue to use a discrepancy model, comparing IQ and academic skills, to determine if a child has a specific learning disability. Through the capstone project professional development created to educate on the topic of assessing ELs for special education, the benefit of a RtI model vs. a discrepancy model will be discussed to inform educators on the benefits of using an RtI model using scientific and researched-based interventions, especially with ELs. By using the RtI

model to filter out cultural, linguistic, and other factors before referring to special education, this could minimize the amount of ELs referred for special education since they are far more likely to qualify for special education support once referred than their native English speaking peers.

### **Dually Identified EL & Special Education Students**

In order to better understand the learners discussed throughout this paper, the demographics and descriptions of the learners must be addressed. Using the U.S. Department of Education statistics, the first part of this section will provide definitions and descriptions of dually identified (special education & English language learner) learners along with statistics and percentages of the student demographics in special education in recent years. The second part of this section will discuss language minority learners, which are those who speak a language other than English, in special education. The third part of this section will provide a current educational concern of misidentification and placement of Hispanic students in special education programs. By looking at the demographics, percentages, and concerns in regards to English learners in special education, it will give a better idea of how the current process for assessment is resulting in these learners receiving special education services. This research will drive the content for the professional development capstone project put together to inform educators on how to best assess ELs for special education.

### ***Special Education Students: Descriptions & Demographics***

Table 1 explains the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) Report Card (2019) results of the demographics and number of students enrolled during the 2018-2019



school year. Since students identified as white are the largest percentage of students enrolled in MN, it could be assumed that they would make up a larger number of students in special education. During the same school year in Minnesota, there were 143,925 students identified as having disabilities, making up 16.2% of the student population; there were 74,315 students identified as English language learners, making up 8.4% of the student population (MDE Report Card, 2019). In Bloomington Public Schools, where I work and plan to create professional development around this paper topic, there were 358 students identified as having a specific learning disability during the 2018-2019 school year (MN Department of Education, 2018). The Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) (2017), using data from the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, showed that MN had between 5%-9.9% of students identified as students with disabilities who are English Learners. In Minnesota, students who receive services for English language proficiency and special education services are referred to as dually identified learners.

**Table 1**

***2018-2019 School Year Student Demographics - MN***

<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Hispanic or Latino</b>	<b>84,784</b>	<b>9.5%</b>
<b>American Indian or Alaska Native</b>	<b>14,839</b>	<b>1.7%</b>
<b>Asian</b>	<b>60,989</b>	<b>6.9%</b>
<b>Black or African-American</b>	<b>99,604</b>	<b>11.2%</b>

<b>Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander</b>	<b>771</b>	<b>0.1%</b>
<b>White</b>	<b>584,296</b>	<b>65.7%</b>
<b>Two or more races</b>	<b>44,021</b>	<b>5.0%</b>
<b>All students</b>	<b>889,304</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

*Source: Minnesota Department of Education Report Card (2019)*

In the following section, I address the number of English language learners in special education during the 2013-2014 school year. I focus on the 2013-2014 school year because these approximate statistics are difficult to commonly come by due to schools across the country only having to federally report on students' race and ethnicity in special education, and they commonly are not required to report on the dual identification of English language learners in special education. In similar regards to this capstone project, Samson and Lesaux (2009) mentioned that due to the federal reporting practices only identifying a student's race and ethnicity, and not their languages, it is difficult to know the proportional representation of language minority learners in special education during any given school year.

### ***Language Minority Students in Special Education***

The U.S. Department of Education Statistics (2013-14) for the 2013-2014 school year show that the overall proportion of students who were primarily identified as having a specific learning disability was lower for non-ELs (38.2 percent) than ELs (50.5 percent). According to Samson and Lesaux (2009), there is no empirical reason to expect that disabilities should occur in some subgroups more than others. Language minority

(LM) learners represent one of the fastest growing groups among the school-aged population in this nation (Samson & Lesaux, 2009). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) and the article posted by Ramirez (2018), the percentage of school students in the U.S. who were ELLs was higher during the 2014-2015 school year (9.4 percent, or an estimated 4.6 million students) than in 2004-2005 (9.1%, or an estimated 4.5 million students). Out of the 4.6 million students identified as ELL students, 3.7 million had a home language of Spanish which represented 77.1 percent of all ELL students and 7.6 percent of all public K-12 students (Ramirez, 2018). In 2014-15, approximately 665,000 ELL students were dually identified as also being students with disabilities; ELL students with disabilities represented 13.8 percent of the total ELL population enrolled in U.S. public elementary and secondary schools (Ramirez, 2018). According to IDEA, states must have in effect, consistent with the purposes of 34 CFR Part 300 and with section 618(d) of the Act, policies and procedures designed to prevent the inappropriate overidentification or disproportionate representation by race and ethnicity of children as children with disabilities, including children with disabilities with a particular impairment, as described in 34 CFR 300.8 of the IDEA regulations (34 CFR 300.173) (20 U.S.C. 1412(a)(24).

As the demographics continue to shift in schools, it is crucial that educators become familiar with how to consider students' cultures, languages, and backgrounds during day-to-day instruction, interventions, and assessment. Many educators lack the knowledge of second language acquisition and how to distinguish between language acquisition and a learning disability; also, many teacher preparation programs lack

instructional and assessment training in how to instruct and assess English language learners (Ramirez, 2009; Samson & Lesaux, 2009). School professionals, who lack the appropriate understanding of testing tools, remain unprepared to properly assess and evaluate ELLs; once referred to the child study team, the student has a greater than 50% chance of being identified as disabled (Becker & Deris, 2019). As mentioned previously, schools across the country have to report every year on evidence gathered around disproportionate representation in special education, however, it continues to be a persistent concern among educators and policymakers (Samson & Lesaux, 2009).

