

Reconceptualizing Quality Education for Multilingual Students with Disabilities

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Currently, a quality education for multilingual learners in the United States has been reduced to how quickly students can learn English so they can be absorbed into general education content classrooms (Viesca, 2013). In part, as with multilingual learners, educating students with disabilities focuses on providing students with an individualized education to remedy their disabilities and as soon as possible transition them to a general education classroom. We suggest there is a need to reconceptualize current approaches to educating multilingual learners and students with disabilities to build an education that will maximize their learning opportunities and potential rather than act as an attempt to fix perceived deficiencies (i.e., English and disabilities) in order to normalize students as quickly as possible.

For students who are both multilingual and have disabilities, the intersections are even more complex. General beliefs about multilingual students with disabilities are laden with deficit-based notions of their languages and abilities (Harry & Klingner, 2006). For the last 30 years, researchers, activists, teachers, and administrators have been concerned about the disproportionate numbers of students from “historically underserved groups” (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010, p. 279), including multilingual learners, within high-incidence special education programs (Donovan & Cross, 2002). There are a variety of factors believed to contribute to this disproportionality, including school structures, language proficiency, and racial and socioeconomic segregation (Losen & Orfield, 2002). The context of schools, including the ways schools and teachers refer and determine students’ eligibility for special education services (Hosp & Reschly, 2004), perpetuate this sociopolitical, historical problem. In addition, there are few preventive measures in place to reduce this bias, which is exacerbated by having limited research to draw on about the referral and placement of multilingual students in special education (Figueroa & Newsome, 2006; Klingner, Artiles, & Barletta, 2006). Multilingual students are, in particular, over- and underrepresented in special education (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higuera, 2005), often placed in restrictive environments (de Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006), and typically receive English-only instruction with limited language support (Zehler et al., 2003).

In order to reconceptualize what quality education looks like for multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and those living at the intersection of both, some of these significant issues and barriers must be overcome. But what might that reconceptualized approach to education be? Is it enough to view bilingualism as an asset? Can disabilities be recast as differentiated approaches and assets to learning? Can we resist the impulse to treat student differences as problems and seek to make students appear “normal” as quickly possible? What kind of power and privilege issues emerge when we reconceptualize and embrace the varied assets students bring to their learning and educational success, rather than viewing their bilingualism and disabilities as problems to be overcome?

We believe this special issue provides an accessible collection of valuable resources for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to inform improved policy and practice for multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and students living at the intersection. We also believe the research and reports it contains can inspire readers to think deeply about the questions posed above and consider the possibilities for a reconceptualization of a quality education for multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and those at the intersection of both. The important work contained in this special issue should push our collective thinking as well as the status quo to consider alternate perspectives, approaches, and narratives as we work to reconceptualize quality education that embraces children for who they are and maximizes the benefits of their differences for effective learning.

We asked Christine M. Leider and C. Patrick Proctor (Boston College), along with Rebecca D. Silverman (University of Maryland) to contribute to the “Invited Article” section of the journal. Their work offers valuable research demonstrating the possibilities and opportunities for assessing bilingualism. Leider, Proctor, and Silverman created and tested the Bilingual Translation Measure, and found opportunities for using it in assessing biliteracy. In our current assessment heavy educational context, particularly regarding the identification of disabilities, reconceptualizing the very nature of assessments related to bilingualism is extremely important in furthering our ability to provide a true quality education for bilingual students, and particularly bilingual students with disabilities.

This special themed issue contains five feature articles demonstrating the opportunities and challenges in reconceptualizing quality education for multilingual students with disabilities. Through their narrative analysis, Jessica Nina Lester (Indiana University) and Allison Daniel Anders (University of South Carolina) present the opportunities and challenges for Burundian children and families with refugee status within the special education identification process. Lester and Anders’ work identifies the ways that institutionalized practices limited opportunities for some and created opportunities for others; furthermore, they demonstrate how issues of power and privilege play out in the process, particularly for multilingual students and families that may not have background knowledge or experience with the various institutional processes they are participating in. Their work suggests that rethinking quality education for multilingual students with disabilities will require shifting attention to a multitude of complex factors as well as a willingness to reconceptualize some of the institutional processes that currently limit opportunity.

