

Contribution of Research

Navigating Challenges in Multilingual Education: Ensuring Equitable Learning for Diverse Students

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Abstract

Addressing critical issues in multilingual education requires tackling various challenges to ensure effective learning experiences for students who speak multiple languages. These challenges include planning for linguistic diversity, equitable access to resources, teacher training, inclusive pedagogies, family engagement, and sufficient funding. The article focuses on difficulties faced by multilingual students, providing practical strategies to support their academic growth. The study involved 55 multilingual students in Texas, predominantly refugee children speaking 38 languages on campus. The study highlights the importance of recognizing the children's unique needs and implementing effective strategies for improved educational outcomes and successful transitions to higher grades.

Keywords: multilingual students, challenges, practical strategies, equity

Multilingual education, the provision of education in multiple languages, has become increasingly significant in today's diverse and interconnected world. As societies experience demographic shifts and globalization, classrooms are filled with students representing a rich tapestry of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. While multilingualism presents unique opportunities for enriched learning experiences and intercultural understanding, it also brings forth critical issues that demand careful attention and thoughtful solutions. Educators, policymakers, and stakeholders must grapple with a range of challenges to ensure equitable and effective education for multilingual students.

Multilingual students face a unique set of challenges in the academic setting. As they strive to learn and master a new language and culture, students must also learn to adjust to the academic expectations of their new environment. A research project was undertaken to delve into the experiences of 55 fifth-grade multilingual students living in

the Texas Panhandle region, with the aim of identifying the significant challenges they encounter. The study aimed to shed light on critical issues such as the risk of misidentification for special education services solely based on language differences. Additionally, the research sought to provide practical strategies to empower these learners to excel in their multilingual classrooms.

The students in the study were predominantly refugee children who spoke a total of 38 different languages on campus. In the fifth grade, these students may struggle to keep up with their peers in terms of academic achievement, as they are often behind in their language and literacy skills. This can be especially difficult for refugee students, who may have experienced trauma and disruption in their lives. Additionally, they may experience feelings of isolation and lack of belonging due to their language differences.

The research team was composed of four members, including two faculty members at the university and two

research assistants (RAs) who worked closely with the students in various settings, such as mainstream classrooms, small groups, and after-school sessions. Data was collected in the areas of English proficiency, oral reading fluency, and writing skills.

Literature Review

According to UNESCO (2023), multilingual education is described as a valuable repository of culture, history, values, and knowledge, playing a crucial role in transforming education. Cenoz & Gorter (2011) proposed a “holistic approach that takes into account all of the languages in the learner’s repertoire” (p. 339). This approach recognizes both the advantages and challenges of embracing multilingual education. The benefits of multilingual education encompass the enhancement of cognitive skills and improved working memory. Additionally, students gain a deeper understanding of various cultures, fostering an inherent acceptance of cultural diversity. Moreover, multilingual education facilitates the easier acquisition of multiple languages. Nevertheless, multilingual education also presents certain challenges. These include difficulties in engaging in conversations with families due to language barriers. Furthermore, language proficiency issues, such as pronunciation or grammar, can be obstacles for students. The scarcity of qualified teachers proficient in various languages is another hurdle. Additionally, students may encounter challenges concentrating on other subjects amidst their language learning journeys.

Based on the standards for teacher educators set forth by the Association of Teacher Educators, it is crucial for teacher educators to integrate cultural competence in preparing pre-service teachers to effectively connect with diverse learners (Association of Teacher Educators, *Standards for Teacher Educators, Standard 2, 2023*, p. 2). This includes not only understanding the concepts of cultural competence, but also demonstrating how these concepts can be applied in their own teaching and in their students’ learning. By incorporating cultural competence into teacher education programs, pre-service teachers can be better equipped to meet the needs of diverse learners in their classrooms.

In addition, teacher educators should engage in regular and meaningful collaboration with relevant stakeholders, such as universities, schools, families, and communities to

improve teaching, research, and student learning (Association of Teacher Educators, *Standards for Teacher Educators, Standard 6, 2023*, p. 5). This collaborative approach allows for a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the needs of students and how to effectively address those needs in the educational setting. It is important for schools to critically examine their current approaches and strategies for improving student achievement and to address performance gaps among different student groups. This may involve identifying areas of improvement, implementing evidence-based practices, and actively working towards closing performance gaps to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities for success. By adhering to these standards and actively working toward these goals, we can support the academic success and well-being of all students, regardless of their background or identity.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), there were 5.3 million English language learners (ELLs) enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools in the United States during the 2017-2018 school year. This represented 10.5% of all public school students. The Texas Education Agency reported that there were 1,845,845 English language learners (ELLs) enrolled in Texas public schools during the 2019-2020 school year. This accounted for approximately 22.3% of the total student population in the state. The majority of ELLs in Texas were Hispanic (1,619,845 students, or 87.3%), followed by Asian (90,845 students, or 4.9%), African American (43,070 students, or 2.3%) and White (36,863 students, or 2%).

