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Representation of English Language Learners in Special Education: A Campus-level Study

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Fifty years ago, Dunn's (1968) seminal article found that African Americans were disproportionately represented in special education as students with intellectual disabilities. Dunn's article was of critical importance as it formally acknowledged disproportionality in the special education literature. This focus in the professional literature over the past five decades has led to federal policy changes, such as 2004 amendments to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] requiring state monitoring of disproportionality. Additionally, case law, such as *Guadalupe Organization v. Tempe Elementary School District No. 3* (1978) and *Larry P. v. Riles* (1984) has been influenced by the acknowledgement of disproportionality. Finally, the field has seen the rise of national technical assistance centers and training programs dedicated to the advancement of knowledge in this area (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Throughout the years, studies have identified disproportionate representation of students of color receiving special education services (Artiles, & Trent, 1994; Artiles, Harry, Reschly, and Chinn, 2002; Bal, Sullivan, & Harper, 2014; Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Donovan & Cross, 2002; MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011; Voulgarides & Thorius, 2017). Sullivan & Artiles (2011) and more recently Cruz and Rodl (2018) noted that the literature surrounding disproportionality in special education exposes fairly consistent national patterns: African American students are overrepresented in special education programs as students with intellectual disabilities or emotional disturbance.

Additionally, Native American students are overrepresented as students with learning disabilities. Finally, national trends suggest that Latino and Asian American/Pacific Islander students are proportionately or underrepresented in high-incidence categories, such as learning disabilities and emotional disturbance.

The research on disproportionality has also investigated the reasons that students might be disproportionately identified and placed in special education programs. Researchers have identified socio-political factors, such as poverty. For example, the National Research Council (Donovan & Cross, 2002) reported that students who were from a racial minority, especially African Americans, were more at risk of being in poverty, which correlated with receiving special education services. However, as educators, the research on practice-based factors; that is, what we do in schools and classrooms is of critical importance. The first factor that has been identified by researchers is a "cultural mismatch between middle class, White teachers and school administrators with low-income and/or racial and ethnic minority student populations" (Voulgarides, Fergus, and King Thorius, 2017, p. 64). When teachers do not share the same cultural background as their students, educators may not have the knowledge to provide culturally appropriate curricula for their students (Bal, Sullivan, & Harper, 2014; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010). The second factor that Voulgarides and colleagues cited is the "gaps in the development and implementation of interventions and other referral systems, which cause disproportionate outcomes" (p. 64). For example, response to intervention (RtI), which became more widely used after its inclusion in IDEA 2004, has had mixed results with regards to appropriate referral

and placement in special education (Sciuchetti, 2017).

Regardless of the reason, the fact is that students of color continue to be disproportionately under- or overrepresented in programs for students with disabilities. Since first being identified five decades ago, the disproportionate representation of students of color in special continues to be a concern for the field of education. Recently, it has come to the attention of researchers, those students who are learning English may also be vulnerable to disproportionate representation in special education.

Disproportionate Representation of English Language Learners

Researchers of disproportionality have focused on students of color, but literature focused directly on English language learners (ELLs) is limited (Barrio, 2017). “Federal databases (e.g., Office of Civil Rights and the Office of Special Education Programs) only recently began collecting data on identification and placement by language status even though reporting by racial category has long been in place” (Sullivan, 2011, p. 319). Nonetheless, researchers have been examining the question of the placement of ELLs in special education for some time now. For example, Ovando and Collier (1985) reported that ELLs were underrepresented in special education because of inaccurate placement. Artiles and Trent (1994) focused their research on Latinos where data from the Office of Civil Rights indicated that Latinos’ limited English proficiency was a variable that affected their placement in special education.

Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, and Higareda (2005) studied English language learners’ placement in special education services in eleven school districts in the state of California during the 1998-1999 school

year. They concluded that ELLs were underrepresented at the district and elementary levels, but overrepresented at the secondary level, and in high incidence disabilities categories, specifically learning disabilities. In a subsequent study, Artiles and Bal (2008) found that ELLs were overrepresented in school districts with larger numbers of ELLs.

Similarly, Sullivan (2011) reported the disproportionate representation of ELLs in special education in several districts in a southwestern state for an eight-year period (1999-2006). Utilizing relative risk ratios to determine the representation of ELLs in special education, Sullivan found that at the state-level, ELLs were overrepresented in special education for high incidence disabilities. However, the author was not able to identify the problem until the data was disaggregated at the region level rather than the state as a whole. In other words, disproportionality was more easily identified with disaggregated data.

