Investigating Special Education Services for Elementary English Language Learners within the South-Central U.S.: A Survey of General Education, Special Education, and ESL Teachers

Kylie Bray

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_hon_theses

Part of the First and Second Language Acquisition Commons, and the Special Education and Teaching Commons

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mahurin Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.
INVESTIGATING SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES FOR ELEMENTARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS WITHIN THE SOUTH-CENTRAL U.S.:
A SURVEY OF GENERAL ELEMENTARY, SPECIAL EDUCATION, AND ESL TEACHERS

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Science with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By
Kylie P. Bray
May 2021

******

CE/T Committee:
Dr. Trini Stickle, Chair
Dr. Christina Noel
Dr. Gail Kirby
Copyright by

Kylie P. Bray

2021
ABSTRACT

This paper explores solutions to the issue of overrepresentation in special education among the English Language Learner (ELL) population. Reasons for overrepresentation of this population can be summarized into three main categories: diagnostic problems, TESOL shortages, and improper assessment tools. By educating future and current teachers on proper ways and techniques to teach, academic failure among ELL students is prevented. Assessment forms need to be revised and accountability needs to exist to ensure that poor teaching and learning environments are not being diagnosed as a disability. An attempt to find how effectively these solutions have been implemented into schools, overrepresentation rates of ELLs, and what other practices are currently being implemented was made through the use of a study distributed to teachers in the South-Central United States. Research found that teaching strategies were poorly enforced in some schools due to lack of instruction in college coursework and professional development and provision of resources for English Language Learners between urban and rural schools had a stark contrast. No school within the survey displayed overrepresentation. However, all schools seemed to lack accountability for assessing an ELL with a possible disability.

Keywords: English language learner, English second language instructor, general education classroom, special education, individualized education plan
I dedicate this thesis to English Language Learners. They have taught me much about perserverance and overcoming challenges. May we continuously fight to persevere and overcome challenges to provide a better education to all students who fill our classroom.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful to Dr. Stickle for serving as an advisor. She sacrificed a huge portion of her time to offer extensive insight and guidance. Her high expectations with an abundance of support have driven me to reach my fullest potential in the academic realm.

Additionally, I would like to thank my family and friends for supporting me throughout this project. Thank you for never failing to listen to me patiently as I talked in circles about my research and my passion for education.
VITA

EDUCATION

Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 2018-present
B.S. in Elementary Education and Special Education
Mahurin Honors College Graduate
Honors CE/T: Investigating Special Education Services for Elementary English Language Learners within the South-Central U.S.: A Survey of General Elementary, Special Education, and ESL Teachers

Greenwood High School, Bowling Green, KY May 2018

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Breakthrough Summer 2021
Selected as Teaching Intern

BG Refuge 2021
ESL Teacher

TopCrops 2021
Intern

Fellowship of Christian Athletes 2019-present
Intern

Russel Simms Aquatic Center 2018-2019
Swim Instructor

AWARDS & HONORS

Juanita Losey Scholarship 2020-2021
B.G. Noon Lions Club Scholarship 2020-2021
Sophomore of the Year of the Epsilon Delta Chapter of Alpha Delta Pi 2019-2020
SNEA Scholarship 2019-2020
President’s List 2018-present

PRESENTATIONS

Western Kentucky University Student Research Conference 2021
CONTENTS

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements ...................................................................................................... iv
Vita ................................................................................................................................. v
List of Figures ............................................................................................................... vii
Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1
Literature Review ......................................................................................................... 3
  Review Methods ......................................................................................................... 3
  Possible Causes of Overrepresentation ...................................................................... 4
    Diagnostic Problems .............................................................................................. 4
    TESOL Shortages ................................................................................................. 4
  Assessment Tools ...................................................................................................... 5
Methods ......................................................................................................................... 9
  Participants ................................................................................................................ 9
  Materials .................................................................................................................... 9
  Design ........................................................................................................................ 10
  Procedure .................................................................................................................. 11
Results ........................................................................................................................... 11
  Analysis ..................................................................................................................... 18
Discussion .................................................................................................................... 20
Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 22
References .................................................................................................................... 26
Appendix A: Stamped Approval from IRB ................................................................. 30
Appendix B: Survey Questions .................................................................................... 32
Appendix C: Email Distributed to In-Field Teachers .................................................. 38
Appendix D: Consent Form ......................................................................................... 39
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Time of Referral..................................................................................................................16

Figure 2. Referrals to Special Education in Urban Schools.........................................................16

Figure 3. Teacher Referrals to Special Education in Urban Schools..........................................17
INTRODUCTION

Disproportionality has been a significant issue for several years in the field of special education (Skiba et al., 2005, p. 130). Patterns of disproportionality have been documented over time, revealing that several populations are subject to overrepresentation. The English Language Learner (ELL) population is one that is consistently overrepresented for special education services. More attention needs to be brought to understanding the effects of this population’s overrepresentation because students who are referred to special education without disabilities suffer negative consequences (e.g., lower academic expectations, reduced potential for economic and social improvement) (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002, p. 20). Two main causes for the overrepresentation of ELLs in special education are discussed to contextualize this issue: lack of inappropriate intervention due to unqualified teachers and inappropriate assessments used for referral. Additionally, a review of the history and polices of special education, and potential causes of overrepresentation of ELLs in special education are explored.

As a first step toward better understanding the extent of this practice and its effects within the local area, that is South-Central United States, responses were solicited and collected from 26 in-service teachers via an online survey. Data analysis from the survey has displayed that zero cases of overrepresentation are occurring. However, several factors, such as insubstantial resources, faulty assessments, and limited Teaching
English as a Second Language (TESOL) education provided for educators, that are known to cause overrepresentation are present.