García (2010) suggested that the concept of education in multilingualism should evolve while considering demographic changes and technological advancements in our interconnected world. To achieve this evolution, García proposed two models: the recursive model and the dynamic model. The dynamic multilingual model advocated the development of diverse language practices to effectively interact with the increasingly multilingual societies. Conversely, second- and third-generation Americans who have experienced varying levels of language shift towards English and away from their heritage language should adopt the recursive multilingual model. This approach enables them to draw from their linguistic heritage while adapting to the present linguistic dynamics (García, 2010, p. 25).

The town in the study has a history of welcoming immigrants, with Catholic Family Services of the Panhandle playing a significant role in resettlement efforts. The city has received refugees from Cuba, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Africa, South America, and other areas of Asia. It is crucial to provide refugees with the necessary resources and support to help them integrate and become self-sufficient in their new homes. Building homes and finding jobs can take time and effort but are essential to offer them a helping hand as they strive to achieve the American Dream.

Multilingual learners not only face the challenge of acquiring academic literacy in a new language in school, but also have to navigate two cultures (Sousa, 2011). This can be a daunting task, both socially and academically. Students may struggle to express themselves in a language that is not their first language and may feel pressure from their families to succeed academically despite the language barrier. Sousa (2011) explained that it might take multilingual learners around two years to become proficient in interpersonal communication in English that includes daily conversations with peers, teachers, and others. However, becoming proficient in academic language that involves mastering complex language structures and vocabulary needed to understand and communicate academic concepts and ideas may take at least five to seven years.

Methodology

The primary objective of this study was to explore the difficulties encountered by multilingual students within the classroom and to offer effective strategies that may assist in promoting their academic progress and language development. The study employed a mixed-methods case study design that is a research approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. The study used surveys to gather data from both teachers/administrators and students. The student data was collected through face-to-face interviews conducted at the designated school, while the teacher/administrator data was collected either through paper surveys or electronic computer surveys. Two university research assistants (RAs) observed 55 fifth graders in the mainstream classrooms, small groups, and one-on-one during break times and after school sessions and collected data in the areas of English

proficiency, oral reading fluency, and writing skills over 13 weeks of class periods.

Through the incorporation of both quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods, the study aspired to derive more comprehensive and nuanced findings regarding the obstacles experienced by multilingual students and the approaches that can be employed to achieve success in the academic environment.

Data Collection

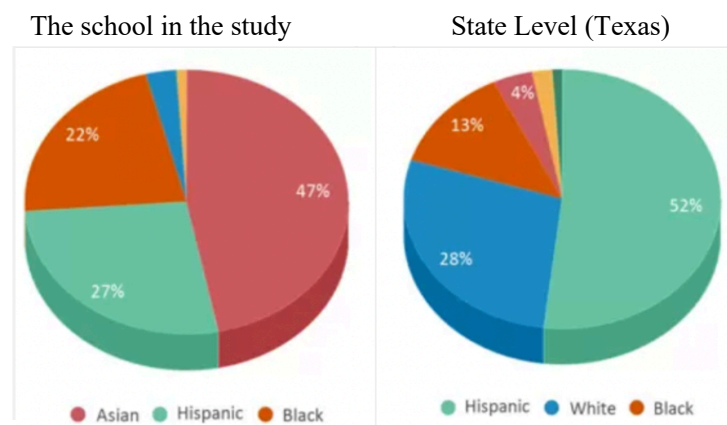
Before conducting the study, the researchers followed a structured process to obtain permission from the school, teachers, and parents of minor students. Initially, the researchers reached out to the campus administrators and then contacted interested teachers at the school. After securing the cooperation of a teacher, the researchers obtained approval from the parents and/or guardians of the fifth-grade students who were interested in the participation of the study. Once consent was obtained from all parties, the participants completed a brief survey either on paper or online via the Qualtrics survey platform. The survey included questions related to the challenges faced by multilingual students in the classroom and the strategies employed to overcome them.