Samson and Lesaux (2009) conducted a research study to examine proportional representation and rates of special education identification for LM learners in kindergarten, first grade, and third grade. They went a step further and analyzed the accurate and timely identification of LM learners at risk for academic difficulties and examined predictors of identification for special education services (Samson & Lesaux, 2009). Data for this study was collected via a variety of sources, including children, their families, teachers, and schools. The results from this study found that LM students are less likely than their native English-speaking peers to be referred for special education services in kindergarten and first grade; however, LM students are more likely to be referred for special education than their native English-speaking peers in third grade. Samson and Lesaux (2009, p. 152-155) measured language minority labels, socioeconomic status, literary skills, and teacher ratings to see if any would be predictors for special education referrals; they found that across all grades, teacher rating variables were consistently stronger predictors of placement in special education than reading

proficiency or LM status. Samson and Lesaux's (2009) results suggest that there is an underrepresentation for LM students being referred for special education services in kindergarten and first grade, and an overrepresentation of LM students during third grade. Overall, this study concluded that LM students are actually underrepresented in early grades and are not identified as quickly as their native English-speaking peers which lead to LM students receiving special education services later than their peers.

A study by Sullivan (2011) took place in a southwestern state that enrolled about 1.1 million students; "students identified as ELLs constituted approximately 16% of enrollment; and students identified as racial minorities comprised 55% of enrollment, with Latinos representing the predominant minority group at 39% of enrollment" (p. 322). Most (91%) of the students identified as ELLs spoke Spanish. Previous research that Sullivan conducted on this state indicated that students identified as African American and Native American were overrepresented in special education and in some of the high-incidence categories and that Latino students were somewhat more likely than their white peers to be identified as having mental retardation (Sullivan, 2011). Sullivan reviewed state and district-level statistics for this study and found that at the state level, students identified as ELLs were increasingly overrepresented in special education, one of the highest areas being SLD. However, at the district level, both underrepresentation and overrepresentation were common and districts were increasingly less likely to evidence underrepresentation (Sullivan, 2011). The results indicated an increased frequency of overrepresentation in special education generally and in the specific disability categories of SLD and speech-language impairment (SLI) (Sullivan, 2011).

### *Hispanic Students in Special Education Programs*

In the United States, out of the 50,276,590 students enrolled in public school from 2013-2017, 13,003,765 (25.9%) were identified as being Hispanic or Latino (of any race) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). Klingner and Artiles (2006) stated that although many Latino or Hispanic students are not ELLs, they are a significant proportion of this population, they are the fastest-growing group in U.S. schools, and have passed African Americans as the largest minority group in the U.S. In discussing placement of Hispanic students in special education for learning disabilities, many researchers mention the disproportionate representation of this population (Klingner & Artiles, 2006; Becker & Deris, 2019); however, Klingner and Artiles mentioned how the National Research Council noted nationally that the data suggest no overrepresentation of either black or Hispanic students for SLD, but the state-level data shows a more complex risk for Hispanic students in some states to be overrepresented. Since this is a large population in schools around the nation that continues to grow, it is important to continue looking into how local and state schools are assessing Hispanic students for special education programs.

Hoover and deBettencourt (2018) insisted that in reference to assessment and diversity, the misplacement of ELs and other diverse learners in special education is due to the limited use of culturally and linguistically responsive practices. In the final section of this chapter, I discuss the assessment process of English language learners, the importance of knowing the difference between second language acquisition versus a specific learning disability, and assessing language, culture, and disability. Most ELLs

with disabilities have a learning disability in reading as their core problem. This is a concern if second language acquisition is not being considered and assessed during special education evaluations.

In the professional development session created and discussed further in Chapter Three, I have included questions from MN department of education for five different exclusionary factor areas to consider when assessing students for an SLD. The five areas include: economic influences, effects of educational environment, lack of appropriate instruction, inconsistent education, and language acquisition and cultural diversity. The professional development created for this capstone is working towards helping educators address all areas of the whole student when assessing for a specific learning disability.

### **Assessment of English Language Learners**

Research in the assessment of English language learners for special education services provides information about the current processes that are working and those that are flawed. It is important to understand factors that may affect the assessment process when testing ELLs in order to eliminate factors that can result in misidentification for special education services. The first part of this section will discuss factors that can implicate the assessment process of ELLs and current issues with the assessment process. The second part of this section will analyze the importance of and how to differentiate between second language acquisition and specific learning disabilities. The third part of this section addresses the need for assessing language, culture, and disability during the evaluation process.

### ***Current Issues with Assessment of ELLs for Special Education***

ELLs face many obstacles due to their cultural and linguistic diversity. However, ELLs with disabilities have additional obstacles that impact their education which is why as educators we need to be sure that we are properly assessing and identifying ELLs with disabilities (Park & Thomas, 2012). One current issue in ELLs being identified for special education services is that oftentimes their English language proficiency along with cultural and linguistic differences can be misunderstood as struggling to learn because these factors commonly lead to underachievement in the classroom (Park & Thomas, 2012). Due to this common underachievement, ELLs are often overrepresented in the SLD category and often referred for special education. This typically leads to entry into special education due to educators' lack of knowledge around second language acquisition and cultural differences in ELLs. An issue regarding current assessments in evaluation processes is the validity when testing students who do not speak English, since all tests are typically biased against ELLs (Park & Thomas 2012). The majority of our assessments are based on standards of English-speaking culture; as a result, there is very little chance that the scores obtained are appropriate, meaningful, or useful (Huang, Clarke, Milczarski, & Raby, 2011). Klingner and Artiles (2006) stated that it is difficult to conduct an appropriate assessment for ELLs due to the unavailability of appropriate tests, the misuse of tests used to identify an IQ-achievement discrepancy, misunderstandings about students' language abilities, and cultural differences. Another concern regarding assessments is when testing materials are translated from English into a student's native language, it often is not equivalent and the student may not have the background knowledge necessary to answer the questions that an English-speaking



student would have, which would render the results of the tests invalid (Huang et al., 2011).

