

Decreasing Over-Referral of ELLs to Special Education

By Stephanie Rawleigh

August 14, 2021

A capstone project submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of
The College at Brockport, State University of New York in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for MS. Ed. in TESOL

To Dylan, both a teacher and a student, I wish you the best as you navigate this complex world of education, and I thank you for the inspiration to continue my journey through it.

DECREASING OVER-REFERRAL OF ELLS TO SPECIAL EDUCATION 3

Table of Contents

Abstract..... 4

Chapter 1: Introduction 5

Chapter 2: Literature Review.....10

Chapter 3: Description of the Product & Tools.....23

Chapter 4: Conclusion..... 28

References.....31

Appendices35

Appendix A: Graphic Organizer Session 1.....35

Appendix B: Graphic Organizer Session 236

Appendix C: Professional Development Slides37

Abstract

This capstone aims to solve the problem of disproportionate referral of ELLs to special education. To attain this goal, I first conduct a literature review on the topic. The research shows a disproportional referral of ELLs to special education because non-ESOL educators do not have the resources and are not collaborating to meet the diverse needs of struggling ELLs. MTSS are not being used in ways that support ELLs. To address this problem, a professional development for World of Inquiry School is presented with tools to support educators in mitigating this problem. The way my research showed to solve this problem is to provide educators with specific resources for ELLs to use within a multi tiered system of support (MTSS) and to give educators opportunity to practice collaborating during the professional development. This capstone's goal is to decrease the over-referral of struggling ELLs special education.

Keywords: English Language Learners (ELLs), disproportionate referral, special education, Multi Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), intervention, collaboration, Professional Development (PD)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Personal Experience

I have worked in a special education setting for four years, three of those being in an inclusive co-taught class and one being self-contained. My role is to provide special education services, modifications, and accommodations to students with disabilities, referenced in this text as a student with a disability, or a student with special education services. In addition, there are always students in my class who are categorized as English Language Learners (ELLs), who work mainly in the classroom with my co-teacher and me but also receive services from an English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher.

It is not surprising with the rising numbers of ELLs in schools, that my inclusive class contains a growing number of ELLs (Miranda et al., 2019). In fact, each year there has been at least one student who is both a student with a disability and an ELL. This has meant a need for collaboration between myself, my general education co-teacher, and the ESOL teacher who pulls ELLs in my class out for small group work once a day. I have had to learn a lot about language acquisition as I have been working with ELLs and the ESOL teacher in my building. We created lessons together and communicated with families together. We even collaborate on writing IEPs for those students who intersected with ESOL and special education. It helped that the ESOL teacher I work with has been a special education teacher as well. It also helped that I started taking ESOL graduate classes because I had had very minimal training on working with ELLs in undergrad and in professional development. It is concerning to me that not all special educators have ESOL teachers that advocate and collaborate with them like I do. I have learned from my observations in my school building and my studies that ESOL teachers in inclusive settings (as

opposed to bilingual or dual language programs) are often isolated and work for limited amounts of time with students in their classrooms and with the general or special education teachers.

Not all general educators and special educators have knowledge about teaching linguistically diverse students. In my experience, many special educators and general educators have little to no resources to work with ELLs, despite carrying a large part of the responsibilities for these students. That is not to say that when a student intersects in special education and language learning that one educator has more responsibility than the other. ESOL teachers and other educators both have skills and expertise that the ELL with a disability needs and if they are not collaborating, the students will not have all their needs met.

Indeed, this lack of collaboration and experience will not set ELLs up for success. Non-ESOL teachers do not know how to interpret or address ELLs' linguistic needs. I have seen on two occasions in my short career, general educators refer ELLs who are struggling academically to special education to get them services to help them and then disbelieve when the Committee on Special Education (CSE) does not agree that the student has a disability. There is a lack of understanding of how language acquisition, especially in later stages, might impact a student's content learning (Becker & Debris, 2019). It makes sense that educators are trying to get struggling ELLs support, but they are not thinking about how a disability label might negatively impact these students. Personally, I am conflicted because I have been a teacher who referred an ELL to special education because I wanted to see them have more services and help in school, but very little changed except the addition of a label. Then, it strikes me as unfair that these students are missing out on opportunities that they might have been given if they were not students with disabilities and were just given better language learning support in the classroom. I

am unsure of the best way to direct students and families who find themselves to be academically struggling ELLs.

Problem Statement

ELLs are over-referred into special education because general education teachers, special educators, and service providers are not trained in the cross-over of language acquisition and disability and do not know how to address the needs of ELLs in the classroom who are struggling (Becker & Deris, 2019). This shows in the disproportional classification of ELLs, in the United States, about 14% of students are classified with a disability (National Journal of Educational Statistics, 2021). In contrast, in New York, 22.1% of ELLs are classified as having a disability (New York State Department of Education, 2014). Special education labels can be harmful to students' self-esteem and opportunities (Mueller, 2019). Moreover, teacher education programs inconsistently address intersectionality and only minimally address diversity outside of one's specialization, for example, special educators learn a lot about ableism and ESOL teachers learn a lot about culturally and linguistically diverse students (Jozwik et al., 2018). ESOL teachers need to be able to share their expertise with their peers that also work with ELL students (Morgan et al., 2018).

Significance

The problem of teachers wanting to classify too many ELLs as having disabilities has significance on many levels. Individually, a special education label whether justified or in error can bring with it negative stigmas from self and others (Arishi et al., 2017). Additionally, students with disabilities are sometimes given less access to high-level learning opportunities during school which can lead to fewer work and home opportunities (Mueller, 2019). This can be

incredibly detrimental to an ELL's future if they are classified with a disability erroneously, regardless of whether the support in school was beneficial at that time (Stein, 2011).