In addition to teacher survey responses, the students were also interviewed and their answers were recorded, transcribed, and entered into the Qualtrics online software system for analysis. Over a period of 13 weeks that encompassed a semester, data was collected resulting in the completion of 55 surveys. The study followed a rigorous and structured approach to data collection, ensuring that all participants provided informed consent and that their data was gathered in an ethical and accurate manner.

Data Analysis

Figure 1 illustrates the demographic makeup of the school that has a diverse student population consisting of 47% Asian students (primarily refugees), 27% Hispanic students, and 22% Black students. By comparison, the state of Texas as a whole has a demographic makeup of 52% Hispanic, 28% White, 13% Black, and 4% Asian, as shown on the right side of the figure.

Figure 1: Student Populations of the School in the Study and Texas



40% of the students in the study spoke Karen (13%), Burmese (15%), Karenni (10%), and Poe Karen (2%), all of which were from Burma. Additionally, 36% of the students spoke Somali. Furthermore, the data indicated that 75% of the students were able to speak two different languages, 25% of students were able to speak three languages, and 2% of students could speak four different languages. It was worth noting that among the surveyed students, 87% were born in the U.S. and 54% reported beginning to learn English as a second language when they started school at the age of 5 or 6. Additionally, 62% of the students reported rarely using their native language at home. The data was categorized into three distinct groups for analysis that encompassed oral language (English) proficiency, oral reading and retelling fluency, and an assessment of writing skills.

1. Oral language (English) proficiency

The students' English proficiency was assessed through oral interviews conducted by the research assistants (RAs) and their performance during reading aloud exercises. The oral fluency was evaluated based on accuracy, reading rate, and prosody (reading with expression). To ensure accuracy and reliability, each session was audio recorded and cross-checked by both the RAs and the faculty researchers. To determine the students' proficiency levels, the researchers referred to the ELPS proficiency level descriptors as presented in Figure 2, following the framework by Seidlitz (2008).

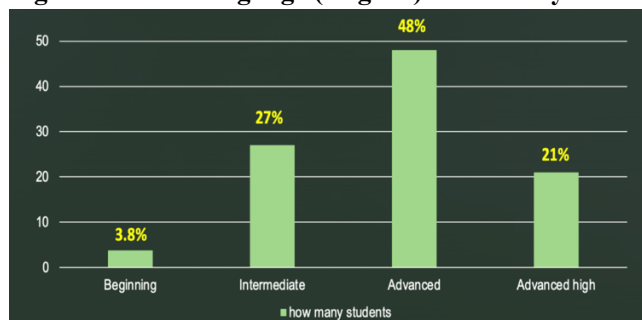
Figure 2: ELPS Proficiency Level Descriptors

	Proficiency Level Descriptors
Beginning Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> using single words and short phrases with practiced material; tends to give up on attempts. using limited bank of key vocabulary, with recently practiced familiar material. with frequent errors that hinder communication with pronunciation that inhibits communication
Intermediate Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> with simple messages and hesitation to think about meaning using basic vocabulary with simple sentence structures and present tense with errors that inhibit unfamiliar communication with pronunciation generally understood by those familiar with English language learners
Advanced Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in conversations with some pauses to restate, repeat, and clarify. using content-based and abstract terms on familiar topics with past, present, and future using complex sentences and grammar with some errors with pronunciation usually understood by most
Advanced high Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in extended discussions with few pauses using abstract content-based vocabulary except low frequency terms; using idioms with grammar nearly comparable to native speaker with few errors blocking communication occasional mispronunciation

Figure 3 displays the distribution of students across different levels of oral language proficiency, including beginning, intermediate, advanced, and advanced high. It is

reasonable to consider that the multilingual students involved in the study may have achieved English fluency due to being born in the U.S. and started to learn English as a second or third language from an early age when they began schooling. However, it is crucial to emphasize that fluency in a language does not automatically guarantee proficiency in academic or technical aspects of the language.