According to Title IX of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the English Language Learner (ELL) population refers to a student who does not speak English as their native language, possesses a language other than English that has had a significant impact on English language proficiency, or a student who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant (Sheng et al., 2011, p. 98). ELLs comprise one of the fastest growing populations in schools across the nation (Sullivan, 2011, p. 317). As of 2016, ELLs comprised 9.6% of the student population or 4.9 million students compared to the 8.1 percent or 3.8 million students that were present in 2000 (McFarland et al., 2019, p. 56). The ELL population is one that consistently is overrepresented for special education services (Shenoy, 2014, pp. 33-34). Overrepresentation occurs when a given population has a greater representation in special education than in the general education population (Harper & Fergus, 2017). ELLs represent approximately 9.6 percent of the student population. However, they represent 14.2 percent of identified students with disabilities in the U.S public school population (McFarland et al., 2019, pp. 56-59). U.S. schools are currently mandated to provide a quality and appropriate education to all students regardless of language or disability. Language acquisition programs and special education programs must be provided to all children who are found eligible as required by No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (Hernandez, 2013, p. 480, DeMatthews et al., 2014, p. 28) Currently, ELLs that are incorrectly receiving special education services are not receiving the appropriate mandated education because they are being misdiagnosed as eligible for
certain programs. More attention needs to be brought to aiding this population’s overrepresentation because students who are referred to special education without disabilities suffer negative consequences (lower academic expectations, reduced potential for economic and social improvement) (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002, p. 20). ELLs were shown to be represented in special education classes at twice the rate of their white peers (Valenzuela et al., 2006, as cited by Sullivan, 2011, p. 319). They are almost four times more likely to be identified as having a language and speech impairment when compared to students who are proficient in English. In addition, more Els are placed in the “learning disability” category than in the “language and speech impairment” category (Chu & Flores, 2011, p. 246). ELLs at the lower level of English proficiency show the highest rate of identification for SPED, with the majority identified as possessing a learning disability due to language factors being the key criteria for identification of a learning disability (Miranda et al., 2019, p. 331). The U.S. Department of Education recorded a 14.2 percent increase in ELLs with disabilities between 1987 and 2001. Unfortunately, more current data are not available due to districts not being required to collect data on ELLs with disabilities (DeMatthews et al., 2014, p. 28).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Review Methods

Academic journals were found through database searches and citation tracking. Google Scholar and EBSCO Host were the main databases used. Specific journals were found by using keywords such as ‘disproportion’, ‘overrepresentation,’ ‘special education,’ ‘ELL,’ ‘prevention,’ ‘general education teacher,’ ‘IEP,’ ‘assessment,’ ‘reliability,’ and ‘validity,’ and ‘ESL teacher.’ Broad terms such as ‘special education’
and ‘disproportion’ were used to find articles relating to special education as a whole. Keywords began to shift to more specific solution terms once an understanding of special education and the causes of ELL overrepresentation were grasped. Academic journals published in languages other than English were excluded from this argumentative paper. Research revealed probable causes of the prevalent issue of overrepresentation of ELL students in special education.

**Possible Causes of Overrepresentation**

*Diagnostic Problems*

A probable cause of overrepresentation in special education is a lack of early intervention and failure prevention for ELLs (Batt, 2008, p. 14) due to a lack of teacher preparation. Many refer to this lack of intervention as a “wait to fail model” because students go through long pre-referral, formal referral, and assessment processes prior to receiving any intervention (Brown & Doolittle, 2008, p. 66). By the time the student receives any assistance, they are often too far behind to catch up (Brown & Doolittle, 2008, p. 66). Response to Intervention (RTI) is a multi-tiered approach that provides interventions with fidelity at an increasing intensity (Brown & Doolittle, 2008, p. 66) without immediately referring a struggling student for special education assessment. Tier 1 of RTI occurs within the mainstream classroom, which leads to the second potential cause of overrepresentation.

*TESOL Shortages*

Tier 1 requires the general education teacher to implement scientifically validated instruction that makes curriculum accessible to all students. Many ELLs, however, are not receiving the appropriate intervention and instruction needed within the general
An English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher can be defined as one that is trained and qualified to instruct ELLs towards English proficiency. ELLs remain in a mainstream classroom if an ESL instructor is not provided (Sullivan, 2011, p. 319). In cases in which an ESL instructor is provided, ELLs still remain in the mainstream classroom for the majority of the day. (Batt, 2008, p. 36). Current general education teachers are, in many circumstances, ill-prepared to teach ELLs and, when met with such challenges amidst lack of resources and lack of training, refer those students to receive special education services (Sullivan, 2011, p. 319). Less than 20% of the 56% of public-school teachers in the United States who have at least one ELL in their class are certified to teach ELLs (Brown & Doolittle, 2008, p. 66). For ELLs general education classroom instruction must be effective and appropriate as well as linguistically and culturally congruent (Brown & Doolittle, 2008, p. 67). In sum, a majority of general education teachers lack the training, expertise, and experience to properly implement necessary Tier 1 instruction and intervention for success of ELLs. Consequently, ELLs who do not receive proper language support are approximately three times more likely to be referred to special education (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002, as cited by Fernandez & Inserra, 2013, p. 3).

Assessment Tools

Another probable cause of overrepresentation of ELLs is the use of inappropriate forms of assessment used for special education referral. Research has shown that assessment outcomes for ELLs suffer from lower reliability and validity because of language factors (Abedi, 2006, p. 2284). Despite the proclaimed focus on appropriate education for all students at the state level, the policy documents lack specificity and
clarity regarding how to address disability issues for ELLs. The majority of decisions are left to be decided, planned, and implemented at the district and school levels where several inconsistencies in knowledge, education, and human and material support exist (DeMatthews et al., 2014, pp. 31-32). States are required to publish appropriate assessment and testing modifications for students with disabilities and ELLs, but do not include assessments for ELLs with possible disabilities (Huang et al., 2011, 732-733).