The greater problem of over-referral is a fault of the local, state, and sometimes federal legislation that determines how to classify students with disabilities. Tests that help classify students for special education are not always accurate when evaluating ELLs who may simultaneously be illiterate in their home language and be learning literacy in English making pure translation for reading and writing tests irrelevant. Undoubtedly, cultural bias in standardized testing is also a concern when testing culturally and linguistically diverse students from standardized testing to progress monitoring (Goh et al., 2017). Legislation needs to have clear guidelines to assess ELLs so that the factor of language is being addressed. On a larger level, colleges, and other teacher education programs are partially responsible for this problem. However, only training and preparing pre-service teachers for the demographic shifts in our schools will not solve a problem that is already present in schools. Fundamentally, it is important to note that schools need to train teachers that are already in service, in interventions that can be used to address the needs in their classrooms. Addressing a gap in expertise can be done through professional development.

Purpose

To solve the problem of over-referral and lack of support for students with disabilities that are also ELLs, schools should provide stakeholders in ELL education including general educators, special educators, and ESOL teachers, an overview of the characteristics of ELLs and how to differentiate and implement interventions. Educators should then collaborate to optimize best practices in teaching and assessing ELLs across settings. Indeed, this will create teams of teachers that share expertise and responsibility for all their students. Thus, the purpose of this

capstone will be to help general education teachers and special educators mitigate referring students for special education when it is not necessary and there is not sufficient evidence of a disability. In a professional development (PD), therefore, I will invite educators to apply the collaborative experience with ESOL teachers, just as my ESOL teacher and I collaborate so that ELLs and other students are receiving a high-quality education. That is, the PD aims to increase the collaboration of ESOL teachers with other educators to produce more consistent use of best practices in the classroom (Morgan et al., 2018).

Summary

This paper will address mitigating the disproportional referral of ELLs as having disabilities using teacher education and collaboration. Hopefully providing educators with the tools to meet some intersectional needs. In Chapter 2, I will review research on the referral and classification of ELLs to special education, teacher education and preparations to work with ELLs, collaboration among specialists, and best practices and interventions when working with ELLs. In Chapter 3, I will present the PD that I made that can help solve this problem by providing tools to work with ELLs who are struggling and practice skills of collaboration. In Chapter 4, I will conclude with a summary of the capstone and the implications of the capstone as well as suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This Chapter reviews and analyzes the current research on the problem of English language learners' being disproportionately referred to special education. In this Chapter I will discuss the disproportionate referral and classification of ELLs in special education. Then, I will address contributors to the problem including the effectiveness of teacher training, the effectiveness of a multi tiered system of supports (MTSS) with ELLs, and collaboration in ELL and Special Education. These aspects of education are factors that contribute to ELLs to be over-referred to special education. Within these contributors I will discuss practical solutions. The solutions presented are linked with analysis of the contributors of the problem, in other words, discussing how education can be more effective in teacher training, more effective in MTSS, and increase collaboration among specialists.

I theorize that English Language Learners are disproportionately referred to special education because their needs are not being addressed in the classroom. There are schools where ELLs are in inclusive classrooms with monolingual peers, as opposed to dual language or bilingual programs where ELLs are taught partially in their native language. In these classrooms, like mine, students are being taught by a general educator who is also teaching other monolingual students. ESOL teachers are still interacting with these students during the day, either in the classroom or in pull-out sessions or small groups, but the students are regularly the responsibility of a non-ESOL educator. These educators may or may not have strategies and resources at their disposal that can be used to adequately meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students, I will address the information we know on that topic later on. However, I am postulating that these educators are lacking in strategies and resources to work with these students. My graduate coursework has shown that ELLs have different assets and

Commented [AM(1): You do not want to theorize. You want to discuss at least one theory that can explain why ELLs may be referred to special education and/or how we can avoid this problem. Many students working on this problem have used Krashen's input hypothesis/affective filter to understand the problem. Maybe you want to use Swain's output hypothesis. Or both Krashen's input and Swain's output. I

So, in 2-3 paragraphs, define a theory (or 2) and discuss how they can help us understand the problem. Remember: "CITE"--- this section has no citation.

needs and without proper support and accommodations, they will struggle in language and content. They need frequent and diverse opportunities to use language, this is called the Output Theory (Swain, 2005). When students do not have enough opportunities to produce language while they are learning, they will struggle to learn the language. When a student struggles in the classroom, teachers want to get them help so they refer them to either MTSS or to special education.

If MTSS is also not equipped to address culturally and linguistically diverse students, on account of it being led by additional general and special educators or service providers that are not ESOL staff, then students' needs might still go unmet (Weddle et al., 2016). In most systems leading to a special education referral. Struggling ELLs are over-referred to special education because non-ESOL educators are not able to meet their needs in the classroom. There are many parts of this theory that need to be address such as whether or not ELLs are disproportionately referred to special education and if that is the case, is it because of the training of non-ESOL educators, failures of MTSS and lack of collaboration among ESOL and non-ESOL educators and these things need to be addressed as part of the solution.

Disproportional Representation of ELLs in Special Education Classification

Disproportionate representation in special education should be discussed when assessing any specific demographic because it shows some insight into how well students' needs are being met. Disproportionality means that a specific group of individuals is either underrepresented or overrepresented in comparison to the larger averages (Morgan, et al 2018). For example, there is no disproportionality if ELLs are represented in similar percentages to their monolingual counterparts in special education, but there is disproportionality if they are represented in special education significantly more or less regularly. As referenced in Chapter 1, both over and under

identification are unfair to ELLs and can be harmful. Overrepresentation can cause detrimental effects of an erroneous label. And underrepresentation can mean students can deprive ELLs of the needed support that special education can provide. Thus, Educators need to be aware of these dangers of misrepresentation to try and prevent them.