Figure 3: Oral Language (English) Proficiency Level



2. Oral reading and retelling fluency

During the study, the researchers evaluated the students' oral reading fluency by having them read selected informational texts aloud and testing their comprehension by asking questions about the material. Two research assistants recorded the students' readings and evaluated their proficiency in spoken English and their reading fluency. The ELPS Proficiency Level Descriptors were also employed to classify students into one of four categories: beginning, intermediate, advanced, and advanced high. Several observational comments were made:

- **Beginning level:** The student read quietly, almost in a whisper. While the student was able to read the text, their tone, prosody, and fluency were not at the expected level for a fifth grader. Additionally, there were some mispronunciations of common words.
- **Intermediate level:** The student read in a monotone voice and did not use expression while reading. They did not exhibit confidence in their reading and were unaware of some spelling rules. Guessing was used more frequently than decoding.
- **Advanced level:** The student had excellent tone and inflection, ensuring that the sentence punctuation was conveyed accurately. With sufficient effort, they were able to decode words.

The results of the oral reading analysis demonstrated that 9% of students were classified as beginning level, 50%

as intermediate level, and 41% as advanced level. Using Levine's (1999) text, "*If you lived with the Iroquois*", the questions that were posed to students were as follows:

1. Did you find the text easy or difficult to understand?
2. Did you visualize anything as you were reading?
3. What facts/details that you read stood out to you?
4. What do you think is the author's purpose for writing this text?
5. How were the Iroquois people, especially the chiefs, judged and chosen?

Roop's (1998) text "*If you lived with the Cherokee*" included the following five questions:

1. What were the two chiefs?
2. When was the white chief in charge?
3. What role did women play in war?
4. Name two jobs that girls did.
5. How did Cherokee parents discipline their children?

Half of the students answered two questions correctly, while 18% of students answered all five questions correctly. However, 4.5% of students did not provide correct answers to any of the questions, and 13.6% of students missed one question.

3. Writing skills analysis

During the 13-week study period, writing samples were collected to monitor the English writing skills development of the students. The writing rubric from the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2022) was employed to analyze students' writing skills in the study. To receive a full credit, the rubric outlined five crucial criteria: 1) Articulating central ideas clearly, 2) Exhibiting well-structured writing, 3) Offering comprehensive information, 4) Employing deliberate word choices, and 5) Using proper spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure. The study employed genuine STAAR questions for realistic practice and evaluated samples according to the writing rubric recommended by the TEA. The instruction provided was as follows:

Read the poem "One Saturday." Based on the details in the poem, write a response to the following: Explain how the speaker's feelings about the grandparents change as they spend time together. Write a well-organized essay that uses specific evidence from the poem to support your response.

Remember to –

- *clearly state your central ideas*
- *organize your writing*
- *develop your ideas in detail*
- *use evidence from the selection in your response*
- *use correct spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and grammar*

Manage your time carefully so that you can –

- *review the selection*
- *plan your response*
- *write your response*
- *revise and edit your response*

Write your response in the box provided.

One Saturday

My grandparents are both really great,
But I've never stayed with them alone.
And so I'm nervous as I leave the car,
Keeping my voice a steady, even tone.

My parents told me to be good,
And I vowed to do my best:
Be good, help out, obey the rules,
And try not to get stressed.

Grandma's kiss brushed my cheek
Like the wings of a butterfly
As Mom and Dad drove away,
Waving their goodbye.

"We're going to have some fun, you know,"
My winking Grandpa said
As his giant bear-paw hand
Ruffled the hair upon my head.

A woodland hike exposed a lake
Ringed with massive trees;
The deep blue water shimmered with
The whisper of a breeze.

Back at home, Gram drafted me
To help her make our dinner,
Which, compared to mac and cheese,
Would be the proven winner.

When dark of night draped the sky,

The three of us lay down
Outside on blankets spread upon
The green grass-cushioned ground.

"Black velvet studded with bright jewels,"
Grandma uttered with a sigh.
"That's the picture that I see
When gazing at night's sky."

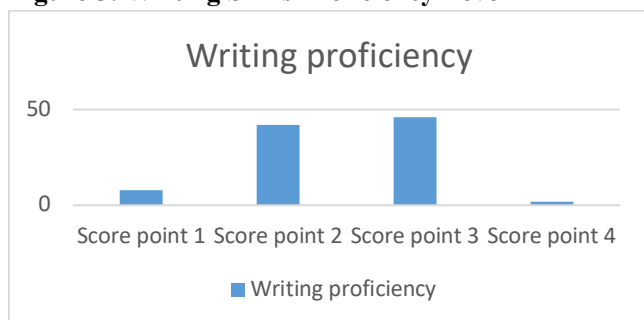
The gems that sparkle in MY life,
I can touch as well as see;
They're lying on their back right now
On either side of me.