Due to districts and schools being responsible for their own implementations of assessment, there are several variations throughout each district in the assessment form, accommodations, and tools used in the assessment process. This produces a discrepancy in the success of assessment in certain school districts. Specifically, in rural school districts with limited ELL or bilingual resources, misidentification of ELLs for special education is much more common (Barrio, 2017, p. 65). Despite the variation found in the specific types of assessment practices, flaws found within assessments are consistent.

Assessments that consist of certain linguistic features can impact successful comprehension of those questions by ELLs. Linguistic features such as unfamiliar words, long phrases in questions, complex sentences, passive voices, adverbial clauses, negation and conditional clauses can cause a huge challenge in the comprehension of a given task or question for ELLs (Abedi, 2006, pp. 2286-2290). These features cause ELLs to struggle, and slow down their progression, making misinterpretation more likely; in essence, the burden on the students’ cognitive load greatly increases, thus interfering with the given task (Abedi, 2006, p. 2286). The usage of unnecessary linguistic complexity can reduce the reliability of the tests as they can be a source of measurement error (Abedi, 2006, p. 2290). The addition of linguistically complex test items brings another
dimension into the assessment: the dimension of language. When language is a factor, the estimated reliability for ELLs will be lower because language factors create a restriction on the performance of content-based measures (Abedi, 2006, p. 2291). The presence of linguistically complex items in content-based assessment adds another construct to be observed in addition to the targeted constructs. By adding complex linguistic factors to content-based assessments, they are a source of construct-irregular variance because it is not conceptually related to the content that is intentionally being measured. This addition of a construct-irregular variance produces an assessment that has poor validity (Abedi, 2006, p. 2292). A study was completed across four different locations nationwide to see the effect of removing linguistically complex language from test items. There was a measurable discrepancy between ELLs performance and non-ELL performance in reading and writing where linguistically complex language was used throughout the test. Yet, the performance gap was substantially smaller in science and lowest in math- where language demands are minimal (Abedi, 2006, p. 2284).

One form of assessment, in particular, that is used today for special education referral is the IQ-achievement discrepancy test. This assessment compares a student’s IQ to their current achievement status. Test administrators and educators will regard a significant discrepancy between the IQ test and achievement test scores as a form of eligibility for a learning disability and a reason to provide special education services. The categories of achievement are composed of skills such as basic reading, reading comprehension, oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, mathematics calculations and mathematics reasoning (Chu & Flores, 2011, pp. 245-246). Wilkinson et al. (2006) completed a study with 21 ELLs students identified as possessing
a learning disability according to the state’s legal criterion for classification of a learning
disability (discrepancy between IQ and achievement). Notably, after studying the
participants, only 11 students actually qualified for special education. It was concluded
that the other 10 had difficulties learning but were misdiagnosed with a learning
disability. Current practices based on the approach of discrepancy tests are flawed
because they are potentially unreliable and invalid. The unreliability of discrepancy tests
stems from comparing two correlated assessments that involve the determination of a
child’s performance in relativity to a cut point on a continuous distribution (Fletcher et al,
2005, p. 509). The validity of the IQ-discrepancy model assessment has also been proven
as weak. Studies have shown that effect sizes on measures of achievement and cognitive
functions are in the negligible to small range for comparison. It is difficult to compare
discrepancies between IQ discrepancy and poor reading achievement versus poor reading
achievement without an IQ discrepancy (Fletcher et al, 2005, p. 510). These tests are also
not culture free, meaning that culture cannot affect the validity of scores. In some subtests
on an IQ assessment, students can receive more points for responding quickly. An
individual with a culturally-based slow, deliberate style may not achieve the same score
as an individual that responds quickly based on their cultural style (Gunderson & Siegel,
2001, p. 50). Most ESL students do not possess the second-cultural knowledge required
to succeed in that type of testing environment, and the individual testing them often does
not know enough knowledge regarding the student’s first culture to differentiate
discrepancies from differences (Gunderson & Siegel, 2001, p. 52).

Following from this review of the current state of ELLs and special education
assessment, the next portion of the paper focuses on research completed to determine the
problem, probable causes of ELL overrepresentation in special education, and current practices in the educational system educational system, within the regional environment of South-Central Kentucky using a survey instrument. Based on the literature review, the following research questions arose:

1.) Are schools more likely to have an overrepresentation of ELLs when provided with less resources (language tools, trained ESL teachers, etc.)?

2.) Is overrepresentation more common in rural schools?

3.) Is overrepresentation more likely to occur in classrooms where teachers have not received college course work or professional development regarding instruction of ELLs?

4.) What current practices are being implemented to avoid overrepresentation of ELLs?

5.) Are schools that are using faulty assessment tools experiencing an overrepresentation of ELLs?

METHODS

Participants

A variety of teachers (i.e., general education teachers, ESL teachers, and special education teachers) from several elementary schools (K-6th grade) across the South-Central region of the United States were invited to participate in a survey. The survey had 26 participants in total. Participants were assigned pseudonyms upon completion of the survey to present the data while protecting their identity.

Materials

Each survey participant was given a link to a survey created on XM Qualtrics. The survey had a consent form at the beginning and was proceeded by 21 questions (see
Appendix B). Questions varied in their construction due to some being multiple choice and others being short answer responses. Data were received between September 14, 2020 to October 30, 2020. Data were collected, received, and analyzed on a MacBook Pro.

