Status of Educational Services to Handicapped Students with Limited English Proficiency: Report of a Statewide Study in California

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to develop an information base on educational service delivery for limited English proficient (LEP) handicapped students in 145 randomly selected school districts in California. Information on the districts was gathered both from existing data banks and a survey questionnaire. The survey instrument was returned by 104 districts for a response rate of 71%. Information was gathered on the following: proportion of LEP students in special education programs; the procedures commonly used in the screening, identification, evaluation, and reevaluation of LEP, handicapped students; educational placement options; and the curricula and instructional practices employed. The study concluded that quantitatively the state was doing well relative to identification and placement into special education of LEP students but that qualitative aspects of service delivery are frequently contrary to those recommended by both theory and research.

Within California, the shift from traditional categorical groupings of handicapped children to the more generic “learning handicapped” classification was one response to concern about minority overrepresentation in special education. Nonetheless, subsequent data have suggested that overrepresentation of minority children continues (California State Department of Education, 1981; Killalea Associates, 1980; Lambert, 1981; Wright & Santa Cruz, 1983). At the same time, there is also concern over possible underrepresentation of minority groups in special education (Bergin, 1980; California State Department of Education, 1981; Sedo, 1978). Difficulties in differentiating second language acquisition problems from learning handicaps, coupled with sensitivity to past practices of overidentification and inappropriate placement, may have led to a reluctance on the part of teachers and administrators to refer culturally different children for special education services.

Within California, where over 90 language groups have been identified, census data indicate the presence of nearly 400,000 limited English proficient (LEP) students in public schools. By extrapolation, from 3,200 to 4,000 (8% to 10%) should be receiving special education services. However, because of the manner...
in which educational census data are collected within the state, it has been impossible to ascertain the extent to which LEP children are either overrepresented or underrepresented in special education. Census data are reported for 10 language groups for the total school population, but information on language proficiency is not collected for special education populations.

While little is known about the quantitative aspects of service delivery to LEP handicapped students, even less is known about the qualitative aspects. The primary purpose of this study was to develop an information base that would provide direction for the delivery of appropriate educational services to this population. To this end, five research questions were posed about current special education practices for LEP handicapped children in California:

1. Is the prevalence rate for identified handicapping conditions among LEP students different from the prevalence rate for the total school population?
2. What procedures are commonly used in the screening, identification, evaluation, and reevaluation of LEP handicapped students?
3. What practices characterize the interactions between the school and the families of LEP handicapped students?
4. How are educational plans developed and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) designed for LEP handicapped students?
5. What types of educational service options are available for LEP handicapped students?

METHOD

A descriptive study was conducted in order to answer these questions. Data were gathered from existing state data banks and through a survey of district-level special education administrators throughout the state. The population of interest was all districts within the state that enrolled students identified as LEP. Districts were randomly selected from 846 districts having LEP enrollments. In addition, the 10 districts in the state reporting the largest LEP enrollments were included, bringing the sample size to 145 districts. According to Isaac and Michael (1982), this sample size allows a .10 level of confidence for sampling error. A nine-page survey instrument was designed to gather information from district-level special education administrators.

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

Surveys were completed by 104 of the 145 districts sampled, a return rate of 71.7%. The respondents, from 33 counties, were geographically representative of the state. Included were 57 elementary districts (55% of the sample), 9 high school districts (9%), and 38 unified districts serving both elementary and secondary students (37%).

The ethnic makeup of districts in the sample was, on the average, .85% American Indian (SD = 1.58), 3.40% Asian/Pacific Islander (SD = 5.08), 1.44% Filipino (SD = 3.47), 28.32% Hispanic (SD = 24.81), 3.00% Black (SD = 5.47), and 62.63% Caucasian (SD = 26.89). The number of students identified as limited in English proficiency per district ranged from 1 to 117,557. The mean number of LEP students per district was 1,773 (SD = 11,636) and the median 98.

Analysis of survey data was complicated by the absence of responses for various questions. Districts either failed to respond to some questions or responded in a manner that could not be tallied. For these reasons, there was considerable variation in the number of responses analyzed for each question.