The sample in Figure 4 illustrates score point 2 within the assessment category. The essay displays a foundational level of writing performance in terms of organization and progression, development of ideas, and use of language and conventions. The essay demonstrates an evident organizing structure, although it may not always be suitable for the purpose or specific requirements of the prompt. Most ideas generally relate to the specified topic in the prompt, but the writer's central idea is weak or somewhat unclear. The absence of an effective central idea, or the inclusion of irrelevant information by the writer, hampers the focus and coherence of the essay. The progression of ideas by the writer is not consistently logical and controlled. Occasionally, repetition or wordiness causes minor disruptions in the essay's flow. In other instances, transitions and connections between sentences are perfunctory or weak, lacking the necessary support for the essay's flow or to demonstrate relationships among ideas. The development of ideas is minimal, reflecting little or no thoughtfulness in the essay. The writer approaches the essay with a limited understanding of the expository writing task. The choice of words by the writer may be generic or imprecise, showing only a basic awareness of the expository purpose without contributing significantly to the quality and clarity of the essay. Sentences are awkward or only moderately controlled, thereby weakening the effectiveness of the essay.

Figure 4: Writing Sample for Score Point 2

At first he was very nervous
 it says "I'm nervous as I leave
 the car" so it clearly says
 that he is nervous and
 also acted like he was not
 scared because "I wanted to
 do my best" so it is not to
 act he is not scared
 and also "keeping my
 voice a secret, even though"

In the study, 8% of students achieved a score point 1, indicating very limited writing performance, while 42% of students attained a score point 2, indicating basic writing performance. Additionally, 46% of students demonstrated a score point 3, signifying satisfactory writing performance, while a mere 4% of them reached a score point 4, representing accomplished writing performance.

Figure 5: Writing Skills Proficiency Level

Discussion

Numerous research studies have investigated the effectiveness of language programs that incorporate learners' native languages. Some studies argue in favor of the transitional program, advocating that students should be allowed to use their home languages only until they become proficient in English. In contrast to traditional approaches, Cenoz & Gorter (2011) focus on a variety of theoretical and empirical approaches to the study of multilingualism in schools by proposing a more holistic approach in considering all of the learners' acquired languages. Yet, others support the ESL (English as a Second Language) programs that focus solely on facilitating English language learning without using

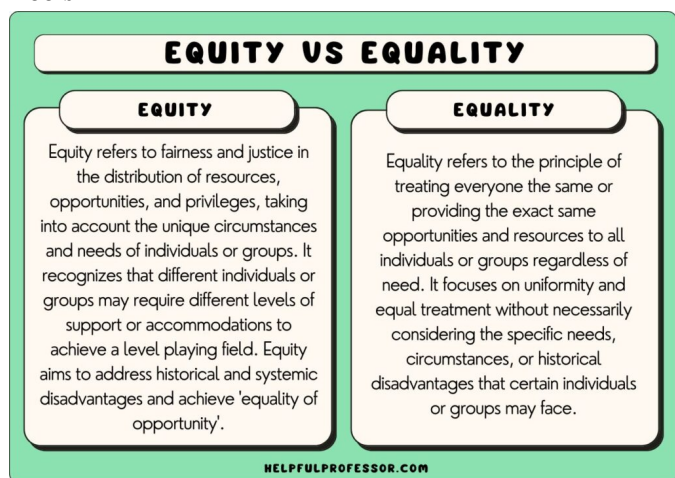
students' native languages (García, 2010). Nevertheless, when the school became aware that their students spoke as many as 38 different languages, it became impractical to implement either of these programs. Instead, the school had to explore alternative approaches to address the linguistic diversity among its student population.

One option could be to adopt a flexible and inclusive language education model that recognizes and values the various languages spoken by the students. This approach may involve integrating multilingual practices into the curriculum and creating a supportive environment that encourages language learning and cultural exchange. Ultimately, embracing linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a challenge may lead to a more inclusive and enriched learning environment. The school can celebrate the cultural backgrounds of its students, promoting a sense of belonging and encouraging a positive attitude towards language learning. Through such efforts, the school can create a thriving educational community where all students have the opportunity to succeed and flourish.

The study advocates for prioritizing equity over equality, wherein equality focuses on providing the same level of support to everyone, while equity emphasizes tailoring support to meet the unique needs of each individual. In other words, equality entails providing the same resources and opportunities to every individual or group and equity recognizes that each person has unique circumstances and requires specific resources and opportunities to achieve an equal outcome (Drew, 2023).