National Legislation through IDEA is clear that there need to be checks in place so that minority students are not over identified in the US (Morgan et al., 2017). Although it is hard to narrow down disproportional representation to only the factor of language acquisition because of other factors such as previous home language education, socioeconomic status, and parent education (Morgan et al., 2018; Weddle et al., 2016). Nevertheless, it is important to try to quantify if ELLs are being disproportionately classified. With that in mind, we can review, now, the literature of the representation of ELLs in special education.

ELLs are underidentified in special education, meaning they are not classified as having disabilities as often as their monolingual peers. Morgan et al. (2017) completed a study involving the analysis of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results throughout the country in reading and math from 2009 and 2013. Morgan et al. (2017) collected 183,570 students' results from the 4th grade level. At 8th grade, they collected 165,540; and at 12th grade they collected 48,560. The NAEP collects demographic data which was available to the researchers, including IEP status, ELL status, and self-reported race and ethnicity. The sample is a broad representation of races, ethnicities, ELLs and non-ELLs for comparison. This study found that ELLs were not listed as over-represented, which I originally anticipated (Morgan et al., 2017). To my surprise, using the data from the NAEP, ELLs were found to be under-represented in special education compared to their English-speaking peers (Morgan et al., 2017). However, if ELLs were classified they were more likely than their monolingual peers to be

classified as having a Speech/Language Impairment or a Learning Disability and significantly less likely to be classified as having Autism Spectrum Disorder than monolingual peers (Morgan et al., 2017). This was determined after removing factors other than language, such as socio-economic status, race and gender, which addresses the difficulty listed above of narrowing down the contributing factor to identification of ELLs. Morgan et al. (2018) confirm these findings in an in-depth systematic critique of 22 studies on disproportional representation in special education. The purpose of this study was to determine the presence of systematic racial or linguistic bias in classification. Indeed, Morgan et al. (2018) found that ELLs have fluctuated in their representation in special education in the last decades but are often under-represented when compared to similar mono-lingual peers. An exception to this was Hispanic language learners are overrepresented in special education, where non-Hispanic ELLs are under-represented (Morgan, et al. 2018). This shows the wide range of students within the ELL demographic and how their needs are so varied. Again, making sure that we are interpreting the correct correlations is key here, Morgan et al. (2018) was very careful to sift the information to isolate factors like language and this is where the flip from the common assumption of over-identified ELLs to the idea that ELLs are under-identified. Morgan et al. (2018) state:

As studies increasingly control for potential confounds, the disproportionality estimates have sometimes reversed directionality from over- to underidentification based on race, ethnicity, and language use (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010; Morgan et al., 2015).

Finding that children who are Hispanic, Asian, Native American, or ELL or language minorities are not disproportionately overrepresented in special education based on their race, ethnicity, or language use—and instead may be less likely to be identified than otherwise similar White, English-speaking children. (p. 264)

Again, the main findings are that ELLs are underrepresented in special education.

Disproportional Representation of ELLs in Special Education Referral

ELLs are under-classified, but they are over-referred to special education when they are struggling. Morgan et al. (2017) states, “Schools were more likely to identify those children who were academically struggling as disabled” (p. 309). Although Ortiz et al.’s (2011) study is classic, researchers contribute to the research on the topic with a study on a large urban district of 77,000 students including 13,000 ELLs. In this study, Ortiz et al. (2011) found that reading difficulties were the main reason for elementary referral of ELLs to special education and ELLs are twice as likely to be reading below grade level than their monolingual peers. In Becker and Debris’s (2019) survey study of thirty-eight teachers’ ability to identify and refer students who were linguistically diverse to special education, a theme from the survey was that this was something educators were not confident in. In addition, Jozwick et al. (2020) surveyed 125 educators who answered questions that indicated a lack of understanding how their pedagogy should be altered when working with ELLs. Unfortunately, ELLs whose language needs are not met will be identified as struggling. Weddle et al. (2016), conducted a study on the implementation of a specific MTSS intervention in a district after discovering the correlation between language struggles and referral to special education in elementary school. Only 7% of ELLs are reading at or above grade level and this makes them more likely to be referred to special education (Weddle et al., 2016). Ruiz (2020) confirms in their background research of a rural district’s MTSS program, when identifying a need for a system of supports for struggling ELLs in the district; that education candidates are often not prepared to monitor and identify needs in students who are linguistically diverse. These educators are responsible for identifying disabilities for referral in struggling students they are not trained to teach. Additionally, there is

about a 50% chance of not being classified into special education if referred, which is how ELLs can be both under-identified and over-referred to special education (Becker & Debris, 2019). Meaning teachers are disproportionately over referring ELL to special education but other procedures are not allowing classification (Morgan et al., 2018). Many ELLs referred to special education do not have disabilities.

Larger statistics in states and districts in the US are showing disproportionate referral of ELLs in special education. On a smaller scale, this data on the over referral of ELLs can be used to guide educator reform. If it is known that more ELLs are referred to special education than are proportional to their demographic, then it can be extrapolated that educators are struggling to identify and assist ELLs and are instead referring them to special education (Morgan et al., 2018). There need to be intensive plans to provide support to struggling ELLs and resources to their teachers.

Teacher Training

Teachers are not prepared to meet the needs of the growing number of ELLs in their classrooms. (Miranda et al., 2019). The ELL population is about 9.5% of the population of students in the US and 10% of ELLs are also students with disabilities (Jozwik et al., 2020). Many educators will work with ELLs with diverse needs in their careers, and all ELLs have different learning needs whether they have a disability, are struggling, or are doing well academically. ESOL, bilingual, and dual language teachers are not the only educators who work with and support ELLs, but also general educators, special educators and service providers work with ELLs and need to be confident in meeting their needs. It is an ethical and professional requirement that educators and schools should be adjusting their practices to address this shift in demographics.