**Design**

The research approach for this project was designed to give an emic perspective that sought to gain a regional view, one that emerged from inside the culture of teachers and that gained insight from inside regional schools regarding current practices with ELL assessment and special education services, both helpful and harmful. Once demographics of schools were accounted for in the multiple-choice questions, the survey shifted to a short answer format to allow teachers to express experiences clearly and succinctly. The survey approach methodology was taken for this project because of the high response rates, ability to compile data quickly, and the ability to reach a larger radius of people that is associated with the usage of survey methodology (Jones et al., 2013). In order to reach the maximum number of educators, the survey was dependent upon the snowball sampling technique. This technique involves finding sources or “seeds” and using their specific networks of people to recruit more subjects. This process is repeated and eventually a “snowball effect” has been created as the amount of survey participants increases dramatically (Sadler et al., 2010). The original sources that were educators found throughout the states of Kentucky and Tennessee. It was encouraged and expected that they would send the survey to others within their school systems and surrounding counties.
Procedure

An email was sent to several elementary school teachers within the South-Central region of the United States with an attached survey link (see Appendix C). The survey was sent to teachers of various background specialties (elementary education, special education, and ESL). Teachers were encouraged to not only fill out the survey but also aid in distributing the survey by sending it to others within the educational field. Participants were provided with consent information and agreement in the initial pages of the survey (see Appendix D). The consent information included the nature and purpose of the survey, an explanation of procedures, the discomforts and risks, benefits, confidentiality, and refusal/withdrawal information. After participants completed the survey, their results were collected and analyzed. To protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms were assigned. Pseudonyms were assigned dependent on teaching specialty and order of survey submission. SP is used to identify special education teachers. GE is used to identify general education teachers. EL is used to identify ESL teachers. For example, participant EL3 was the third to submit the survey and is an ESL teacher.

Results

Based on research found in the Literature Review the original hypothesis stated:

1.) Schools would have an overrepresentation of ELLs in special education programs due to lack of general education teacher expertise

2.) Schools would have an overrepresentation of ELLs in special education due to inappropriate assessment practices
3.) Rural schools are more likely to have an overrepresentation of ELLs in special education programs due to a lack of resources, understanding of the population, and accountability in assessment type selected.

Consistent with the literature, findings indicate that the schools’ responses were very similar based on nation, state and district mandated policies. However, each school is different and expresses these regulations in a unique way based off of several factors. One factor that might determine how ELL regulations are enforced within a school is the percent of the non-native population within each school. To gain insight in the South-Central United States ELL situation in comparison to published data, a parallel line of inquiry was followed.

To evaluate the regional ELL population in each school, the teachers were asked, “How many ELLs attended their school?” One of the questions that proceeded was “How many ELLs have an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP)?” This data helped determine the rate that overrepresentation is occurring within the schools or if overrepresentation was occurring at all and if there was a correlation between overrepresentation in special education and population size of ELLs. According to the data collected, no cases of overrepresentation were noted nor were correlations between population size of ELLs and population size of ELLs with an IEP found. One explanation for this could be the range given to survey participants to select the “percentage of ELLs” and the “percentage of ELLs with an IEP.” Each answer choice had a range of 20 percentage points (0-20%, 21-40%, 41-60%, and etc.) to select for both questions. This means a school could have an ELL population that makes up 10% of their school, but 19% of their special education
program (a clear overrepresentation), but due to the large range provided for each answer choice, it would not be recognized as overrepresentation.

Despite a lack of overrepresentation displayed in the data, there were several problematic commonalities found between schools that are often causes of overrepresentation in special education. One problem that was regularly reported was the lack of resources provided within rural schools to help aid in instruction of ELLs. Resources can range anywhere from ESL teachers to language instruction educational materials. A common theme in the survey responses from rural school educators was their plea for better resources. Often times, funding for schools is allocated on a needs basis that is displayed through student population percentages. Due to the lower percentages of ELLs in rural schools, they often do not receive as much funding for such resources. Participant GE25 stated, “We are limited on our ELL teachers and they are stretched very thin throughout the district.” Participant GE25 also mentioned that ELL students only receive specific ESL instruction two times per week which is very different from urban schools with a higher concentration of ELLs. Participant SP16, from a rural school, also claimed that in order for the ESL students and programs to be more successful, the ELLs would require specific ESL instruction on a regular basis that amounted to more than one to two times per week.

These responses are juxtaposed with the responses from urban educators. Participant EL4 from an urban school stated that their school was very successful and attributed it to the amount of ESL instructors they had. “We have 6 certified ESL teachers and 6 classified ESL teachers in our program,” said EL4. Several urban schools boasted not only ESL teachers as a resource but also the robust availability of material resources
for ELL students that were provided by their district. Participant EL5 stated that, “the district has been more than willing to provide materials, technology, etc., to help students in any way that they can.” According to various responses, many teachers see a strong correlation between the success of their programs and the resources provided to them.

Another problematic commonality found in the survey responses and is known to cause overrepresentation is the lack of teacher expertise regarding TESOL instruction. Educators in both rural and urban school settings expressed the lack of expertise in TESOL instruction at the fault of the district and the university. Several educators recognized the need for general education teachers to have a foundational understanding of TESOL instruction. Participant GE20 and GESP6 stated that an education in TESOL is necessary for collaboration amongst teachers of various specialties for the success of students. Despite many educators seeing the need for a growing knowledge in TESOL, not many are being provided with the professional development needed post-graduation. EL12 stated that teachers need professional development to teach them how to scaffold instruction to better accommodate ELLs. EL4 said that professional developments are needed so that “we don’t just have ELL students sitting on a computer.” Not only is post-graduation professional development on TESOL lacking, but current college coursework is also lacking TESOL education. Participant GE25 said that they were not prepared for the diversity that is present in the classroom and they only had one college class that addressed educating ELL students. Participant GE10 explained that in their education degree program, they had one conversation regarding ELL instruction and now sees the need for “a class in college for ELL teaching for all teacher candidates.” Participant EL12 also explained, “Other states are requiring teachers to get their ESL endorsement as part
of their undergraduate program for teaching. If we did that in Kentucky, it would provide
the foundation for all teachers to be trained to better teach their EL students and provide
for their success. The need for TESOL education and the lack of provision of TESOL
education for teachers/teacher candidates is evident in the survey responses.