At the national level, ELLs are often overrepresented in the identification process and placement in special education in comparison to their White peers (Dever, Raines, Dowdy, & Hostutler, 2016). However, Dever and colleagues pointed out that there was limited amount of information reported on the status of ELL students because there are no legal requirements for districts to report data on language. Likewise, DeMathews, Edwards, and Nelson (2014) analyzed information on state education agencies, school districts, and schools along the US-Mexico border. With the amount of ELL students in US-Mexico border schools, they highlighted issues such as policy and how it does not provide a well-structured manner of working with disproportionality. In their analysis, they determined that “no state currently collects data that identifies ELLs in special education as a specific subgroup, which

makes examining issues associated with ELL-special education disproportionality challenges, complex, and time-consuming for state administrators” (p. 30). This lack of data is problematic, as we shall see in the next discussion.

Disproportionate Representation of English Language Learners in Texas

This study was conducted in the state of Texas. Therefore, a brief look at the research concerning English language learners receiving special education services in this state is warranted.

Contreras (2006) analyzed representational patterns of English language learners receiving services in the three regions in South Texas. Utilizing data from the Texas Education Agency, for 110 school districts in South Texas, the researcher found that ELLs in these regions were more likely to receive special education services when compared to their non-ELL peers. Specifically, her results indicated that 77.3% of the districts reported overrepresentation of English language learning receiving special education services.

Linn (2011) conducted a study that examined the disproportionate representation of English language learners in special education programs in the state of Texas. Utilizing relative risk ratios, the author discovered that when state data was disaggregated to the region level, disproportionate representation of ELLs in special education was reported. Linn concluded that the “underrepresentation of English language learners in special education programs merits attention because it may mean that there are ELLs who have a disability and are not receiving appropriate services” (p. 38). Subsequently, Linn and Hemmer (2011) conducted a longitudinal study that examined the representation of

ELLs in special education programs in school districts in Education Service Center One in Texas for a 7-years period. They concluded that throughout the time-period overviewed, overrepresentation risk ratios decreased each year as well as the ELLs placement in special education, which was of concern.

The disproportionate representation of students of color, including ELLs in special education indicates an issue that must continue to be addressed (Contreras, 2006; Linn, 2011; Linn & Hemmer, 2011; Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005; Sullivan, 2011). Garcia (2015) stated that ELLs are overrepresented as much as any minority students in special education programs. “Being bilingual or an ELL increases a student’s chance of being labeled as a student who should receive special education services” (p. 4). Furthermore, data used to identify disproportionate representation for ELLs often masks the problem in national-level, state-level, and even the district-level (Linn, 2011; Sullivan, 2011). A systematic review of the literature by Cruz and Rodl (2018) summarized studies of disproportionality at the national, state, municipality, and school-level. Out of 26 studies, 61.54% of studies focused on national data, 19.23% focused on state data, 11.54% focused on district data, 7.69% focused on municipality data, and 0% focused on school data. Though there is a need for data analysis for the disproportionality rates nationwide, statewide, and district wide, “studies of student-level data are relatively rare within the disproportionality literature” (Sullivan & Bal, 2013, p. 477).

Therefore, research that includes campus-level data can provide a better overview of issue of identifying ELLs for appropriate educational services whether these services are language support and instruction or special education services.

The purpose of this study was to examine the representational patterns of ELLs receiving special education services at elementary, middle, and high school campuses in a school district in South Texas.

Method

The population for this study consisted of the elementary, middle, and high school campuses in a district located in South Texas along the border with Mexico. Henceforth, the district under examination will be referred to as South District. According to the population estimate by the U.S. Census, the population of the city that South District is located in was 260,654 persons in 2017. Additionally, citizens identifying as Hispanic accounted for 95.4% of the population (U.S. Census, 2016). A total of 30 campuses (elementary, middle, and high school campuses) were identified for South District, but only a total of 27 were used for the study. Three campuses were eliminated because they were discipline alternative schools or early college high schools. These campuses did not include students for the criterion researched or the data numbers were masked and therefore the number of ELLs in special education was not available to the researchers.