Figure 6 illustrates the comparative description of equality vs. equity in providing supports to individuals with a variety of needs and challenges. According to Drew's (2023) image, equity recognizes that different individual students or groups of students may require differential levels of accommodations in order to attain 'equality of opportunity' whereas equality focuses on equal treatment without consideration of specific needs and circumstances or disadvantages of individuals or groups (See <https://helpfulprofessor.com/equity-vs-equality-examples/>). To achieve both equity and equality for the multilingual learner, strategies or learning tools based upon individual and group needs rather than uniformity and equitable treatment of opportunities and resources must be provided to students.

Figure 6: Equity vs. Equality in Strategies or Learning Tools



(Source: Drew, 2023)

In order to further promote equity in the multilingual classroom, tiered lesson planning is suggested by addressing linguistic diversity in the lesson. Tiered lesson planning is the educational practice of grouping students by skill and teaching a modified lesson to fit each group's skill level (Carroll, 2022). Each group of students receives tasks and assignments that fit their level of readiness. Tiered instruction can avoid students feeling as though the work is so easy that it is boring or so difficult that it is disheartening. Lessons can be tiered in various ways, such as considering learning style, desired outcome, or levels of proficiency.

In the multilingual classroom, tiered instruction aims to provide equitable access to high-quality educational resources in both native languages and English. The number of tiers and challenge levels may be tailored to suit the language proficiency of the student group. For instance, in a class, three tiers of instruction may be implemented, catering to students requiring standard instruction, moderately challenging instruction, and advanced instruction (Carroll, 2022). The specific tiers may involve tasks like researching the lesson's topic and listing major points (Tier One), creating a chart to summarize findings (Tier Two), or conducting more advanced tasks, such as summarizing theories and developing arguments to support specific theories (Tier Three). To successfully implement this approach, schools must provide teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge through professional development.

To effectively support multilingual students, teachers may consider incorporating technology-assisted methods. Technology plays a crucial role in language learning and communication improvement, especially for students with diverse linguistic backgrounds. Continental Press (2023) outlined several ways in which technology can be beneficial for assisting multilingual students. These methods include using exceptional two-way voice translation tools like Google Translate and TalkingPoints, interactive digital bulletin boards such as Padlet, and recording tools like Voice Recorder and Vocaroo. Additionally, quiz websites like Quizlet, Quizizz, and Kahoot, among others, can also serve as valuable resources for multilingual learners. By thoughtfully integrating technology into the learning process, teachers may create a supportive and inclusive environment for their multilingual students, helping them thrive academically and personally.

Additionally, involving parents and community members as educational partners can be a powerful means of supporting multilingual students. When language barriers exist between teachers and parents, enlisting community members who are bilingual or multilingual can help bridge the communication gaps. Effective communication fosters understanding, trust, and collaboration. Through active engagement with parents and community members, schools can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for multilingual students and their families. Furthermore, establishing partnerships with language specialists, educators, and stakeholders will help to develop a tailored language education program that addresses the specific needs and backgrounds of its diverse student population.

One of the motivating factors for this research study was the researchers' initial concern about the potential misidentification of multilingual learners for special education services due to language barriers rather than because of learning disabilities. Research findings indicated this concern may not be valid or statistically significant, primarily because 87% of the students were born in the U.S. and began learning English as a second or third language at the earlier ages. With respect to these findings, the researchers took extraordinary care and exercised great caution to thoroughly verify whether any of the multilingual students were erroneously over-identified for special education referrals, not due to learning disabilities, but possibly because of language differences. Survey data

corroborated the research study's findings for multilingual learners and the school's confidence that their fifth graders had been correctly identified for special education services and multilingual students were receiving adequate instructional support to ensure their academic success. This corroboration provided clear evidence that there was in fact no over-representation of Special Education designations in the participants' group, regardless of place of birth or home language(s).

Teachers can serve as models of multiliteracy by learning about and showing respect for their students' languages and cultures (Au, 2006). Even if they are only fluent in one language, teachers may still take steps to learn about and appreciate other languages and cultures. The

teacher may develop a chart listing the phrases, beginning with standard English and including all of the languages spoken by the students and the teacher's own heritage language. Creating a chart can be a great way to promote multiliteracy and celebrate linguistic diversity in the classroom. This chart can serve as a visual reminder of the many languages and cultures represented in the classroom and may also help students feel valued and respected for their linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Acknowledgement

This study was sponsored by Richard and Mary West Traylor Research Grant in the Center for Learning Disabilities at West Texas A&M University.

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