Additionally, another problematic practice occurring in the schools that could
potentially result in overrepresentation that was observed in the survey is how educators
respond to struggling ELLs. One major theme found within rural schools was that
educators reported that they often found themselves not knowing how to respond to an
ELL student who was struggling. When asked “What you would do if an ELL student
was struggling?”, Participant GE20 said the course of action would be to “inform the
ELL coordinator or the guidance counselor.” This participant demonstrates the feelings
that several others had and that is the feelings of dependence upon the ESL teacher due to
a lack of TESOL background. The background in TESOL that is needed to intervene for
a struggling ELL student is missing amongst several educators. This is causing them to
be extremely dependent upon the ESL teachers. For urban schools who have ESL
educators on staff and enough to provide sufficient coverage per ELL population, this
may not be an issue. For rural schools that do not have access to any or a district-shared
ESL instructor, teachers, schools, and districts are not able to provide the needed
intervention for struggling ELL students. These students are often referred at a quicker
rate within the rural school districts and not by ESL teachers. According to data, 81% of
responses that indicated assessments of ELL students for a learning disability occurred
within one year of time of arrival were from rural school educators. Only 6% were urban
school educators and the remaining were mid-city school educators (refer to Figure 1).
One hundred percent of the responses that said a wait time of 30-36 months occurred prior to assessing an ELL for disabilities were from urban school educators. However, Participant EL5, an urban school educator, did not favorably describe the long wait time before referral. Instead, this participant claimed that “the process takes years and puts the student even further behind.” According to responses from rural school educators, 100% of their special education referrals for ELLs were made by the general education teacher (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Time of Referral

Figure 2. Referrals to Special Education in Urban Schools
Despite the need for ESL teachers to make the referrals, that burden was placed upon the general education within rural schools. The reason cited most often was lack of availability of ESL teachers in their district. This dispreferred practice also has not been eradicated within urban schools. According to the data, 60% of special education referrals in urban schools were also made by the general education teacher, leaving only 40% of referrals made by the ESL teacher (see Figure 3).

![Referrals to Special Education in Urban Schools](image)

**Figure 3. Teacher Referrals to Special Education in Urban Schools**

The reason could be due to a high concentration of ELLs and lack of resources for them each individually. There may be less individual attention granted to them by the ESL teachers, so the general education teacher may need to do the referring if seen fit. Another reason for the high referral rate from general educators may be the lack of prior college course work or professional development that consists of TESOL education. Participant GE26 stated, “None of my coursework covered anything to do with ELL students.” Teachers may feel overwhelmed with the student’s struggle and the inability to help due to lack of education and may refer as a result. Many urban teachers that said that
general education teachers referred students also put that they felt ill-prepared regarding instruction of ELLs.

**Analysis**

Two reported problems that are consistent with previously published research were the lack of understanding of 1) when to assess or 2) how to assess ELLs for special education. In the survey, rural schools were shown to assess ELLs early and did not utilize intervention systems. Urban schools tested ELLs later and relied on intervention systems in place. There is a downfall to both extremes. If tested too early, an ELL may be placed into a special education program by confusing incomplete language acquisition for a disability, resulting in an overrepresentation of ELL students in special education. However, if tested too late, an ELL student may not receive the needed intervention on a timely manner and thus runs the risk of being behind peers resulting in an underrepresentation of ELL students in special education. Currently, no federal or state mandates regarding assessing ELL students for special education exist, but, rather, many states have recently issued research-informed guidelines in an effort to better and more consistently assess students for disabilities (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2018). Further research could better inform such guidelines, particularly in an effort to develop consistent timelines regarding interventions and how to assess ELL students for special education. Districts could also be guided in their transition from a formal assessment for special education referral to one more dependent upon observations. One form of assessment is curriculum-based measurement (CBM). It is suggested that assessments that are curriculum centered will avoid the many issues that result from standardized tests. These tests measure student growth in core academic skills and are found to be
more reliable and valid because they take into account small changes in growth and are able to be administered frequently at a low cost (Sandberg & Reschly, 2011, p. 147).

Another problem that appears in both the research and the survey data was the lack of resources (materialistic and ESL teachers) that is provided to rural schools. Districts are allocated money by the state for certain populations based on their percentage make-up in the district. If a district has a small amount of ELL students compared to the rest of the population, they will receive less resources. In these districts, several schools may have to share one ESL teacher and students may have one to two thirty-minute sessions a week with the ESL teacher. In a district with a high population of ESL students, the school itself can have multiple ESL teachers and are able to provide up to five thirty-minute sessions a week to ESL students. The ESL students within highly populated ESL districts, will be provided with more intervention and a more appropriate form of education. However, the reality of every school receiving an adequate number of resources and ESL teachers is unrealistic and unfeasible. Instead, it may be more beneficial for general education teachers to be trained in TESOL.