Teachers do not know how to respond to ELLs because of inadequate teacher training. Miranda et al. (2019) addressed the question of if the needs of ELLs are being addressed in teacher training programs. They gathered 20,000 surveys from special education teacher candidates to assess what they knew about ELLs with disabilities and their needs. Results showed that teacher candidates had confidence in their ability to meet the needs of ELLs with disabilities, but they also did not have the knowledge or resources to meet those needs in reality (Miranda et al., 2019). It was hard for many special education teachers to decipher a learning problem from language acquisition, and many did not think it was necessary to learn about language acquisition because it was not a disability (Miranda et al., 2019). There was overall neglect in the teacher education program of the intersectionality of learners with disabilities who were also learning English. Likewise, Jozwik et al. (2020) surveyed 840 educators across general and special education who worked with ELLs and yet 83% of these educators did not have pre-service credentials in working with ELLs. Jozwik et al. (2020) found that all teachers who knew another language and had gone through the language acquisition process were able to understand the needs of ELLs more. Those educators that worked with ELLs with disabilities found that compartmentalizing services made it difficult to collaborate and therefore meant some language needs were overlooked (Jozwik et al., 2020). More et al. (2016) even found, in their interpretation of the most popular practices and resources used in teacher education programs, that most teacher education programs include language diversity training as an afterthought rather than a specific course requirement. In essence, ELLs are met with classroom teachers who do not have any background working with them (More et al., 2016). The process of identifying students with disabilities when appropriate and not referring unnecessarily, but still being able to educate them well is essential knowledge that our teachers do not have. ELLs with disabilities

have more complex needs that require language acquisition knowledge from all members of the educator teams who work with them. If teacher training is not addressed, then there needs to be increased collaboration between other educators and ESOL specialists who will have missing pieces of the student's background and needs.

Best practices for ELLs in Special Education

Once an ELL is classified as having disabilities, collaboration is important to that ELLs complex needs being met. When a student is properly identified in special education, as well as when ELLs are referred to special education, it is important that these students are met with a collaborative CSE (Committee of Special Education) team that is ready to create an individualized program for them (More et al., 2016). Special educators and other service providers are witnessing the increase of ELLs in their programs due to the 29% increase of ELLs in schools since 2016 (Szymanski & Lynch, 2020).

Collaboration is lacking among CSEs working on ELLs' IEPs. Tran et al. (2018) presented a paper that defines culturally and linguistically responsive practices and provides examples and recommendations for educator resources. Tran et al. (2018) suggests that due to the lack of material in many schools to help teach culturally and linguistically diverse students. Schools should refrain from buying any more materials that can not be used dually in work with ELLs. This way, special educators and general educators do not need to change their curriculum for general education students but rather continue to use research-based practices that will be effective with ELLs as well. Hoover et al. (2018) critiqued 30 IEPs and similarly suggested that teachers imbed culturally responsive teaching into their normal practices at the classroom level by collaborating with ESOL teachers to determine what to teach and how to teach it in a way to best meet the needs of their ELL students.

This change toward meeting these needs starts with the IEP for students with disabilities. The Individualized Education plan should be just that, individualized. It should contain language needs and strengths when the student is an ELL and the accommodations and practices that need to be implemented by all educators to meet their needs should be responsive to not only their disability, but also their language. Hoover et al.'s (2018) inventory of 30 IEPs from multiple districts showed a lack of appropriate language support presented in the IEP, no mention of native language supports, and very little implied collaboration. There is no legislation mandating how an IEP must be created, only what it must contain, but Hoover et al. (2018) suggests that including collaborative language, necessity for native language supports, accommodations that are specific to vocabulary and language, as well as specific language and cultural strengths and assets is the only way to ensure linguistically relevant IEPs. Tran et al. (2018) states, "An IEP is considered CLR [culturally and linguistically responsive] when it values and incorporates diverse learner qualities and strengths into the development and implementation of needed services" (p. 230). Jozwik et al. (2018) suggests this as well, proposing key elements that are not required in an IEP for ELLs but are essential, including the inclusion of linguistic assets, goals for language development, and language accommodations. Jozwik et al. (2018) present case studies to show the effectiveness of IEPs written with all collaborators input including information from the family, student, and educators. All of these team members should collaborate to create a plan in response to the specific student because there are some collaborators who are experts in certain aspects of the student's education.

The lack of teacher training in this intersection of ELLs with disabilities before entering the profession means that districts and schools must complete this work as in-service through professional development to foster the collaboration of the different specialists working with a

student (Daniel & Pray, 2017). General collaboration will help create IEPs that address a more representative view of the needs of the child and how those needs interact (Tran et al., 2018). For example, a student who has been classified as having a learning disability, gets counseling services, and is an ELL should have a team where the ESOL teacher works with the social worker and special educator, and possibly general educator to address the student's language needs in all of those settings and with their general education peers. Perhaps the ESOL teacher provides common vocabulary being learned, family history, visuals to assist in social and academic problem solving, language and cultural assets, and in turn, the other educators also contribute so that the student is being addressed as an individual with unique needs. All of these collaborators have a stake in the success of the student and are working to meet their needs. In fact, that collaboration should certainly be in place even before a student is referred to special education.

Best Practices for ELLs in General Education

There are strategies that can help general educators to address the needs of ELLs before referring them to special education. These strategies include, school wide use of an Multi Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), early intervention, research based and culturally responsive interventions, and school educator collaboration within these systems.