Another concern with the evaluation of ELLs for special education services is the teacher preparation and professional development around this population. There is a lack of knowledge for assessing and teaching ELLs in our current education systems and even more of a disparity in educating ELLs with disabilities. Some educators have little understanding of second language acquisition, the influence of a child's native language, the relationship between the native language and English language proficiency, and the impact of cultural differences on students' performance at school (Park & Thomas, 2012). A final concern discussed by Park and Thomas (2012) is the lack of law and policy around this topic. Currently, there are various policies in place to make sure ELLs with and without disabilities receive appropriate educational services that require monitoring and enforcement to address both underrepresentation and overrepresentation of identification of minorities for special education services; however, these have not had a large impact on educational outcomes for minorities (Park & Thomas, 2012).

Given the growing concerns around ELLs being assessed for special education services as well as ELLs with disabilities, it is pertinent that teachers of these populations know how to best identify, assess, and support the learning needs of ELLs with disabilities. The U.S. Department of Education English Learner Toolkit suggested the following policy recommendations pertaining to referral, identification, assessment, and service delivery to ELs with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2016):

- **Local accountability**—Local planning areas that submit special education program plans to the state should be required to detail their process for the referral, identification, assessment, and service delivery to ELs with disabilities.
- **Clear policies and guidance**—States should create a comprehensive policy for ELs with exceptionalities (including gifted education) based on current research followed by extensive guidance to localities.
- **Teacher training and licensure**—States should facilitate and/or require all teachers to be trained to some extent in ESL [English as a Second Language] strategies and language acquisition. Further, policies should be in place that require any teacher who serves at least one EL to be trained in the appropriate ESL or bilingual education strategies necessary in order to meet the language development as well as the academic needs of the students.
- **Coordinated policies between special education and EL professionals**—States should consider developing policies that require and set parameters for communication and collaboration between EL and special education professionals at the point of entry to and exit from special education as well as during the monitoring process while ELs are being served in special education.

*Second Language Acquisition vs. Specific Learning Disability*

School professionals often incorrectly assume that the ability of ELLs to use conversational English is a clear demonstration of one's ability to learn academic content on grade level (Becker & Deris, 2019). Many times I have had teachers ask me, "Why is this student ELL? They can speak English just fine." Ramirez (2018) stated that most experts agree it takes 5-7 years to acquire academic English, or the language proficiency needed to succeed academically and professionally. Students typically acquire social language much more rapidly, but there is frequently a gap between social and academic English; also newcomer ELLs may go through what is known as a "silent period", in which they say very little but listen carefully to everything happening around them (Ramirez, 2018). Since the acquisition of a second language is a process on top of learning the academic language, it is a factor that must be considered and evaluated when identifying ELL students for special education services. The process of second language acquisition is influenced by many factors including socio-cultural environment, language proficiency in the first language, attitudes toward the first and second language, perceptions of others' attitudes towards the first and second language, and personality attributes (Klingner & Artiles, 2006). Some behaviors that appear to indicate a learning disability may be normal for a child's cultural background or can be a by-product of the acculturation process (Klingner & Artiles, 2006).

It can be difficult to determine who actually has a disability because the characteristics of students acquiring a second language or additional language are very similar to those of students with language and/or learning disabilities (Klingner & Artiles, 2006). This matches why the top two disability categories ELLs qualify for are SLD &

SLI, and therefore it can be quite difficult for educators to assess the difference between a learning disability and second language acquisition. Theorists have argued for years whether language is acquired or learned, and have agreed that learners progress through predictable stages when acquiring language (Krashen, 2000) with varying time spent in each stage depending on factors related to aptitude, native language proficiency, personality, motivation, previous exposure to content in the native language, and quality of instruction (Farnsworth, 2018). Farnsworth (2018) discussed that ELLs move through different stages of development at different rates; therefore, language assessments are needed to allow for both cultural and linguistic variation.

The Department of Education's English Learner Toolkit (2016) resource on addressing English learners with disabilities describes examples of learning behaviors and whether they may be indicators of second language acquisition or a learning disability under each qualifying category for SLD (oral comprehension/listening, speaking/oral fluency, phonemic awareness/reading, reading comprehension and vocabulary, writing, spelling, mathematics, and handwriting or motor skills). In all of these areas, the difficulty should be seen with both the native or first language of the student and the second language if there is a possible learning disability. By looking for the difficulty in both the native language and second language, the evaluation can rule out second language acquisition barriers. Students must show a severe discrepancy in one or more of the academic areas previously mentioned in order to qualify for special education services for SLD.

This can be a difficult process with which to follow through if school districts have limited native language resources to truly assess the effects that a possible disability has in the student's first language. As mentioned previously in this chapter, the areas that are assessed for processing deficits and academic discrepancy are the same areas that students who are not yet proficient in English are continuing to build. This is why it is pertinent that there be a team member who is familiar with second language acquisition when assessing an ELL student for special education, especially when assessing for SLD. Farnsworth (2018) also stated that SLD is difficult to assess in ELLs for several factors including (a) the cultural bias in standardized assessments, (b) the lack of qualified personnel administering bilingual assessments, (c) teachers confusing language acquisition with learning disabilities, (d) behaviors associated with language acquisition appearing similar to those with learning disabilities, and (e) a lack of consideration for students' linguistic and sociocultural differences. Becker and Deris (2019) argued that universities must provide coursework that furthers second language acquisition theories and strategies for all teacher candidate programs after they conducted a study that resulted in an overwhelming amount of staff members noting that they did not feel competent when making decisions regarding ELLs which often led to staff members placing ELL students into special education each time.