Another problem that was consistent between the survey data and research was the limited amount of TESOL instruction provided for teacher candidates in their college coursework. By mandating that college educational programs include TESOL coursework into their curriculum, it would be super beneficial to several school districts—especially those with limited ESL funding. Rural school district teachers are having to rely solely on the small amount of ESL teachers and the very limited number of resources given to them by the district. However, if TESOL instruction is embedded into their coursework, they will be able to use their own skill repertoire instead of having to rely on
the resources provided to them. The data from the survey contradicted the previous research in that several responses said that their districts have provided professional development within the areas of TESOL and modifying how curriculum is taught for their teachers. The districts could, then, initiate or continue to provide or enrich the current professional development for teachers regarding TESOL instruction- as the ESL population is ever-growing and teaching strategies are everchanging. By providing professional developments, it acts as a safeguard to ensure that every teacher has somewhat of a background in TESOL regardless of their university’s inclusion of TESOL in the educational programs. College coursework and professional developments for general education teachers will better ensure that ELL students are receiving some educational intervention regardless of funding or resources provided.

**DISCUSSION**

Key to the findings here is that no survey response discussed an overrepresentation of ELL students in special education, according to Blanchett’s definition mentioned previously. However, responses indicated that school policies were not necessarily designed to effectively avoid overrepresentation. Occasionally, the reported evaluation of and mediation practices for English language learners were implemented in such a way that underrepresentation, may instead occurred, that is to say that the English language learners that would have benefited from special education services did not receive those services. Based on the research and survey findings, several possible implementations emerged that cannot eliminate the problem of overrepresentation of English language learners within special education but can assist in
mitigating the effects of ineffective educational practices regarding ELL student placement in special education. One possible solution is the addition of TESOL professional developments and workshops. Content covered in these workshops will need to consist of proper modification of curriculum for ELL students. By general education teachers becoming more proficient in modifying curriculum, schools are able to take preventative measures by providing better and more effective intervention for ELL students prior to the need for referral. For schools that have a high referral rate of ELL students to special education from general education teachers due to a lack of ESL instructors, their workshops will also need to present characteristics of struggling ELL students and ELL students with the need for special education intervention so that teachers can better differentiate between the needs of language intervention versus special education. This content would also be necessary in an urban school professional development seeing that 60% of their ELL student referrals were made by general education teachers. Not only do professional developments need to occur for general education teachers but also for special education teachers and ESL instructors. For special education teachers, they should receive better instruction on alternate forms of assessments to expand diagnostic ability. They should also receive more detailed information regarding struggling ELL students to bring them awareness of different disabilities and interventions that lead to more accurate referrals in the future. For professional development for ESL instructors, they should be receiving more possible modification strategies to share with general education teachers and information concerning how to differentiate between an ELL student’s need for more language instruction or special education.
Another course of action that could be taken is the allocation of more money given to rural schools to provide and develop a TESOL repository of materials. If these districts are not able to hire full-time ESL teachers because it is not feasible, they need to provide better materials to general education teachers to better instruct and modify for ELL students. The accumulation and addition of better materials for general education teachers would act as a preventative measure and would allow teachers to be more effectively instructing ELL students in academic English and content.

The last and possibly the most essential course of action is the implementation of TESOL in college coursework for teacher candidates. By better educating teachers on the forefront, they will be better prepared and equipped to modify curriculum and educate ELL students in both academic English and curriculum. This will create less of a dependency on ESL teachers within districts that have limited access to them. It will also allow ELL students to have better instruction and succeed, limiting the possibilities of them being placed into special education inappropriately due to struggling caused by a lack of English acquisition.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, causes for the overrepresentation of ELL students in special education were discussed: lack of early intervention, lack of TESOL instruction in teacher education programs and professional developments, inappropriate assessments used for referral, and inconsistent timing of assessments provided to ELL students being considered for special education. Lack of early intervention can be addressed by educating future and current general education teachers on teaching strategies for the
ELL population so that they are able to provide intervention in the general classroom by adapting curriculum where needed. The lack of TESOL instruction within college coursework for teacher candidates can be addressed by making more professors and administrators at campuses aware of the prevalent issue and the great need for this instruction to be provided and embedded into educational college courses. The lack of TESOL instruction (for instructing ELL students with and without disabilities) for general education teachers, special education teachers, and ESL teachers can be addressed by informing school districts of the issue and advocating that funding be reserved for providing these professional developments for educators of all types. Another issue needing to be addressed is the need for more appropriate forms of special education assessments that are observation driven for ELL students with questionable disabilities to ensure that their limited English proficiency is not being mistaken for a learning disability (Shenoy, 2014, p. 34). Research was performed with the intent to observe overrepresentation patterns in both rural and urban schools and to observe current practices for ELL students with possible disabilities. According to the research completed, no school was found to have a case of overrepresentation of ELL students in special education. However, not all schools were implementing solutions to ensure the problem was not occurring and often had fallible practices that are known to lead to overrepresentation of ELL students. Teaching strategies and adaptations were poorly incorporated into some classrooms due to lack of instruction in college coursework and professional developments. There was limited consistency across schools in assessment types and the timing at which the assessments were being performed. Some schools within the survey data found, clearly assessed students too early which is often a cause
for overrepresentation and some schools waited a prolonged amount of time to assess ELL students which can lead to underrepresentation. This displays the lack of accountability found in legislation and policy documents regarding ELL students with disabilities that is often provided for other students that have possible disabilities regarding how to assess and when to assess (DeMatthews et al., 2014, pp. 31-32).

Moreover, a need for more research regarding this topic needs to be completed. Federal laws require states to monitor racial disproportionalities within special education. Despite the legislation, these policies do not address ELL populations. Therefore, statistics concerning the ELL population in special education are difficult to find (Sullivan, 2011, p. 319). Without enforcement to obtain this data, only a small number of schools have the sufficient mechanisms to collect information regarding identification, placement, and outcome data (Sullivan, 2011, p. 319). If federal mandates were enforced to regulate the education of this population, statistics and information about the success and failure of solutions would not be so challenging to observe. Enforcement of data collection for this population would also lead to the ability to successfully advocate for ELL students to administrators on school boards and policy makers by having valid research and statistics to display findings and the need for change.