The way that general educators should address any student struggling in their classroom before referral to special education is through MTSS. A common MTSS is Response to Intervention (RTI) which involves 3 tiers of increasing support generally put into place before a referral to special education to show how a student has been responding to classroom interventions. MTSS includes individualized instruction for students, research based interventions, and progress monitoring (Dussling, 2020). Ruiz (2020) presents a way to use RTI

with ELLs. Ruiz (2020) notes, “Since the implementation of RTI, a higher percentage of students referred for special education evaluation actually qualified for services” (pg. 36). This indicates that teachers were more accurate at determining a need for special education services when using MTSS, which should start with early intervention to prevent ELLs from falling behind in the first place, and there is no legislation mandating it for ELLs (Becker & Debris, 2019). Early intervention is vital for preventing referrals to special education as Stein (2011) states, “Early intervention...allows learning difficulties to be addressed in the regular classroom before inappropriate referrals to special education are made” (p. 3). Educators need to intervene where they see an ELL struggling academically as soon as possible. In many cases, using best practices within tier 1 with the guidance of an ESOL teacher will be enough for that ELL to grow (Ruiz, 2020). It is important to note that ELLs do need time to build their vocabulary and learn the language, even after social fluency has been met, ELLs could take five to seven years to fully match their monolingual peers in academic vocabulary (Farnsworth, 2018). This does not mean a teacher should delay intervening for five years, ELLs should still be learning and acquiring language, so long as progress monitoring is showing that they are learning and developing, the intervention is working (Becker & Debris, 2019).

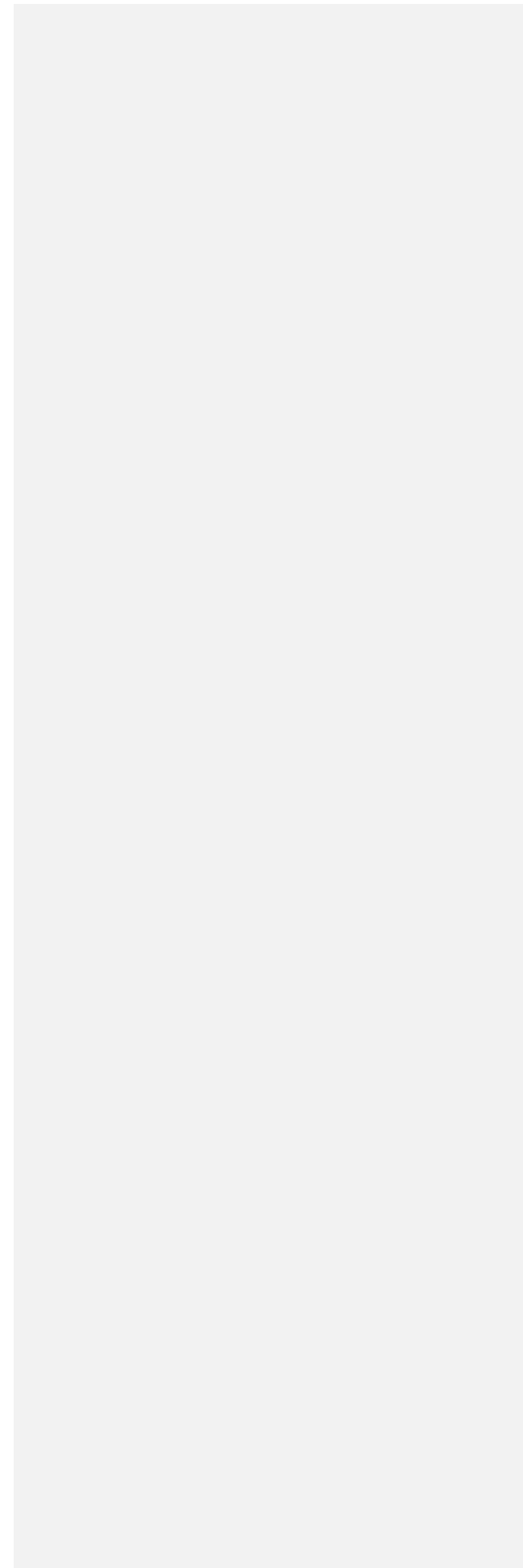
Interventions need to be research based for use with culturally and linguistically diverse students for the MTSS to be effective with ELLs. In the case of ELLs, and in fact all students, RTI cannot be a script, it must be responsive to the child (Ruiz, 2020). For ELLs, this means not comparing them solely to monolingual peers, taking background of schooling into account, recognizing the cultural and linguistic needs that must to be met, and using multiple forms of progress monitoring to assure unbiased tracking (Ruiz, 2020). If RTI is performed with fidelity, ELLs are less likely to be referred to special education because their needs will be met in the

classroom (Ruiz, 2020). RTI is also good for teachers because tier 2 and 3 require specific relevant interventions, when given specific interventions to use, teachers will feel less helpless in meeting the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students (Ruiz, 2020). It is important that the interventions are designed for culturally and linguistically diverse students, often these interventions can be used for both ELLs and general education students so a teacher does not need to be learning dozens of interventions. As an example, Dussling (2020) followed a specific culturally responsive intervention for tier 2 ELLs in an upstate NY school with 363 students including 16 ELLs. The pre and post tests showed that after 6 weeks, students increased their DIBELS reading scores and maintained that afterwards. Another example, Rubin (2016) created a case study on the use of repeated reading intervention on three ELLs that were struggling readers. In the intervention, linguistic needs such as common mispronunciations from L1 were addressed and these three students improved their fluency and language skills (Rubin, 2016). More et al. (2016) also provides a list of researched-based interventions for ELLs that could be used and given to teachers so that they are not left feeling unprepared to address the needs of ELLs and then in response refer them to special education. However, it is also vital that every teacher, not just a teacher providing tier 2 or 3 interventions, are implementing best practices with ELLs. Teachers need to be collaborating and sharing what strategies they are using.

Summary and Transition

Fundamentally, ELLs are under-identified in special education but over-referred and this is due to a lack of information and resources provided to non-ESOL educators as well as a lack of collaboration to share necessary intersectional information about a student. This can be solved by presenting educators with tools to use and the ability to collaborate and share information to build strong plans to address ELLs in the classroom. Chapter 3 will continue the discussion of

solutions to address this problem. In Chapter 3 I will provide a description of a Professional Development that I designed to address the problem that non-ESOL teachers face.