### ***Assessing Language, Culture, and Disability***

It is essential that educators examine suspected disability behaviors from a cultural and linguistic perspective to make certain that misplacement into special education is avoided (Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018). Huang, Clarke, Milczarski, and

Raby (2011) insisted that teachers who work with ELLs with a learning disability should be knowledgeable on second language acquisition, the influence of native language proficiency to the development of English, assessment of proficiency in both native language and English, and sociocultural influences on learning. These areas will give the teacher a deeper understanding of the student and the cognitive processes that the student is experiencing with acquiring a new language (Huang, Clarke, Milczarski, & Raby, 2011). It is important to consider a student's background and culture when assessing them for special education because a student may be able to speak fluently in their native language but never learned to read and write, meaning when they are given assessments it could negatively affect their assessment scores, even when given in their native language (Huang et al., 2011). Research points to curriculum-based dynamic assessments (CDA) for use with ELLs with disabilities because students' learning abilities are examined and evaluated as a function of what the student can do as he or she is being taught, as opposed to what they already know which removes the barrier of background knowledge and better assesses their processing and ability to learn (Huang et al., 2011).

As ELLs move through language development at different rates, language assessments are crucial when determining whether or not a student has a disability. According to Farnsworth (2018), best practices begin with gaining details about the child's native development history and assessing the child's proficiency in the native language and English with both formal and informal measurements; when picking these assessments, team members should look for standardized language assessments that are normed and standardized with bilingual children. However, it is important to note that

even standardized tests that have been normed with diverse and bilingual children have drawbacks such as pictures or references that may be unfamiliar to ELLs due to their differing cultural backgrounds or length of time in the United States, which leads to tests inaccurately assessing background knowledge, not language proficiency (Farnsworth, 2018). A great way to gather information about a student's cultural and language background is to go right to the source: the student and their family. Although contacting families can be difficult at times due to various reasons, the information that a student's family provides will give insight into how they use language at home, which language is dominantly used, experiences, characteristics of the child, any history of oral language delays, insight into psychological processes, and whether the disability is evident in their native language (Farnsworth, 2018). By gathering accurate language assessments, the team members are able to get a glimpse of the student's processing skills and can rule out language acquisition to help distinguish between typical language development or SLD.

Assessment teams should consider gathering a comprehensive picture of a child through interviews as previously mentioned, and through observations of the child in different settings. Observations should occur over time and not just in one snapshot instance. Farnsworth (2018) recommended using a running record, anecdotal record, event sampling, or time sampling; she also mentions being intentional about the observation to pay attention to language acquisition. Another type of observation that is helpful is when ELLs are interacting with their peers, which provides clues on language development as well as executive functioning skills (Farnsworth, 2018). A helpful way to also gain perspective on the cultural piece of a child being assessed is to reach out to

cultural liaisons or interpreters. They may have insight into behaviors that were assessed that can help rule out the effects of a child's culture in their behaviors at school. Other examples of culturally- appropriate assessments in the classroom include performance and dynamic assessments, rubrics, self-assessments, and curriculum-based measurements (Gottlieb, 2006). The importance of understanding the whole child (language, culture, etc.) cannot be stressed enough, as Huang et. al. (2011) stated that ELLs who were inappropriately placed in special education actually regressed in their academic progress.

It is clear that the field of education needs to continue to train and educate teachers and other staff involved in assessment of ELs to better understand the whole child and rule out any causes from second language acquisition that may be presenting as academic difficulties. The professional development session created provides ways for educators to rule out SLA and also consider other factors such as environment, culture, lack of consistent instruction, economic influences, and lack of appropriate instruction.

### **Summary**

To summarize, this chapter was a literature review giving a background on recent years in special education law through the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), descriptions of the federal disability areas, and special education assessment procedures to identify a specific learning disability. The first section discussed the legal obligations of school personnel when identifying a child with a disability and after a child is identified with a disability, and the federal laws that hold educational institutions accountable for providing services to students with disabilities. The chapter then went on to discuss current student demographics within public schools, as well as demographics



of special education, ELLs, and Hispanic learners in public schools in the nation along with those in Minnesota. This section analyzed whether there is a current overidentification or overrepresentation of language-minority learners in special education. The final section in this chapter discussed issues with current assessment processes of ELLs when being assessed for special education services and recommendations for how to better assess students. The final section also discussed identifying a learning disability versus English language proficiency through second language acquisition. The chapter ended by discussing the importance of considering culture, language, and disability when assessing ELLs.

The literature review presented provides the basis for the investigation included in the current capstone; specifically, *what changes can be made to special education assessment for learning disabilities in EL learners to ensure there is not an overidentification or misidentification of ELs receiving special education services for a learning disability?*

Based on the information provided in this chapter, Chapter Three addresses how I plan to create a professional development training that can serve to address the current need of educating teachers around the topic of identifying, assessing, and teaching ELLs. In the district where I teach, the ELL population continues to grow and I believe in order to address the needs of all learners in our school, teachers need to be trained in the area of how to support ELLs in their classrooms while also ensuring they are not referring students for special education that may be showing language support needs. Chapter Three describes how to differentiate between second language acquisition and a learning

disability in further depth and how to ensure the assessment process rules out effects of culture and language to minimize the chances of misrepresentation of ELLs with disabilities.

