Assessment Concerns: Best Practice in Supporting English Language Learners in Elementary and Middle Schools

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One of the pathways to successful learning is for a student's teacher to understand and utilize assessments that identify what the student knows and his/her strategies for learning. Also, knowing the learner's mental constructs and cultural ways of thinking and behaving provides information for best teaching. Unfortunately, such thorough assessments of all students, and particularly English language learners (ELLs), are not common in public school settings. In addition, ELLs are at risk of failure from the ever-present standards' benchmarks and tests that pervade schools. In such a testing-intensive environment, there are concerns regarding assessments that may or may not identify adequately the ELL who needs special education services, or gifted and talented programs, as well as basic and academic English language development.

Fair, appropriate assessment is paramount to good teaching.

While progress has been made towards more adequate assessment of ELLs, more needs to be done. This paper attempts to raise concerns and highlight recommendations about current assessment practices with ELLs in elementary and middle school learning communities.

IDEIA 2004

The fair, unbiased and adequate assessment of ELLs in elementary and middle schools is a current issue of concern for educators across the spectrum. Recent legislation has given more credence to assessment, and more pressure as well. With the 2004 revision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), strategies and conditions for appropriate ELL assessment have become more apparent. IDEIA ensures that suitable services are given to all children and youth throughout the nation. Access to these services is based upon assessment and may require subsequent interventions. Such conditions affect ELLs in three ways.

First, according to the IDEIA regulation, all ELLs must now participate as bona fide members of their school or learning community in state and district mandated testing. Second, special education entry requirements have been revised so that students may now enter special education through what is known as the Response to Intervention (RTI) provision. This portion of the law has the promise of improving assessment for ELLs if educators rethink the process for informal assessment and intervention in the general education setting as well as entrance procedures into the special education setting for all students, and especially for those who are linguistically diverse. A closer look at IDEIA require-

ments, the impact in terms of high stakes testing, as well as the RTI process, including informal assessment, general education intervention and special education entry procedures, is instructive. A third way that ELLs are affected by IDEIA in the "ELL Assessment and Special Education Services" is described in the section below.

ELLs and large-scale, high-stakes testing

The reauthorization of the IDEIA (Public Law 108-446) requires all students to participate in state and district wide assessments. States are no longer permitted to exempt ELLs from taking on grade level, high stakes tests such as the TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, soon to be named STAAR or State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness) state test in Texas or the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test) in Florida (Garguilo, 2009). While the idea of requiring high standards of learning for all students and high standards of teaching for all teachers is commendable, the application of a "one test fits all" philosophy, specifically for ELLs, creates failure or frustration on the part of ELLs and their teachers. Not only do state mandated tests fail to give a clear picture of ELLs' abilities, but often these tests have adverse consequences for the future success and opportunities of ELLs (Solórzano, 2008; Kieffer, Lesaux, Rivera, & Francis, 2009).

The requirement of immediate high-stakes testing for an ELL upon enrollment in U.S. schools is counter to language acquisition theory. According to a study of children in bilingual programs, children acquire language parity in a range of 1 to 6.5 years, with the average ELL attaining English language that equals that of

their monolingual peers within 3.3 years (McSwan & Pray, 2005). Another recent study shows that an average of 34 months (almost three years) time is necessary in order to learn to communicate in English (Goldberg, Paradis, & Crago, 2008). Although these figures promote a picture of somewhat rapid acquisition of language, a distinction is not made in the studies between whether the language being examined constitutes basic interpersonal communication skills or the more difficult cognitive academic language. According to studies by Cummins (2007), Collier (1987) and Klesmer (1994), cognitive academic language, that which is necessary to take a standardized assessment, requires an average of four to seven years for ELLs to catch up in academic content knowledge to their English-speaking classmates.