The issue of overrepresentation of ELL students in special education is one that needs to be addressed quickly due to the exponential growth rate of the ELL student population. The ever-increasing growth rate is dependent upon immigration trends and fertility rates. As of 2000, the foreign-born population in the United States was greater than 30 million, more than 10% (Batt, 2008, p. 6). These statistics require a call to action to aid in the education of these students and in return aid in the education of the general
education classroom. Professional developments need to be implemented for general education teachers to learn about teaching strategies. Teacher education programs need to add courses informing future teachers how to properly instruct ELL students. Current assessment strategies need to be revised to ensure proper diagnoses and proper timing for when to assess. While this may be true, if these new solutions are not advocated for or supported, they will do nothing by simply informing.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: STAMPED APPROVAL FROM IRB

DATE: July 29, 2020

TO: Trini Stickle, PhD
FROM: Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1614026-1] Investigating Special Education Services for Elementary English Language Learners within the South-central US: A Survey of Teachers and Administrators
REFERENCE #: IRB 21-010
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: July 29, 2020
EXPIRATION DATE: July 28, 2021
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a MINIMAL RISK project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of July 28, 2021.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Robin Pyles at (270) 745-3368 or irb@wku.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

- 1 -
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: Investigating Special Education Services for Elementary English Language Learners within the South-central US: A Survey of General Elementary and Special Education Teachers

Investigator: Tina Stickle, WKU English Department, tina.stickle@wku.edu

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. You must be 18 years old or older to participate in this research study.

A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and email the researcher any questions you may have. If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign this form and return it to the researcher. You should keep a copy of this form for your records.

1. Nature and Purpose of the Project: The purpose of this survey is to better understand the experiences of educators with students who are English Language Learners (ELLs) and who may have or are suspected of having special education needs, beyond their second language acquisition needs. We are hopeful the responses in the following questions will shed light on the diagnostic and pedagogical issues and the resource constraints that educators experience every day and that are increasing every year. We are also hopeful your responses will help us develop better practices in teacher education and advocacy on your and the students’ behalf.

2. Explanation of Procedures: What follows is a 20-question survey that requests information on your experience teaching English Language Learners (ELLs), your experience with overlaps in ELLs and special education needs, difficulties in diagnosing special education needs, solutions that you or your school district have implemented, and resource constraints. The surveys will be anonymized, so that any individual responses will be reported using a pseudonym of SPED Teacher 1, SPED Teacher 2 (for special education teachers) or EE Teacher 1, EE Teacher 2 (for general elementary teacher) or ESL Teacher 1, ESL Teacher 2 (for English as a second language teacher); however, much of the information will be reported in the aggregate, i.e., as statistical measures such as “75% of responses to question 3 below.” Response time to complete the survey should take no more than 25 minutes.

3. Discomfort and Risks: The slight invasion of your time is the only discomfort expected. We thank you in advance for participation. No known risks are expected as your responses will be anonymized. Additional protection of your identity is described below.

4. Benefits: No expected direct benefits are foreseen, other than possibly an intrinsic satisfaction that your experiences may help future educators develop better practices for teaching ELLs and ELLs with special education needs.

5. Confidentiality: Your identity will be protected in the following way. Once we collect the survey results, we will have the original survey with the signed consent in a password protected folder. We will then extract your survey responses, place those electronic files in a separate password protected folder, and assign the survey responses with a code that links the consent with the survey data. Only the Project Investigator, Tina Stickle, and the student researcher, Katie Henry, will have knowledge of the coding system. Records will be viewed, stored, and maintained in private, secure files only accessible by the P.I. and advising faculty for three years following the study, after which time they will be destroyed.

6. Refusal/Withdrawal: Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both known and potential but unknown risks.

Signature of Participant ____________________________ Date _____________________________

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT
THE PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Rita Pyle, Research Protection Administrator
TELEPHONE: (270) 745-3390

WKU IRB 21-016
Approved: 7/28/2020
End Date: 7/28/2021
EXPEDITED
Original: 7/28/2020
APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Please identify your teacher classification (Choose all that apply):

- [ ] K-6
- [ ] ESL
- [ ] SPED
- [ ] Other (add below)

If you have other classifications, please write in below.


Number of years formally employed as a teacher:

- [ ] 1-3 years
- [ ] 4-6 years
- [ ] 6-10 years
- [ ] more than 10 years
- [ ] more than 15 years
- [ ] more than 20 years
What category best describes the geographic location in which you teach:

- Rural (less than 10,000 people)
- Urban (50,000 or more people)
- Mid city (at least 10,000 but less than 50,000 people)

School's student population:

- Less than 500
- 500-1000
- 1000+

Percentage of school population that is ELL*:

*ELL= English Language Learners

- 0-20%
- 21%-40%
- 41%-60%
- 61%-80%
- 81%-100%
Percentage of students with an IEP* that are also considered ELL*:
*IEP=Individual Education Plan
**ELL= English Language Learners

- 0-20%
- 21%-40%
- 41%-60%
- 61%-80%
- 81%-100%

Time that ELL* students spend in ELL classroom on average per day:
*ELL= English Language Learners

- 0-30 Minutes
- 30-60 Minutes
- 60-90 Minutes
- 90-120 Minutes

Type of teacher that typically refers ELL* students to be tested for special education:
*ELL= English Language Learners

- General Education Teacher
- ELL Teacher
- Special Education Teacher

Has your school hosted a training or professional development on teaching ELL* students?
*ELL= English Language Learners

- Yes
- No
What type of assessment is provided for ELL* students to be placed into special education?  
*ELL*= English Language Learners  
- Dual Language Standardized Tests  
- Based on Observations/Informal Testing  
- English Standardized Test  
- English Standardized Test after English Proficiency Has Been Proven  
- Standardized Tests with Interpreter  
- Click to write Choice 6

Are general education teachers adapting lessons for ELL* students within their classrooms at your school?  
*ELL*= English Language Learners  
- Yes  
- No

Approximately how long does an ELL* student have to be at your school prior to assessing for learning disabilities?  
*ELL*= English Language Learners  
- 0-6 months  
- 6-12 months  
- 12-18 months  
- 18-24 months  
- 30-36 months
In your experience, did your college education courses prepare you for instructing ELL students in your classroom? Please explain.