## CHAPTER THREE

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

#### **Chapter Overview**

The purpose of Chapter Three is to provide a detailed explanation of my capstone project. The goal of this capstone project is to answer the research question, *what changes can be made to special education assessment for learning disabilities in EL learners to ensure there is not an overidentification and/or misidentification of ELs receiving special education services for a learning disability?* This chapter includes four major sections, the first being a project overview to provide a detailed explanation of the project including the setting, audience, structure, and timeline of the project. The next section describes the rationale for choosing a professional development presentation for the culminating project. The third section explains adult learning theories and frameworks used to create a professional development presentation to support this capstone project. Finally, the conclusion will summarize key points from Chapter Three and introduce Chapter Four.

#### **Project Overview**

This project consists of one professional development session that can be offered multiple times throughout the school year, aimed at informing special education teachers, special education team evaluators, special education supervisors, and EL teachers. Since research suggests that one-time professional developments are not as effective, there will be quarterly follow-up emails with a survey to gain insight on how attendees from the

professional development have continued to implement and incorporate what they learned. The emails will also include any new evaluation materials or tips created to supplement what was taught during the professional development. The professional development session is geared towards answering the research question, *what changes can be made to special education assessment for learning disabilities in EL learners to ensure there is not an overidentification and/or misidentification of ELs receiving special education services for a learning disability?* It is my hope that this professional development drives changes within the district I work in, and possibly other schools in the future, to better assess students who are identified as ELLs for special education services by reducing the likelihood of students being misidentified as having a learning disability due to second language acquisition, or other cultural or socioeconomic factors. The capstone project is described in further detail in the following section.

### **Project Description**

As stated above, the project is one professional development session offered multiple times throughout the year along with example evaluation materials to address how to best assess ELLs for special education services.

### ***Setting***

The district in which this project takes place in is a metro area Midwest school district. The district has ten elementary schools, three middle schools, and two high schools. English learners currently make up 13.5% of the district's population. Students identified for special education services make up 16.3% of the population. The professional development will be offered at the secondary level first; but then based on

the success of the first session, it will be opened up to the elementary level as well. The high school, which is the initial targeted audience of this professional development, currently has 234 English learners, making up 14.5% of the school population. Of those English learners, forty students (17% of the high school EL population) are also identified as needing special education services for a learning disability. At the three middle schools, there are 2,343 currently enrolled students and ELs make up 9.3% of the population (218 students); furthermore, 13.6% (319 students) of the population is identified as needing special education services. At the time of this writing, it is unclear how many of those middle school students dually qualify for EL and special education services; however, the number of incoming 9th graders coming into the high school with a learning disability are predominantly also identified as EL students.

### ***Audience***

All staff are welcome to enroll in this professional development; however, it is specifically targeted towards secondary teachers (middle and high school) who work in the field of teaching ELs or special education, and participate in the evaluation process and procedures for qualifying students for special education services. The goal of this professional development is to provide current research information, evaluation methods, and an interactive session that the targeted audience can immediately implement into their everyday evaluation practices.

The targeted special education staff members would be special education teachers, school psychologists, special education supervisors, and any response-to-intervention specialists. The previously listed staff members are the target

audience since they play the largest role in evaluating students for special education services. If they are better informed on these strategies and evaluation methods, it could potentially begin the process of lowering the likelihood of misidentifying ELs for special education services, specifically in the area of specific learning disabilities (SLD).

### ***Structure***

The one-hour session will include a Google Slides presentation describing the data around the EL population at the secondary level who are also receiving special education services, and information focusing on those that are receiving services specifically for a learning disability. The presentation will then focus on differentiating between second language acquisition and a learning disability by giving a brief overview of second language acquisition for special education staff who may not be familiar. The final part of this presentation will be geared towards informing the audience of how to best assess language, culture, and disability factors to ensure the importance of understanding the whole child during evaluation. This is where resources and key takeaways will be provided for adult learners to begin implementing in their practice immediately.

### ***Timeline***

The timeline for this project is as follows, but is flexible. Based on availability for elective professional development sessions to be held, there will be four offerings during staff development days throughout the 2020-2021 school year. The first offering will be held in October 2020, the second offering in November 2020, the third offering in January 2021, and the final offering in March 2021. After approval by the district, there

will also be an option for staff to participate in an online version of this professional development for dates outside of the ones offered previously through the district's professional development website. Following these sessions and after gaining feedback from staff members, I hope to be able to present this professional development training to districts outside of the one I currently work in.

The project portion of this capstone was chosen to be a professional development session in order to reach a large audience, advancing the growth of many educators within the special education department in the district. The reasoning behind choosing this mode of delivery for this capstone's content is explained in further detail in the next section.

### **Choice of Method**

A professional development presentation was chosen as the project method because it was identified as the most effective way to reach a large audience in the district at the secondary level. The district in which I am employed offers many opportunities for professional development for secondary staff throughout the school year and staff are used to attending sessions similar to this PD session created in this capstone project. The additional consideration of needing continuing education units on English Language Learners for teaching re-licensure will make this professional development session appealing to staff as well. I considered doing a website or informational mass emails to targeted departments; however, after considering how both those options are often overlooked by the overwhelmed and overworked teacher, it was decided a professional development session was the best option. By doing a professional development

presentation, I will be able to reach a large targeted audience to share recent research, suggest changes to current evaluation processes, and provide a valuable learning experience for growing in both teaching and special education evaluation practices within the district.