Research also shows that concurrent bilingual subjects (young children learning two languages at once) are able to acquire the phonetic patterns of two languages simultaneously and that there is transfer of syntax and language structure between the two languages. Conversely, students who have deficits in acquisition of their primary language will also have difficulties in acquisition of the second language (Fabiano-Smith & Barlow, 2010). Specifically, when ELLs have difficulties in terms of phonological processing (the subset of auditory skills that allows for fluent speech and reading) in the native language, they readily transfer these deficits into the second language, essentially lengthening the rate of acquisition (Hu, 2008). Why then, if time is necessary to acquire language and to also adequately assess ELLs who may have learning difficulties in their native languages, do IDEIA and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) require almost immediate English language standardized testing of ELLs' academic knowledge? It

exceptional population of students.

ELL assessment and special education services

The third way that ELLs are affected by the IDEIA involves identification for special education services. Klingner, Artiles, and Barletta (2006) pose a crucial question, "Do ELLs struggle to develop literacy because of their limited proficiency in English or because of learning disabilities (LD)?" (p. 109). There are several formal assessments available for use with English dominant students in determining the extent of the presence of learning disabilities, such as the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-4* (Dunn & Dunn, 2007) and the *Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement* (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2004). However, when a determination must be made as to whether or not an ELL has a true disability, assessments normed only on native English speakers will tend to produce lower than normal scores for students who are limited in English (Ortiz & Ochoa, 2005; Schon, Shaftel, & Markham, 2008).

If Spanish-speaking students are referred for special education testing, the school's psychologist must make a decision as to whether to test in the student's native language (L1), or to test in English (L2), or both, based on language proficiency testing (McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, & Leos, 2005). Since most assessment measures are normed on native English speakers, Schon et al. (2008) suggest the use of tests that have been normed on Spanish-speaking students, such as the *Bateria III Woodcock-Muñoz: Pruebas de Habilidades Cognitivas – Revisada* (Woodcock, Muñoz-Sandoval, McGrew & Mather, 2004). It is expected, however, that Spanish-speaking ELLs who are referred for special education testing and possible services be assessed in both L1 and

L2, due to the fact that assessments given in only one of the languages yields an incomplete picture of the student's abilities (McCardle et al., 2005; Wagner, Francis, & Morris, 2005; Wilkinson, Ortiz, Robertson, & Kushner, 2006). These are appropriate formal measures for the Spanish-speaking learner; however, ELLs speak a variety of languages and dialects from all countries in the world, and there are no widely available tools in multiple languages for the identification of learning disabilities (Barrera, 2006).

How then do teachers assess for learning disabilities in an English language learner in a fair and credible way? Learning language is a time-intensive process and is influenced by many factors such as the socio-cultural environment, language proficiency in the first language (L1), attitude, personality, and perceived status of both L1 and L2 (August & Hakuta, 1997; Klingner et al., 2006). The promise of RTI for ELLs lies in the spirit of the IDEIA legislation: that educators should meet the needs of individual children as soon as possible, without waiting for a diagnosis or a lack of progress to provide intervention. Again, as with the formal diagnostic batteries such as those mentioned above, the tools that have been developed for the RTI process (informal qualitative assessments, curriculum based assessments, progress monitoring devices) were not made specifically for ELLs (Vogt et al., 2010). What is fortunate about RTI, though, is that it offers a process of data gathering, of monitoring, and of observing, rather than a one-time evaluation. In other words, teachers need both a philosophical stance regarding special education services and appropriate assessment materials that provide useful information (Brimijoin, Marquissee, & Tomlinson, 2003; Costa et al., 2005).

Teachers must become culturally proficient and increasingly aware of the stages of language acquisition in an attempt to reject their initial reaction to refer ELLs for special education testing simply based on "gut feelings" or based on inadequate performance compared to native English peers (Kornhaber, Fierros, & Veenema, 2004).