Chapter 3: Description of the Product and Tools

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 revealed English Language Learners are disproportionately referred to special education (Becker & Debris, 2019; Morgan et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2018). One of the reasons for disproportional representation of ELL in referral to special education is lack of communication between specialists, in order to meet these students' needs (Hoover et al., 2018; Jozwik et al., 2018; Tran et al. 2018). Another is a lack of resources for these specialists and educators to meet the needs of ELLs that are struggling, (More et al., 2016; Ruiz, 2020). In addition, educators do not feel competent to address the needs of struggling ELLs (Becker & Debris, 2019; Morgan et al., 2018; Ruiz, 2020). This PD was deliberately chosen based on the literature review in Chapter 2 on the topic that revealed some deficits in teacher education that need to be met in the field through professional development (Jozwik et al., 2020; Miranda et al., 2019; More et al., 2016)

In this chapter, I will describe a professional development (PD) to address the disproportional referral of ELLs to special education. I have been working at World of Inquiry School on the 6th grade team as the special education teacher in an inclusive co-taught class, for five years and my experience has been that this school is presenting the previously mentioned problems. There is a disproportionate representation of ELLs being referred to special education because the classroom teachers and ESOL teachers and the service providers are not collaborating effectively and do not have the resources or confidence to work with ELLs effectively. This PD will offer practical resources and skills to address the problem of disproportionate referral to special education within this school.

Description of the Professional Development

I will invite the 4th-6th grade teams from World of Inquiry School in the Rochester City School District to this PD. This includes 6 general educators, 3 special educators, 2 ESOL teachers, 2 speech and language pathologists, and 1 social worker. This PD comes in two sessions and will work in conjunction with the established multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) that is already in place at the school. MTSS is already the best defense to prevent unnecessary referrals to special education, but this PD will provide more deliberate resources and skills to work with ELLs within this system (Karten, 2017). The PD will take place in two morning sessions for 45 minutes before students arrive. It can be used alternatively with the primary grades (K-3) or the middle school team (7-8), but this plan is for the intermediate grades (4-6).

Session One

On day one of the PD, the problem and solution will be briefly presented based on the information from Chapter 2, as well as my anecdotal experience from my school experience working with ELLs in the classroom. Then the learning target will be presented. Educators will then participate in a jigsaw activity where partner groups learn about a research-based strategy to work with ELLs and complete the graphic organizer in Appendix A about the resource and how it can be used in their classes. The strategies will be provided from the table of strategies in More et al. (2016) on page 234, from each of these strategies I have found articles that describe a way of implementing that strategy (Appendix C: [Slide 8](#)). After educators have reviewed a strategy, they will briefly present their source to the whole group. At the end of the presentations, a reflection prompt will be presented for educators to guide their thinking between sessions.

The learning target for this day will be, “I can identify resources that can be used in my classroom to work with linguistically diverse students.” I chose to start with the problem and

solution presented so educators understand the basis and intention of the PD, this will take no more than 10 minutes. Then going into a jigsaw creates an example of hands-on learning. Indeed, PDs should not be lectures unless we want educators to be lecturers, and we do not. A jigsaw is an example of collaborative learning with a structure that can be used from the classroom.

Educators will be in small groups about three to four people, they will choose a spokesperson to share at the end. The articles and videos will be based on research so that educators leave the PD with strategies they can use with ELLs. The graphic organizer, in Appendix A, will guide the educators into thinking about how this strategy can be used with their ELLs and what key points need to be shared so other educators can use this strategy with their ELLs. The jigsaw will take 20 minutes, 15 minutes for members of the groups to individually read their article and 5 minutes to discuss and decide on a spokesperson. I will encourage educators to write down key takeaways when a representative from each group is presenting. Educators will also have access to the same resources that the expert in that strategy is presenting on. The spokesperson will summarize their strategy in one-two minutes. The presentations will take 10 minutes. The closing reflection prompt will take 5 minutes because this is meant to be done mostly independently.

Session Two

On day two of the PD, the problem and solution will be reviewed, as well as the strategies presented the day before. Then educators will be placed into small groups by grade level to participate in collaborative practice. They will pick a student that they all work with or are aware of that is an ELL and is struggling academically. They will collaboratively discuss the student's strengths and needs. They will then complete a chart to establish how each teacher who works with this student can use day one's strategies on a regular basis to provide adequate tier 1

support on the classroom level (Ruiz, 2020). It is essential that the charts created are curated to a specific student because every ELL, or student for that matter, has different strengths and needs. Once everyone has time to collaborate and create these charts the group will come back together. To close, the presenter will reinforce that these plans are not just theoretical, but should be implemented. Normal progress monitoring should be continued as per MTSS, this plan is integrated into tier one of the MTSS that is already in place. Here it will also be encouraged that the team should collaborate on all their ELL and create charts for each of them in the future. Teams should also be continuously adding to the resources provided. As a final closing educators can popcorn out a takeaway they have from this PD.

The learning target for day two will be, “I can apply specific strategies to my work on a team to address the needs of a specific ELL.” The two sessions build upon each other and are very collaboration-based because this is important to model that we want educators to be collaborating on a regular basis as presented in Chapter 2 when Tran et al. (2018) presented that students cannot be supported by specialist only in isolation because their needs are intertwined, especially their language needs. The review of the problem, solution, and learning targets will take about 5 minutes. Then the directions for the collaborative time will take another 7 minutes, it needs to be made explicit how this skill of collaboration relates to the problem, to MTSS and to best practices moving forward. Then the collaborative time will take about 20 minutes, using the graphic organizer in Appendix B. The remaining time will be used to reflect on the process and takeaways and reiterate the importance of continuing to collaborate to meet the needs of not only just our ELLs but all students. This is important to reflect on the experience so that it is solidified and continued into future practice.