In order to decrease the chances of misidentifying or overidentifying ELs for special education services, this professional development will help raise awareness around how to best assess ELs for special education services in the area of specific learning disabilities, the most common area students qualify for in special education. By further raising awareness and knowledge of more recent teaching and evaluative practices, this professional development will help in advancing the equity of teaching and students' learning in the district. As a current special education teacher who works with many dually identified EL students, I came to the realization that this capstone project has already changed how I assess and collect data on my current students. I am hopeful the same effect will be had by staff members who attend this professional development session.

### **Project Framework and Assessment**

According to Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner (2017), effective professional development occurs when professional learning is structured in a way that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes. The goal of this capstone project is to do just that: to improve teacher evaluation practices when assessing English learners for special education services, specifically targeted towards assessing those being evaluated for a learning disability, resulting in students



learning in their least restrictive environment with the proper support. Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner (2017, p. 4) have identified seven widely shared features of effective professional development:

1. Is **content focused**
2. Incorporates **active learning** utilizing adult learning theory
3. Supports **collaboration**, typically in **job-embedded contexts**
4. Uses **models and modeling** of effective practice
5. Provides **coaching and expert support**
6. Offers opportunities for **feedback and reflection**
7. Is of **sustained duration**

This capstone project of a professional development presentation will focus on incorporating all seven of the features covered in Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner's effective practices for professional development as described below.

During the professional development presentation, I will ensure it is content focused on the topic of assessing ELs by giving examples of how my team and I have already worked to incorporate the assessment procedures identified in the presentation. This will allow teachers and staff to see how they can implement the suggestions into their own practices and assessment teams. The presentation incorporates active learning by having moments to stop and discuss the information being presented. Staff will be directed to discuss how they envision applying the new knowledge learned to their evaluation processes and benefits they see by adding in these best practices. The effective practices described in the presentation will encourage collaboration between staff

members working on evaluations and across settings between special educators and EL teachers. Through realistic examples of students and scenarios, I will model how to implement the effective practices discussed for assessing ELs. My contact information and resources will be provided to those attending the professional development session in order to provide support for those that need help in getting started with implementing practices and resources for assessing ELs for special education.

**Assessment.** At the end of the PD session, a Google form will be available for attendees to provide feedback and reflection on the presentation as well as the resources provided. After the first trimester of implementing changes to evaluation practices to include best practices learned in the PD session, a Google form will be sent out to members who participated in the PD session asking about which methods they have implemented in their evaluation processes, how they feel these practices are helping their evaluation methods, and what could be better or what further resources they need in order to support their assessments of ELs. Lastly, in collaboration with district special education supervisors, a reasonable timeline for implementing the practices discussed will be established per buildings and evaluation teams.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the capstone project overview, including its setting and audience, as well as the timeline for completion for the professional development sessions to begin to answer the question of, *what changes can be made to special education assessment for learning disabilities in EL learners to ensure there is not an overidentification and/or misidentification of ELs receiving special education services for*

*a learning disability?* The second section of this chapter explained the reasoning behind the choice of method in choosing a professional development presentation to inform others' teaching and evaluation pedagogy. The third section of the chapter addressed the research paradigm for adult learning to drive best practices and effectiveness in the creating and delivery of the professional development session.

Chapter Four reflects on the process of developing this project, revisit the literature discussed in Chapter Two, expand on implications this project may have, describe limitations, and discuss how the project benefits the teaching profession.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion & Reflection

#### Introduction

This capstone project aimed to answer the following research question, *what changes can be made to special education assessment for learning disabilities in EL learners to ensure there is not an overidentification and/or misidentification of ELs receiving special education services for a learning disability?* First, I had to research whether there was or was not a current issue with overidentification or misidentification of English learners (ELs). Then, I had to look at how to differentiate between second language acquisition and a specific learning disability (SLD); the disability category of SLD was chosen since it is the largest category students qualify for, especially with ELs. Finally, the literature around best practices helped to guide how to assess ELs for special education services in order to create the capstone project of a professional development session and supplemental materials to rule out other factors.

In this final chapter, I review the literature discussed in Chapter Two about assessing ELs for special education services. I also reflect on my own major learnings throughout this capstone experience from the research and development of the project. The second half of this final chapter will reflect on the implications of, limitations, and uses for the capstone project created. The chapter will then conclude with how the capstone project and research done will benefit the profession of education, specifically how it will benefit the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL).

#### Major Learnings

Through this capstone experience, I have realized that there is still much that needs to be studied and researched when it comes to ELs and special education. When doing my initial research, it was very clear that the student population dually identified English language learners (ELL) and special education is a new topic in education as it was quite difficult finding multiple studies that measured both areas of disability and language acquisition. Exploring the difference between second language acquisition and disabilities, especially specific learning disabilities and speech and language disabilities, is an area I encourage colleagues in the field of education to continue doing research on.

In my own experience, I have taught many students who dually qualify for special education for a learning disability and also receive language support for being identified as an EL. Since it was a prevalent population in my own classroom, it was interesting to find out that it is common across the country for ELs to also qualify for special education services. One unexpected learning I found in my research was that not only are ELs overidentified for services, but they also are underidentified in early grades because of their EL label. Oftentimes in early grades their difficulties are attributed to their language acquisition which can cause them to not receive needed special education support early on.