ELL assessment and gifted education services

Historically, traditional gifted education options and services have excluded ELLs from gifted and talented education classrooms in the U.S. public school setting (Bernal, 2002; Irby & Lara-Alecio, 1996; Ortiz & Gonzalez, 1998) for several reasons. First, the assessment and identification criteria to participate in such programs were designed for the traditional student of the past decades (Esquierdo, 2006). Established quantitative and qualitative measures did not create the opportunity to capture the gifted and talented (GT) characteristics of the ELL - GT (Cooper, 2000). Second, program designs presented limitations for the ELL - GT. Communicating through English was expected, and programs that required intensive research or independent projects for the GT students to accomplish were perceived as too difficult for ELL students to produce. In addition, the pervasive philosophy that the ELL must learn to speak English before academic content could be learned placed all ELLs at academic risk, including those who might have been identified as gifted and talented. Third, professional development for GT teachers in the past largely excluded understanding the ELL population in general, and specifically identification of the ELL - GT (Baldwin, 1985). Finally, unintentional cultural misunderstandings between the

school and parent community created barriers in communication (Renzulli & Siamek, 1999).

Research in the past decade has given understanding in the areas of language development and implementation of specific strategies, leading to an evolution of gifted and talented education practice (Castellano, 1998). Today, there is a growing awareness and acceptance for the identification of the ELL - GT (Bernal, 2000, 2002; Feiring, Louis, Ukeje, & Lewis, 1997; Harrison, 1999; Kingore, 2007; Naglieri, 2007, 2008; Ortiz, & Gonzalez, 1998; Texas Education Agency, 2009). Identification assessments include both qualitative and quantitative measures that approach the ELL - GT student with culturally sensitive understandings. The *Kingore Observation Inventory* (KOI) (Kingore, 2007), a qualitative measure of the seven characteristics of gifted and talented, and the *Naglieri Non-verbal Assessment Test* (NNAT) (Naglieri, 2008), a quantitative measure of ability, are two recently developed tests for identifying the ELL - GT.

While progress has been made in the realm of ELL - GT assessment, once the ELL - GT is identified, the student may not be served appropriately. Typically, the ELL - GT who meets the criteria for gifted and talented education is served in a traditional manner; that is, the student receives GT instruction for part of the day or week in a heterogeneous classroom with students from varied backgrounds and abilities. Some ELL - GTs succeed in this arrangement. Others manage for a time, then, drop out. Still, others decide not to participate at all. Such typical academic settings are not friendly to the ELL - GT, as sophisticated language structures used in advanced classes for the GT can create frustration for ELLs who already struggle to discern the language at this level. Teachers, perhaps unaware of best practice for the

ELL - GT, and already burdened with preparing all students for state-mandated tests, have little to no time to provide scaffolding for the learner. Such non-support can lead the ELL - GT to fail and/or to drop out of school altogether in the higher grades, and such a dismal outcome presents greater consequences for the society at-large (Bernal, 2000; Castellano, 1998).

Several changes are needed to ensure a pathway for the academic success of the ELL – GT. First, researchers, teachers and administrators must use more appropriate gifted and talented identification processes, which include qualitative and quantitative opportunities for academic giftedness to be demonstrated in the ELL (Kingore, 2007; Kornhaber, et al., 2004). Second, it is imperative that instructional programs be designed to create academic options and services which provide academic language development as well as opportunity for native language use and exploration (Bernal, 2002). Also, teachers and administrators responsible for these programs must have professional training and development that includes cultural understandings, and appreciation for varied modes of thinking and learning (Holthouse & Thomason, 2009). Third, many gifted and talented identified students exhibit social and emotional needs, and perhaps lack of development in these (Kingore, 2007). Similar behavioral traits and needs should be expected from ELLs - GT, and understanding this phenomenon should be a priority in the learning community (Cooper, 2000).

The schools are obliged to become welcoming communities that extend support to culturally diverse parents, helping them know that they are a contributing factor to their children's academic success. In such a community, school personnel and students alike applaud progress of all ELLs' efforts to succeed

(Holthouse & Thomason, 2009; Kornhaber et al., 2004).