Resolution

This product resolves the problem of disproportionate referral of ELLs to special education because it gives educators the tools to meet the needs of struggling ELLs without referring them to special education. The cause of the problem presented in the research in Chapter 2, was that educators were not prepared to work with ELLs (Becker & Debris, 2019; Morgan et al., 2018; Ruiz, 2020) and very little collaboration was occurring to address these gaps (Hoover et al., 2018; Jozwik et al., 2018; Tran et al. 2018). This PD addresses both of these problems by providing strategies on day one and then providing time to create a plan of implementation through collaboration on day 2. It is important to not just present the problem and the solution to the problem, but actual resources for educators to implement the solution. Not just theory, but practice.

This PD will invite World of Inquiry School, which already has an MTSS program in place and that the implementation of these strategies will be monitored because there is a specific educator responsible for progress monitoring. Within an MTSS model, there needs to be structures to monitor progress and move students from tier to tier if needed (Karten, 2017). It also begins early classroom intervention, and that is what this PD addresses which can be included in tier 1 if MTSS is in place, or it could be stand-alone (Becker & Debris, 2019). But again, this PD is best paired with World of Inquiry School's established MTSS program. I expect a school building that implements this PD to have a decreased number of referring ELLs to special education who do not have disabilities. This solves the problem of over-referred ELLs to special education (Morgan et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2018; Becker & Debris, 2019)..

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This capstone project has explored the disproportionate referral of ELL to special education. I looked into the literature on the topic of students referred to special education and also into teachers ability to meet the needs of ELLs. Research has revealed that ELLs are over-referred into special education programs but under-identified as having disabilities (e.g., Becker & Debris, 2019; Morgan et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2018). The disproportionate referral rates show the deficiency of knowledge and resources that educators have to meet the needs of struggling ELLs, leaving them unsure how to properly support ELLs and in that misunderstanding, thinking they have a disability and referring struggling ELLs to special education. In other words, educators that are not in specialized ESOL fields have not had adequate training in teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students (Becker & Debris, 2019; Morgan et al., 2018; Ruiz, 2020). Students' needs are not being met in their programs because teachers are not collaborating to share knowledge (Hoover et al., 2018; Jozwik et al., 2018; Tran et al. 2018). This is leading to increased teachers referring students to special education to get them supports, but the label of student with a disability will not always help a student's language acquisition, and ELLs are difficult to classify with a disability after referral anyways, so students are left in the same general education setting being taught again by general education teachers.

In completing this capstone, I proposed that through on-the-job professional development, we can solve the problem of over referral of ELLs to special education. The professional development would occur in teams of educators with ESOL teacher involvement. It would focus on helping grade level bands at World of Inquiry School to better collaborate and use specific tools and practices to meet the tier 1 needs of ELLs in each grade. I learned about

specific strategies to address struggling ELLs in my own class and way to collaborate with my fellow educators to better address the needs of struggling ELLs. I also learned about the varied disproportionate representation of ELLs in referrals to special education and identification into special education.

Implications on Student Referral

The greatest implication of this capstone's findings is that ELLs can be better addressed in MTSS and not wrongly referred to special education in such high numbers. Students who are struggling in school can better have their needs met when this problem is addressed as the capstone suggests. Students would have their needs addressed earlier and more effectively with these strategies. Students will be less likely to be stigmatized by referral to special education. Additionally, teachers would be able to collaborate more freely and address students' needs with more confidence after the implementation of the PD. This would need to be an ongoing process of learning, perhaps during multiple PDs, to better interact with their teams to learn how to best plan instruction for individual students.

Recommendations for Further Solutions and Research on ELLs Referral

Although a professional development plan addresses the problem on a building by building basis, it is a solution that can be solved much earlier in the educator training process. Teacher candidates and service providers should be trained within their programs in best practices for culturally and linguistically diverse students. This should include special education training programs, general education programs, speech and language pathologists, and teachers of the deaf because English Language Learners can intersect with any of these categories (Miranda et al., 2019). With this early training, teachers will enter the building already having skills and understandings about how to work with students with disabilities. Increasing

knowledge of intersections within special education, general education, and language acquisition is key.

Another aspect of further research that I would recommend is the disproportional representation of ELLs as students with disabilities. If the findings of Becker and Debris (2019) and Morgan et al. (2017) that ELLs are under represented but over referred to special education are generalizable, then that could mean there are many problems that need to be discussed and researched further such as the accuracy of testing for classification with disabilities on an ELL and the need for more bilingual or dual language programs for ELLs to receive appropriate language supports as they are learning content. My own experience has shown me that ELLs who are struggling and then referred to special education, usually benefit from bilingual programs, especially literacy, in their own language.

Final Thoughts

Students are complex. Classrooms are diverse. Teachers more and more need to be able to address intersectionality in their students. Not all students can be treated the same and not all students benefit from the same strategies. As we look at the systems in place in education we need to be careful that students are not receiving unnecessary labels, but that their needs are being addressed. One way of addressing these complex needs is to be aware of disproportionality. If ELLs are being over referred to special education, educators need to look at the short term and long term solutions. We need to decide how to best prepare educators to have the tools to address these needs and also the knowledge, remembering that educators can be experts and creating collaborative experience can be incredibly helpful to learning.