In my research I believe many of the misrepresentations of ELs in special education, or those overlooked for special education, is due to the lack of preservice training required for teachers around teaching ELs and understanding language acquisition. If more teachers were trained in this area, it is possible that they could more confidently differentiate between academic difficulties due to language acquisition or a

possible disability. As the demographics continue to shift in schools, it is crucial that educators become familiar with how to consider students' cultures, languages, and backgrounds during day-to-day instruction, interventions, and assessment. Many educators lack the knowledge of second language acquisition and how to distinguish between language acquisition and a learning disability; also, many teacher preparation programs lack instructional and assessment training in how to instruct and assess English language learners (Ramirez, 2009; Samson & Lesaux, 2009). School professionals, who lack the appropriate understanding of testing tools, remain unprepared to properly assess and evaluate ELLs; once referred to the child study team, the student has a greater than 50% chance of being identified as disabled (Becker & Deris, 2019).

### **Literature Review Revisited**

In Chapter Two, I discussed how the variances in state laws and eligibility standards cause problematic differences regarding what qualifies a student for a SLD. A student who qualifies for a specific learning disability in Wisconsin could move to Minnesota and no longer qualify as having a disability due to differing eligibility standards. The extensive amount of research in the education field also points to disproportionate trends and rates of students qualifying for SLD services, and there is a large overrepresentation of students of color qualifying in this area.

Another problematic area for SLD criteria is the delay of services when districts and states follow the discrepancy model since the student has to show a standard deviation difference of 1.75 or higher from grade level standards. Oftentimes, this leads to students not receiving services for a learning disability until upper elementary grades,

and with this comes the issue of under-identification of learners due to timeline requirements. This information was crucial in creating the professional development presentation since the assessment process is not only an issue for ELLs but also for students of color. The additional factors to consider document created to support the professional development presentation can help lower and potentially eliminate this issue of overidentifying students with a learning disability.

The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA expanded the SLD identification options to include response to intervention (RtI) (Zumeta, Zirkel, & Danielson, 2014). RtI is a tiered model approach where students are first provided with evidence-based instruction within their classroom by their classroom teacher, and if there is still no improvement after the data collection, then the student moves on to Tier 2 intervention. If the student continues to show difficulties they would then move to Tier 3, the final tier before special education referral. Although Congress passing this change was meant to allow for more students to receive support without needing to show a severe discrepancy between IQ and achievement, some professionals argue that this approach creates uncertainty regarding how best to determine eligibility (Zumeta, Zirkel, & Danielson, 2014).

Others argued that RtI potentially provides a way to support English language learners and other students when they first show signs of academic struggles (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Ideally, an RtI model would be a strong model for filtering out cultural, linguistic, and other factors that may be causing difficulties at school other than a learning disability; however, not all buildings have access to scientific and research-based interventions which can lead to students moving to a special education referral instead.

Current federal regulations do not require a specific response to intervention programs or models in determining eligibility; due to this many schools and districts continue to rely on the discrepancy model rather than the RtI model when determining eligibility for a specific learning disability (Zumeta, Zirkel, & Danielson, 2014).

In regards to ELLs, the determination factors involved in qualifying for a specific learning disability prove to be problematic if the student's native language and culture are not taken into consideration during the evaluation process. Out of the eight academic areas that are measured, six of them are areas that are monitored in English language development standards: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension. Farnsworth (2018) stated that SLD is difficult to assess in ELLs for several factors including (a) the cultural bias in standardized assessments, (b) the lack of qualified personnel administering bilingual assessments, (c) teachers confusing language acquisition with learning disabilities, (d) behaviors associated with language acquisition appearing similar to those with learning disabilities, and (e) a lack of consideration for students' linguistic and sociocultural differences. Two additional areas that evaluators need to pay attention to when evaluating students who have a native language other than English are cultural factors and limited English proficiency. These are areas that can often be overlooked when a student is seeming to show a need for extra support at school.

ELLs face many obstacles due to their cultural and linguistic diversity. However, ELLs with disabilities have additional obstacles that impact their education which is why as educators we need to be sure that we are properly assessing and identifying ELLs with



disabilities (Park & Thomas, 2012). In Chapter Two of this paper, I discussed multiple issues with ELLs being identified for special education services such as:

1. English language proficiency along with cultural and linguistic differences can be misunderstood as struggling to learn because these factors commonly lead to underachievement in the classroom (Park & Thomas, 2012). Due to this common underachievement, ELLs are often overrepresented in the SLD category and often referred for special education.
2. Educators' lack of knowledge around second language acquisition and cultural differences in ELLs (Park & Thomas, 2012).
3. The majority of our assessments are based on standards of English-speaking culture; as a result, there is very little chance that the scores obtained are appropriate, meaningful, or useful (Huang, Clarke, Milczarski, & Raby, 2011).
4. Difficult to conduct an appropriate assessment for ELLs due to the unavailability of appropriate tests, the misuse of tests used to identify an IQ-achievement discrepancy, misunderstandings about students' language abilities, and cultural differences (Klingner and Artiles, 2006) .
5. When testing materials are translated from English into a student's native language, it often is not equivalent and the student may not have the background knowledge necessary to answer the questions that an English-speaking student would have, which would render the results of the tests invalid (Huang et al., 2011).

In Chapter Two I also discussed how there is a lack of knowledge for assessing and teaching ELLs in our current education systems and even more of a disparity in educating ELLs with disabilities. Some educators have little understanding of second language acquisition, the influence of a child's native language, the relationship between the native language and English language proficiency, and the impact of cultural differences on students' performance at school (Park & Thomas, 2012). Park and Thomas (2012) also expressed the lack of law and policy around this topic. Currently, there are various policies in place to make sure ELLs with and without disabilities receive appropriate educational services that require monitoring and enforcement to address both underrepresentation and overrepresentation of identification of minorities for special education services; however, these have not had a large impact on educational outcomes for minorities (Park & Thomas, 2012).