According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), during the 2016-2017 school year, South District had an enrollment of 24,237 students. Ninety-nine percent (99%) of the student population identified as Hispanic, compared to 52.5% at the state level. Additionally, fifty-eight percent of the student population was identified as ELLs, compared to 18.8% at the state level. Furthermore, 7.8% of the total population in South District received special education services, compared to 9.2% at the state level. Finally, 37% of the student population was enrolled in bilingual education programs,

compared to 9.7% at the state level and 19.5% were enrolled in ESL programs, compared to 9.1% at the state level (TEA, 2017).

The data used in this study were from *The Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) Standard Reports 2016-2017* (Texas Education Agency, 2017). In this study, relative risk ratios were used to describe the representational patterns of English language learners (ELLs) in special education programs. Data obtained from these reports included the following four numbers for each campus: total student enrollment, total ELL students, total students receiving special education services, and total ELL students receiving special education services.

Calculation of Relative Risk Ratios

In order to calculate the relative risk ratio for each campus in South District, composition and risk indices were first calculated. Formulas for calculating composition indices, risk indices, and relative risk ratios (Gibb & Skiba, 2008) were entered on an Excel spreadsheet. Composition indices for each campus were calculated first. This number provided the percentage of English language learners in special education for each campus. Next, the risk indices were calculated, which provided the percentage of English language learners who are in special education compared to all English language learners. Finally, relative risk ratios were calculated to determine the risk of being in special education if students were labeled as English language learners compared to those students who were non-English language learners. The following are the formulas used to obtain the relative risk ratio for ELLs in special education:

- **Composition index** =
$$\frac{\text{Number of English language learners in Special Education}}{\text{Total Number of Students in Special Education}} \times 100$$
- **Risk Index** =
$$\frac{\text{Number of English language learners in Special Education}}{\text{Total Number of English language learners}} \times 100$$
- **Relative Risk Ratio** =
$$\frac{\text{Risk index of English language learners}}{\text{Risk index of non- English language learners}}$$

As noted in the last formula, the relative risk ratio was calculated by dividing the risk ratio of English language learners by the risk ratio of non-English language learners. Relative risk ratios obtained for each elementary, middle, and high school campus indicated to what extent being labeled as an English language learner in South District determined the potential for a student's placement in special education.

Results

Voulgarides, Fergus, and King Thorius (2017) indicated that a relative risk ratio “identifies a specific racial group’s risk of a particular outcome compared with that of all other students” (p. 69). Subsequently, the ratios reported describe the risk an English language learner has of being placed in special education compared to that of all non-English language learners. A relative risk ratio of 1.0 indicates that there is a proportional representation; a relative risk ratio greater than 1.0 indicates overrepresentation; a relative risk ratio less than 1.0 indicates underrepresentation (Coutinho & Oswald, 2004). Although there is no agreed number for significant overrepresentation or significant underrepresentation, researchers have identified and suggested criteria for determining a concern for overrepresentation or underrepresentation (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Coutinho & Oswald, 2004; Parrish, 2002). For the purpose of this study, the suggested criterion

of “acceptable range of risk ratios as values between 0.80 and 1.20” will be utilized to identify the proportionate representation of English language learners receiving services in special education for elementary, middle, and high school campuses South District (Sullivan, 2011, p. 324). Likewise, risk ratios less than 0.80 will describe underrepresentation and risk ratios of 1.20 and above will describe overrepresentation.

Representational patterns of ELLs in South District

For the purpose of this study, each campus was given a letter (*E*, *M*, *H*), and a number to represent campuses in South District. The letter *E* represents elementary school campuses. The letter *M* represents middle school campuses. The letter *H* represents high school campuses. As previously mentioned, three secondary schools in South District were not included in the study. After these exclusions, 90% of elementary and secondary campuses were included. Table 1 presents the relative risk ratios for elementary school campuses in South District and Table 2 reports the relative risk ratios for secondary school campuses in South District.

As reported in tables 1 and 2, 18 campuses (66.66%) of South District included in this study, reported relative risk ratios under 0.80 indicating potential underrepresentation of English language learners in special education programs, 17 of which, (94%) were elementary campuses. Said another way, 17 of the 20 (85%) of the elementary campuses reported potential underrepresentation. Only one secondary campus (H1) reported potential underrepresentation. Also, only one campus (E14) reported proportionate representation of English language learners in special education.