References

- Arishi, L., Boyle, C., & Lauchlan, F. (2017). Inclusive education and the politics of difference: Considering the effectiveness of labelling in special education. *Educational & Child Psychology, 34*(4), 9–19.
- Morgan, P. L., Farkas, G., Cook, M., Strassfeld, N. M., Hillemeier, M. M., Wik Hung Pun, Becker, G. I., & Deris, A. R. (2019). Identification of Hispanic English language learners in special education. *Education Research International, 1*–9.
- Daniel, S. M., & Pray, L. (2017). Learning to teach English language learners: A study of elementary school teachers' sense-making in an ELL endorsement program. *TESOL Quarterly, 51*(4), 787–819. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.347>
- Dussling, T. M. (2020). The impact of an early reading intervention with English language learners and native-English-speaking children. *Reading Psychology, 41*(4), 241–263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02702711.2020.1768977>
- Farnsworth, M. (2018). Differentiating second language acquisition from specific learning disability: An observational tool assessing dual language learners' pragmatic competence. *Young Exceptional Children, 21*(2), 92–110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1096250615621356>
- Goh, S. K. Y., Tham, E. K. H., Magiati, I., Sim, L., Sanmugam, S., Anqi Qiu, Daniel, M. L., Broekman, B. F. P., & Rifkin-Graboi, A. (2017). Analysis of item-Level bias in the Bayley-III Language Subscales: The validity and utility of standardized language assessment in a multilingual setting. *Journal of Speech, Language & Hearing Research, 60*(9), 2663–2671. https://doi-org.brockport.idm.oclc.org/10.1044/2017_JSLHR-L-16-0196
- Hoover, J. J., Erickson, J. R., Patton, J. R., Sacco, D. M., & Tran, L. M. (2019). Examining IEPs

of English learners with learning disabilities for cultural and linguistic responsiveness.

Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 34(1), 14–22.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/ldrp.12183>

Jozwik, S. L., Cahill, A., & Sánchez, G. (2018). Collaboratively crafting individualized education program goals for culturally and linguistically diverse students. *Preventing School Failure*, 62(2), 140–148. <https://doi-org.brockport.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/1045988X.2017.1393791>

Jozwik, S., Cuenca-Carlino, Y., & Gardiner-Walsh, S. (2020). Special education teachers' preparedness for teaching emergent bilingual students with disabilities. *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners*, 20(2), 38–.

Karten, T. J. (2017). *Developing effective learners: RTI strategies for student success*. Solution Tree Press.

Miranda, J. L., Wells, J. C., & Jenkins, A. (2019). Preparing special education teacher candidates to teach English language learners with disabilities: How well are we doing? *Language Teaching Research*, 23(3), 330–351. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168817730665>

More, C. M., Spies, T. G., Morgan, J. J., & Baker, J. N. (2016). Incorporating English language learner instruction within special education teacher preparation. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 51(4), 229–237. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451215589183>

Morgan, P. L., Farkas, G., Hillemeier, M. M., & Maczuga, S. (2017). Replicated evidence of racial and ethnic disparities in disability identification in U.S. Schools. *Educational Researcher*, 46(6), 305–322. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17726282>

Morgan, P. L., Farkas, G., Cook, M., Strassfeld, N. M., Hillemeier, M. M., Pun, W. H., Wang, Y.,

& Schussler, D. L. (2018). Are Hispanic, Asian, Native American, or language-minority children overrepresented in special education? *Exceptional Children*, *84*(3), 261–279.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402917748303>

Mueller, C. (2019). Adolescent understandings of disability labels and social stigma in school.

International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (QSE), *32*(3), 263–281.

<https://doi-org.brockport.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1576940>

National Journal of Educational Statistics (2021). Students with disabilities.

<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg>

New York State Department of Education. (2014). Multilingual learner/English language learner graduation rate improvement and dropout prevention: Planning tool.

http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/bilingual-ed/ellmll-grad-and-dropout-toolkit_4_12_19_final.pdf

Ortiz, A. A., Robertson, P. M., Wilkinson, C. Y., Liu, Y.-J., McGhee, B. D., & Kushner, M. I.

(2011). The role of bilingual education teachers in preventing inappropriate referrals of ELLs to special education: Implications for response to intervention. *Bilingual Research Journal*, *34*(3), 316–333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2011.628608>

Rubin, D. I. (2016). Growth in oral reading fluency of Spanish ELL students with learning disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, *52*(1), 34–38.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451216630280>

Ruiz, M. I. (2020). Beyond traditional response to intervention: Helping rural educators

understand English learners' needs. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 39(1), 35–53.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/8756870519894661>

Stein, J. C. (2011). The case for collaboration integrating information on English learners and special education in teacher preparation programs. *Multicultural Education*, 18(3), 35–40.

Swain, M. (2005). “The output hypothesis: Theory and research.” *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning*. N.p., 2005. 471–483. Web.

Szymanski, A. (Toni), & Lynch, M. (2020). Educator perceptions of English language learners. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 31(4), 436–450.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1932202X20917141>

Tran, L. M., Patton, J. R., & Brohammer, M. (2018). Preparing educators for developing culturally and linguistically responsive IEPs. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 41(3), 229–242. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406418772079>

Weddle, S. A., Spencer, T. D., Kajian, M., & Petersen, D. B. (2016). An examination of a multi tiered system of language support for culturally and linguistically diverse preschoolers: Implications for early and accurate identification. *School Psychology Review*, 45(1), 109–133. <https://doi.org/10.17105/SPR45-1.109-132>

Yangyang Wang, & Schussler, D. L. (2018). Are Hispanic, Asian, Native American, or language-minority children overrepresented in special education? *Exceptional Children*, 84(3), 261–279. <https://doi-org.brockport.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0014402917748303>

Appendix A
Graphic Organizer Session 1

Session 1

Name:

Name of Strategy:	
Description of Strategy:	
How strategy is beneficial for English Language Learners:	
Parts of strategy you already use in your classroom or practice:	
How could you use this strategy more deliberately in your classroom or practice:	

Appendix C

Professional Development Slides

Slides: <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1mdjyaDSWpzhJ9i2SBWCi1ekbnrITsjIA63RZGRVTLNo/edit?usp=sharing>

Voice Thread: <https://voicethread.com/share/18089857/>