Assessment concerns in the middle grades

When ELLs enter U.S. schools in the middle grades, they are faced with the challenge of learning basic English, as well as content-laden, academic language necessary for success in school and on mandated state tests (Solorzano, 2008). In Texas, a middle grades student who enters school from another country is typically assessed using the *Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey* (WMLS) (Woodcock & Muñoz-Sandoval, 2005). The WMLS battery of tests includes norm-referenced measures of reading, writing, listening, and comprehension and is used to establish a language proficiency level in English. Upon entry in many districts, students are initially assessed using only the Verbal Analogy Test and the Picture Vocabulary Test, two sub-tests of assessment from this battery of tests (Nelson Education, 2005). Both tests may give some information on ELLs' thinking and language constructs. However, students are expected to be familiar with such unusual terms as a "water wheel," "butter churn," "cornucopia," and "bi-plane."

In Texas, ELLs in middle grades are further assessed with Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment Standards (TELPAS). All ELLs are required to complete five writing samples, which are then holistically rated, using Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs), by their TELPAS trained teacher (Texas Education Agency, 2009). It is significant to note that in order to become a certified rater, teachers must complete the required training and achieve at least an 80 on the rating test they are given. In addition to rating the writing samples, teachers also must rate

the students' listening and speaking. The last aspect of the TELPAS is a reading test, which is given online in many schools. Students are rated as a beginner, intermediate, advanced, or advanced high in listening, speaking, writing, and reading.

The TELPAS assessment is structured to provide valuable information. The problem arises in the interpretation that educators have in regards to each category of the PLDs. For example, there could be a student who receives a rating "advanced high" on the TELPAS test and yet fails the state mandated test. "Advanced high" ratings on PLD scales mean that an ELL *should* be able to function in an academic setting equal to that of a native English speaker. There appears to be a "disconnect" between PLD and state test ratings.

Some states have attempted to level the playing field by allowing testing accommodations for ELLs on high-stakes tests (Kieffer et al., 2009). For instance, students who are in their first three years in U.S. schools and who meet the criteria as outlined by the Texas Education Agency may be allowed to take a different version of the TAKS test called the Linguistically Accommodated Test (LAT). Students who meet the criteria for the LAT test are allowed accommodations, but the test is given orally in English. The accommodations for the LAT Math and Reading tests include linguistic simplification, oral translation, reading assistance, using a bilingual dictionary, and having a bilingual glossary in place (Texas Education Agency, 2009). Other accommodations range from allowing tests to be given in a small group environment to having answer choices read out loud (Kieffer et al.) Unfortunately, in their meta-analysis of the research on accommodations, researchers at Harvard and the University of Houston found that the accommodations provided little to no improvement on ELL

performance (Kieffer et al.).

Students who do not meet the criteria are subsequently required to take the TAKS test, without accommodations. A student in his/her second year in U.S. schools could qualify for the LAT administration and pass the test. The passing score means that he/she will not receive accommodations for the next year. It is possible that even though the student passed the LAT test in year two, he or she may not have mastered English academic language. The primary skill the ELL student demonstrated is effective use of the accommodations; i.e., the student knows how to use a bilingual glossary or perhaps has the skill to ask for translation or simplification.

Recommendations for ELL assessment

Teachers are key to important pathways of learning for ELLs, by providing fair assessments and using such assessments to scaffold the learner's needs. Teachers must:

- Understand the IDEIA directives and regulations as applied to ELL students.
- Learn informal testing procedures that should be used in the Response to Intervention stage of assessment. Attend workshops on the topic and request that highly competent RTI specialists give in-service workshops for all teachers in a school, including those who teach ELLs.
- Understand that a student who struggles to learn English does not necessarily need special education services, yet also be aware that an ELL student may indeed have learning differences and require services for these differences.
- Welcome students who are gifted and talented ELLs - applaud their giftedness.

- Finally, monitor closely the Proficiency Levels Descriptors with middle school ELLs as students may or may not be ready for state tests.

Further understanding and development of appropriate and authentic assessments will help teachers help their students reach their highest potential. Careful monitoring of growth in language means taking time to be the gateway, which in turn opens the pathway for ELLs to be successful students and productive citizens.

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