Table 1

Relative Risk Ratios of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in South District Elementary School Campuses

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
<i>E1</i>	0.44
<i>E2</i>	0.49
<i>E3</i>	0.46
<i>E4</i>	0.55
<i>E5</i>	0.48
<i>E6</i>	0.25
<i>E7</i>	0.44
<i>E8</i>	0.75
<i>E9</i>	0.59
<i>E10</i>	0.34
<i>E11</i>	0.79
<i>E12</i>	0.54
<i>E13</i>	0.77
<i>E14</i>	0.91
E15	2.28
<i>E16</i>	0.31
<i>E17</i>	0.44
E18	1.61
<i>E19A</i>	0.56
<i>E20</i>	0.48

Note. **Boldface** indicates relative risk ratio ≥ 1.20 , overrepresentation. *Italics* represents relative risk ratio ≤ 0.80 , underrepresentation.

Table 2

Relative Risk Ratios of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in South District Secondary School Campuses

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
M1	1.03
M2	1.23
M3	2.07
M4	1.06
<i>H1</i>	0.66
<i>H2</i>	0.94
H3	1.46

Note. **Boldface** indicates relative risk ratio ≥ 1.20 , overrepresentation. *Italics* represents relative risk ratio ≤ 0.80 , underrepresentation.

Five campuses (18.51%) of South District included in this study, reported relative risk ratios over 1.20 indicating potential overrepresentation of ELLs in special education programs, including three secondary schools (42.8%) and two elementary schools (10%).

Discussion

This study was conducted to ascertain the representational patterns of ELLs receiving special education services at elementary, middle, and high school campuses in South District. Data revealed that ELLs are disproportionately represented in special education in elementary and secondary campuses in South District, with potential underrepresentation being overwhelmingly a concern, especially at the elementary level.

Studies utilizing national, regional, and district level data have revealed that ELLs are underrepresented in districts with greater

ELL populations (Artiles & Bal, 2008; Linn, 2006). This study concurs with these findings as South District reported over 66% of its campuses and 94% of its elementary campuses with risk ratios under 0.80. South District has a large ELL population (59.63%) compared to the state (18.8%).

Similarly, other studies (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005; Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, Higareda, 2002) have revealed that ELLs are underrepresented at the elementary level, but overrepresented at the secondary level. Likewise, This study found 94% of the elementary campuses reporting the potential underrepresentation of ELLs receiving special education services and almost 43% of secondary campuses with potential overrepresentation. It could be that disaggregating state data to the campus level unmasked important trends of potential underrepresentation at the school campus level. This would mean that there might be English language learners who require special education services, but are not being identified. This study and others conducted throughout the state of Texas (Contreras, 2006; Linn, 2011; Linn & Hemmer, 2011) underscore the importance of reporting data at national, state, and district-levels because data at one level might not accurately illustrate the representational patterns of ELLs receiving special education services on school campuses in Texas and throughout the United States.

Conclusions

With the findings of the study, several conclusions can be drawn from the data reported for South District. Firstly, South District has a risk ratio of 0.73, indicating potential significant underrepresentation of ELLs in special education programs. This leads to a concern of the number of students who are learning English at the elementary level who may have a disability and are not

being identified for special education services in South District. Meanwhile, the state of Texas reported a relative risk ratio of 0.87 (TEA, 2017), indicating proportional representation. The idea that state data may mask district and campus data was reinforced by the results of this study. The fact that only 14.81% of all campuses in South District reported proportionate representation of ELLs in special education is of concern. It is also in direct contrast to the aggregated data reported at the state level.

Although school districts do not have to report on the how many English language learners are being served in special education, this study documents that data reported on ELLs at all levels, but especially the campus level is meaningful. For example, on a middle school campus, M3, ELLs are more than twice as likely as their non-ELL peers to be identified for special education services. Similarly, on a high school campus, H3, students learning English are one and one-half times as likely to be receiving special education services. Researchers (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005; Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, Higareda, 2002; Contreras, 2006; Linn, 2011) have posited that the increase, and subsequent overrepresentation of ELLs identified for special education services at the secondary level, might be attributed to the lack of native language support provided through bilingual education programs at the elementary school level. For example, in South District, bilingual education programs, of varying models, are provided at the elementary level, but English as a second language programs are provided at the secondary levels. The availability of native language support could contribute to the potential over- and underrepresentation of ELLs in special education. Students learning English at the elementary level may not be identified, especially for academic

disabilities, such as a learning disability because the language support may help mask their learning difficulties and teachers may believe the student just needs more time to learn English. Then, at the secondary level, when the student receives English as a second language support, the student academically falls significantly behind and is identified as a student with a disability. In addition to the amount of language support, additional issues that impact student representation in special education include inequities in the referral process that students undertake to be identified for special education, including teacher bias in referral (Harry & Klingner, 2014) and culturally biased assessment instruments (Skiba, Knesting, & Bush, 2002; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts, 2014).