It is crucial that educators understand how the process of second language acquisition is influenced by many factors including socio-cultural environment, language proficiency in the first language, attitudes toward the first and second language, perceptions of others' attitudes towards the first and second language, and personality attributes (Klingner & Artiles, 2006). Some behaviors that appear to indicate a learning disability may be normal for a child's cultural background or can be a by-product of the acculturation process (Klingner & Artiles, 2006). The areas that are assessed for processing deficits and academic discrepancy are the same areas that students who are not yet proficient in English are continuing to build. This is why it is pertinent that there be a team member who is familiar with second language acquisition when assessing an

ELL student for special education, especially when assessing for SLD. It can be difficult to determine who actually has a disability because the characteristics of students acquiring a second language or additional language are very similar to those of students with language and/or learning disabilities (Klingner & Artiles, 2006). This matches why the top two disability categories ELLs qualify for are SLD & SLI, and therefore it can be quite difficult for educators to assess the difference between a learning disability and second language acquisition. Farnsworth (2018) discussed that ELLs move through different stages of development at different rates; therefore, language assessments are needed to allow for both cultural and linguistic variation.

The Department of Education's English Learner Toolkit (2016) resource on addressing English learners with disabilities describes examples of learning behaviors and whether they may be indicators of second language acquisition or a learning disability under each qualifying category for SLD (oral comprehension/listening, speaking/oral fluency, phonemic awareness/reading, reading comprehension and vocabulary, writing, spelling, mathematics, and handwriting or motor skills). In all of these areas, the difficulty should be seen with both the native or first language of the student and the second language if there is a possible learning disability. By looking for the difficulty in both the native language and second language, the evaluation can rule out second language acquisition barriers.

### **Implications of, Limitations & Uses for Capstone Project**

The implications of this project will inform educators involved in the evaluation process of ELs for special education services. The project's goal is to educate these

professionals on how to best assess EL students suspected of a learning disability while ensuring they consider effects of second language acquisition and cultural differences that could be factors involved in their academic difficulties. Through this informative presentation it is also intended that this leads to a more equitable assessment process for ELs to ensure the proper labeling of students with disabilities and avoiding the misplacement of those without disabilities. Originally the plan was to give this presentation during a teacher workshop day in October 2020, but I have since moved districts and the uncertainty of what the fall of 2020 will look like due to COVID-19 it is uncertain when this professional development will be given. However, the results of the completion of this project will be discussed with my current and previous supervisors to encourage changes within their current assessment processes for EL students within the districts. The hope being that changes will be implemented and shared with other districts along the way.

Some limitations regarding this capstone project include the timeliness of giving the presentation, the amount of districts this presentation reaches, and the factor of it being a one time presentation. With the uncertainty of the fall of 2020, it is unclear when this presentation will be given to staff which could slow the momentum and effect of these changes happening at the beginning of the school year. Another limitation is the amount of districts the presentation reaches; if this presentation is only given at one or two districts in the state, then there are still many districts that will continue to succumb to the common errors of assessing ELLs. This presentation is only a one time session and would be less impactful if I did not include the follow up emails and creation of

materials. A final limitation is with the 2013-2014 school year data used for dually-identified learners since the statistics are approximate. As mentioned in earlier chapters, it is difficult to know the proportional representation of language minority learners in this area due to schools across the country only having to federally report on students' race and ethnicity in special education and not being required to report on the dual identification of English language learners in special education.

### **Benefits to Profession**

Becker and Deris (2019) argued that universities must provide coursework that furthers second language acquisition theories and strategies for all teacher candidate programs after they conducted a study that resulted in an overwhelming amount of staff members noting that they did not feel competent when making decisions regarding ELLs which often led to staff members placing ELL students into special education each time. With this capstone project, I aim to start to close the gap of educators feeling that they are not competent enough to assess ELs for special education services. With this professional development presentation, staff will have access to a document that provides prompting questions to ask in order to rule out other factors that could be causing academic difficulties. They will also have access to the presentation at any time to review the information as well as to share with colleagues. This capstone project will continue to raise awareness around the issues regarding assessment of ELs and how to move forward to ensure equitable assessments for this population. As this presentation is given and feedback is received, I plan to continue to create assessment tips and materials for

evaluation teams to use during assessments involving ELs and other students who come from a household that speaks a language other than standard English.

### **Conclusion**

In review, there are many qualifying areas for a specific learning disability that if limited English proficiency and cultural factors are not taken into consideration it can result in misidentifying children as having a disability leading to an overrepresentation of certain populations. This chapter included a reflection on how this capstone project aimed to limit the amount of ELs overrepresented in special education and the process behind creating the project. This project and paper were created in order to answer the research question, *what changes can be made to special education assessment for learning disabilities in EL learners to ensure there is not an overidentification and/or*

*misidentification of ELs receiving special education services for a learning disability?*

The chapter began by summarizing the process of creating this project along with major learning outcomes along the way. Next, I reflected on parts of the literature review that were most crucial to creating my project and influencing the information included in the professional development. I continued on by explaining the implications of and uses of this capstone project along with a few limitations of it as well. Finally, I ended the chapter by explaining how this capstone project will impact and benefit the education profession in the field of ESL and Special Education.

In conclusion, through the creation of this project I was able to answer the research question and successfully put together a professional development session in order to educate my colleagues on the topic of assessing ELs for special education

services. The research provides several best practices of how to change and improve current assessment processes of assessing this population for a more equitable outcome to ensure the correct identification of ELs with disabilities. With this professional development and supplemental resources at my fingertips, I can ensure that other students similar to Evelyn, whom I mentioned in Chapter One, are accurately identified for special education services.

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