Patricia Martínez-Álvarez (Teachers College, Columbia University) conducted an in-depth case study of one representative bilingual student and how he has been positioned as a student with a learning disability despite demonstrating high levels of competence in varying ways.

Martínez-Álvarez's research provides a clear rationale to respect student diversity as well as "understand variances as ordinary rather than extraordinary." Her work demonstrates how analyzing student work from a multicompetence perspective creates opportunities to reconceptualize what counts as knowledge as well as opportunities to assess student competencies related to classroom practices, particularly for multilingual students with disabilities.

Peggy Hickman (Arcadia University) and Shernaz García (University of Texas at Austin) provide a critical examination of principal leadership of two Title I bilingual elementary schools deemed "high performing." They show the contradictions as well as tensions found in the hegemonic beliefs of principals that affect student opportunities for learning within general and special education programs for bilingual Latina/o students. Hickman and García offer important insights into reconceptualizing the notion of "high performing" as well as opportunities to expand discussions of equity- and social justice-oriented leadership, particularly for bilingual Latina/o students.

Melissa Driver (University of Virginia) examined the Response to Intervention (RTI) process for multilingual students. Her research demonstrates the challenges multilingual students face in being treated as multilingual with their native language(s) not always being considered within the assessment and placement processes of RTI. This article offers important implications in terms of improving RTI to be culturally and linguistically responsive and therefore of better quality for multilingual students with disabilities.

In their work examining conceptions of "normal" related to cultural and neurological diversity in autism, Mina Chun and Marni E. Fisher (Chapman University) scrutinize definitions of autism through three lenses: cultural and linguistic diversity, within the medical model, and as a form of neurodiversity. They demonstrate how the "typical medical model, when applied to (dis)ability, makes an assumption of what is 'normal,' and then applies hegemonic and dominant cultural overtones to name anything outside of that norm as deficient." Chun and Fisher offer a strong argument for the perspective of neurodiversity. They describe the possibilities of reconceptualizing "normal" when it comes to autism, providing valuable tools for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to consider in expanding our perspectives on diversity.

In this special issue, we also have two brief reports. Soyoung Park (Stanford University) explores the common recommendation that bilingual parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) expose their children to only one language (English). Park examines the research literature on the topic and demonstrates that there is insufficient evidence for this recommendation to be implemented, highlighting the hegemonic commitment to English as well as the potentially damaging impacts of such recommendations to families, students, and communities.

Offering a reimagination of quality education for Latina/o bilingual learners with disabilities, Barbara Dray (University of Colorado Denver) and Peggy Hickman (Arcadia University) argue that the instructional needs of bilingual students with disabilities should be addressed by providing students with optimal language supports across all of the instructional programs they participate in. In their article, Dray and Hickman discuss the current context for Latina/o learners who are at risk of being placed in special education, describe the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework, and offer important considerations for providing quality language

and literacy instruction at each level of instruction. Their work offers valuable insights into improving the quality of instruction for bilingual students with disabilities.

Finally, in this special issue we offer three materials reviews for you to consider in terms of valuable resources capable of helping with the reconceptualization of quality education for multilingual students with disabilities. Specifically, Joya Carter-Hicks (Kennesaw State University) reviewed *Special Education Considerations for English Language Learners: Delivering a Continuum of Services* by Hamayan, Marler, Sanchez-Lopez, and Damico (2013); Vanessa Santiago Schwarz (University of Colorado Boulder) reviewed *Ability, Equity, and Culture: Sustaining Inclusive Urban Education Reform*, edited by Kozleski and Thorius (2014); and Kavita Venkatesh (Boston College) reviewed *Condition Critical: Key Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Education* by Lawrence-Brown and Sapon-Shevin (2013). Each of these reviews provides valuable insights into the resources and their purposes and potential uses.

In conclusion, each piece within this special themed issue of the *NYS TESOL Journal* provides valuable insights into reconceptualizing a quality education for multilingual students with disabilities. Collectively, however, each contribution to this issue offers expansive opportunities and possibilities for us to re-think, re-imagine, and re-create the education of multilingual students, students with disabilities, and especially those living at the intersection of both. We thank all of the contributors to this great collection of resources and believe that, in total, this special issue can push our thinking, practices, and policies collectively in our efforts toward educational success and attainment for multilingual students with disabilities.

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