Limitations of the Study

This study had some limitations. Firstly, although it was within the purpose of this study, data accounted for only one school district in the state of Texas. Additionally, data was only obtained for one school year. Next, when collecting data, a parallel between the data did not exist. The Texas Education Agency reported numbers in their Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) for the academic year 2016-2017 but reported numbers for their Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS) reports for calendar years individually, 2016 and 2017. However, TEA made recent changes in their reports that omitted the information for the district total including ELLs receiving special education services district wide. So, the comparisons were limited to only the 2016 calendar year. Moving forward, this limitation can be addressed by generated one report that includes all data necessary to calculate relative risk ratios, including enrollment, number of ELLs, number of special

education students, and number of special education students enrolled in special education programs. Finally, due to the limited amount of research for ELLs receiving services in special education, it was difficult to compare other studies with this particular study, especially for campus-level.

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for the individual campuses, districts, states, and the nation. Firstly, for the individual campuses, teachers have the responsibility to provide an education for each student that addresses their academic, social, and emotional needs and refer students to special education only when all other interventions have given the student an opportunity to learn and they are not making progress in the general education curriculum. Of a critical nature in this support are the assurance non-biased assessment and referral processes as well as the implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices. Special education is only for those students who have a documented disability and require special education services because of that disability. Placement in special education is not justified by because of the lack of language support for an ELL. Secondly, for each school district, it is the responsibility of the local education agency (LEA) to keep track of potential overrepresentation and underrepresentation of students in special education. If educational needs are not being met for individual campuses, LEAs have the responsibility to take action and oversee each campus with such a concern. Likewise, it is the responsibility of the state education agency (SEA) to see that each school district complies with federal laws. It is the responsibility of the SEA to provide LEAs the necessary services to address any

educational concerns for all students, including ELLs. At a national level, through the Office of Civil Rights, the federal government should strongly consider collecting data on English language learners in a similar way it has collected data for racial and ethnic groups. Collection of data concerning the placement of ELLs at the national, state, district, and campus levels would facilitate research in this area as well as provide bilingual students with appropriate education.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given the fact that students receive their education at an individual campus, there is a need for understanding the representation of ELLs in special education programs at the campus-level. Therefore, several recommendations are made for future research. The most significant of the recommendations is the replication of this study, especially for all campuses in all school districts in the state of Texas, and all states in the nation. Moreover, disaggregated research to study the representational patterns of ELLs in the different categories of disability on campuses would provide a better understanding of how to best provide appropriate education services for all students.

Finally, this study should be replicated with longitudinal data for ELLs receiving special education services at the campus-level. This type of study would help educators, districts, states, and the nation have a greater understanding of disproportionate representation of English language learners receiving special education services and help provide appropriate education, whether that be language support or special education services.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Relative Risk Ratios of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in South District Elementary School Campuses

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
<i>E1</i>	<i>0.44</i>
<i>E2</i>	<i>0.49</i>
<i>E3</i>	<i>0.46</i>
<i>E4</i>	<i>0.55</i>
<i>E5</i>	<i>0.48</i>
<i>E6</i>	<i>0.25</i>
<i>E7</i>	<i>0.44</i>
<i>E8</i>	<i>0.75</i>
<i>E9</i>	<i>0.59</i>
<i>E10</i>	<i>0.34</i>
<i>E11</i>	<i>0.79</i>
<i>E12</i>	<i>0.54</i>
<i>E13</i>	<i>0.77</i>
E14	0.91
E15	2.28
<i>E16</i>	<i>0.31</i>
<i>E17</i>	<i>0.44</i>
E18	1.61
<i>E19A</i>	<i>0.56</i>
<i>E20</i>	<i>0.48</i>

Note. **Boldface** indicates relative risk ratio ≥ 1.20 , overrepresentation. *Italics* represents relative risk ratio ≤ 0.80 , underrepresentation.

Appendix B

Table 2

Relative Risk Ratios of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in South District Secondary School Campuses

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
M1	1.03
M2	1.23
M3	2.07
M4	1.06
<i>H1</i>	<i>0.66</i>
H2	0.94
H3	1.46

Note. **Boldface** indicates relative risk ratio ≥ 1.20 , overrepresentation. *Italics* represents relative risk ratio ≤ 0.80 , underrepresentation.