In your experience, if an ELL student is struggling in the classroom, what are the next steps for assisting the student to succeed? Please explain.


If you could implement one or more changes to the assessment of ELLs for special education needs and appropriate interventions, what would you suggest?


If you have any other suggestions on teaching ELLs, ELLs with special education needs, or related issues, please add your comments here.


In your experience, how successful is your ELL program at helping ELLs gain proficiency in English (i.e., able to completing coursework at their academic level)? Please provide as much specificity and details to help us better understand your assessment.

In your experience, describe classroom, school, and district actions that allow ELLs the best opportunities to gain proficiency in English.

In your experience, what are the three most needed changes to help ELLs acquire English?

In your experience, have you observed instances where ELL students were placed into special education programs and later removed from these programs or "outgrew their diagnosis?"
APPENDIX C: EMAIL DISTRIBUTED TO IN-FIELD TEACHERS

We invite you to take part in our survey (link provided below). Our goal is to better understand the experience of teaching English Language Learners (ELLs), particularly their assessment and access to special education (SPED) interventions, and possible barriers to those services. Additionally, we are also interested in your experiences with positive interventions to help these students, protocols you have developed or imagine could help ELLS who may also need SPED interventions.

The purpose of this research is to help develop best practices for assessment, placement, and interventions learning from the teachers on the ground who are presented with these issues daily as well as through reported interventions within the current education literature. We believe your experiences are key to helping us determine how best to ensure the ELL population who would benefit from special education interventions could be served working within such issues as limited financial and human resources.

We will anonymize all participant’s responses to protect your identities. For instance, an elementary teacher working within the Bowling Green (KY) school system would be given an identification code such as BGEE1 or a special education teacher working in Louisville could be identified as LVSPED4 (more information is provided at the beginning of the survey).

We also ask that, if possible, you would forward the survey link to fellow educators working in the southcentral US in Kentucky or Tennessee. We would so very much appreciate your help in obtaining as many actual teacher experiences as possible.

We also ask that you complete the survey by October 30th, 2020. As a reminder, we will send out an email week of October 19th, 2020.

Thank you for considering our request to add your experiences to our research. If you have any questions, please feel free to email Trini Stickle at trini.stickle@wku.edu.

Trini Stickle, PhD
Applied Linguist
WKU English Department
and
Kylie Bray
WKU Elementary Major
SPED Major
and TESOL Minor
Honors College
Student researcher

Here is the link to our consent and survey:
Special Education Services and English Language Learners Teacher Survey
APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

1. Nature and Purpose of the Project:

The following is a 20-question survey sent to you as someone with experience teaching English Language Learners and/or special education students within the elementary education system of the South-central United States. The purpose of this survey is to better understand the experiences of educators with students who are English Language Learners (ELLs) and who may have or are suspected of having special education needs, beyond second their second language acquisition needs. We are hopeful the responses to the following questions will shed light on the diagnostic and pedagogical issues and the resource constraints that educators experience every day and that are increasing every year. We are also hopeful your responses will help us develop better practices in teacher education and advocacy on your and the students’ behalf.

2. Explanation of Procedures:

What follows is a 20-question survey that requests information on your experience teaching English Language Learners (ELLs), your experience with overlaps in ELLs and special education needs, difficulties in diagnosing special education needs, solutions that you or your school/district have implemented, and resource constraints. The surveys will be anonymized, so that any individual responses will be reported using a pseudonym in the form of BGSPED1, LVSPED2 (for city, special education teacher, number) or NVEE1, LXEZ2 (city, general elementary teacher, number) or BGESL1, OBESL2 (for city, English as a second language teacher, number); however, much of the information will be reported in the aggregate, i.e. in statistical measures such as “30% of responses to question 1 show x”.

Surveys will be collected from September 15, 2020, until October 31, 2020. Analysis of the responses will occur between November 1, 2020 until January 31, 2021. The Initial report in the form of Ms. Bray’s honors thesis. If findings allow, we will seek additional conference and publication opportunities.

3. Discomfort and Risks:

The slight intrusion of your time is the only discomfort expected. We thank you in advance for your participation. No known risks are expected as your responses will be anonymized. Additional protection of your identity is described below.

Benefits:

No expected direct benefits are foreseen, other than possibly an intrinsic satisfaction that your experiences may help future educators develop better practices for teaching ELLs and ELLs with special education needs.

Confidentiality:

Your identity will be protected in the following way. Once we collect the survey results, we will lose the original survey with the signed consent in a password protected folder. We will then extract your survey responses, place those electronic files in a separate password protected folder, and assign the survey responses with a code that links the consent with the survey data. Only the Project Investigator, Trini Stickler, and the student researcher, Kylie Bray, will have knowledge of the coding system.

4. Refusal/Withdrawal:

Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services or interactions you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty. Withdrawal simply requires contacting the Project Investigator at the email address provided: trini.stickler@wku.edu. At that time, your data (i.e. survey responses) will be deleted and removed from any future reporting.

You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

Please type in your name in the space below. Typing in your name serves as your consenting signature allowing the researchers to use your responses to this survey in all conference and publication presentations for this research project.

[Signature]

39