Prevalence of LEP Handicapped Students

Of the 104 sample districts, 103 reported the total number of LEP students currently identified as handicapped. Responses ranged from 0 to 5,212 LEP handicapped students per district. The mean response was 80.1 (SD = 515.7) and the median 5.75. The magnitude of the difference between the mean and median responses can be accounted for, in part, by a single large district that reported more than 5,000 LEP handicapped students.

The mean percentage of LEP students identified as handicapped in sample districts was 11.08% (SD = 18.43), whereas the mean percentage of the total school population identified as handicapped was 7.74% (SD = 3.32). Differences in prevalence rates (t = 1.58, df = 81, p = 0.12) and in variances were also nonsignificant. The 7.74% prevalence rate found for sample districts is roughly equivalent to the current statewide rate of 8.09% (California State Department of Education, 1982).

The mean percentage of handicapped students identified as LEP in sample districts was...
7.36% ($SD = 8.08$) whereas the mean percentage of the total school population identified as LEP was 11.01% ($SD = 15.05$). There was no significant difference in means ($t = -1.92$, $df = 81$, $p = 0.059$) or variance.

The rate of occurrence for specific handicaps was calculated for the LEP handicapped population and also the total handicapped population within sample districts ($n = 52$). When prevalence rates among LEP handicapped students were compared with rates among all handicapped students via dependent $t$ tests, differences significant at the .05 level emerged for only two handicapping conditions, severe emotional disturbance and other health impairments. The differences were in the direction of underrepresentation of LEP students in these categories. Tests for difference in variance were nonsignificant.

**Screening, Identification, Evaluation, and Reevaluation Practices**

One set of survey questions dealt with the procedures used in the screening, identification, evaluation, and reevaluation of LEP handicapped students. When asked the source of referrals for special education for students already identified as LEP, districts ($n = 66$) reported that regular teachers accounted for a mean of 60% of referrals. Other referral sources were bilingual education teachers (17%), principals or other administrators (6%), school counselors (6%), and students' parents (4%).

The majority of the respondents (69%) reported that they felt that the number of LEP students referred for special education was representative of the number needing special education services. Only 19% replied that too few students are referred and 11% that too many are referred. When asked if there are special education students who are limited in English proficiency but not identified as LEP, 72% of the districts responding to this question answered "no."

**Screening and identification.** Of the 72 districts responding to a question on special education screening procedures, 19% indicated that the processes and procedures used with LEP students were not dramatically different from those used with English proficient students. However, several districts did note that language considerations played a more major role in the screening of LEP students. Specific procedures cited by sample districts appear in Table 1.

**Evaluation methods.** Special education evaluation methods and procedures used with LEP students were also described by 72 districts. Four districts (6%) replied that they did not assess LEP students for special education. The most commonly mentioned assessment procedure was oral translation of tests commercially available in English only (83% of responding districts). Other common procedures involved the use of tests available commercially in the primary language of the student (74%), tests commercially available in English only (43%), and tests developed by the district or local planning area in the primary language of the student (21%).

In the assessment of LEP students for possible special education services, the multidisciplinary evaluation team included either a representative from bilingual education or some other person able to communicate in the primary language of the student. For all languages, bilingual education personnel were included less often than other persons able to communicate in the child's primary language. Bilingual education representatives (as opposed to representatives from the community or other sources) were most often available for Spanish language students.

Respondents were asked to list commercially available non-English-language assessment devices (tests, rating scales, interview schedules, etc.) routinely used in special education assessment of LEP students. The measures cited by at least 5 of the 58 districts responding to this question appear in Table 2. These measures are (a) measures which assess language proficiency, either in the home language, English, or both; (b) performance-type measures which attempt to bypass the need for English communication skills (e.g., the Leiter, Ravens, and WISC-R Performance Scale); and (c) non-English versions and/or translations of standard psychological assessment tools such as the WISC-R and the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery.

**Reevaluation procedures.** Most districts (65 of 69 responding) reevaluate LEP handicapped students for continuation in special education about as frequently as they reevaluate English-speaking students. Four districts (6%) reported...
TABLE 1
Special Screening Procedures Used with LEP Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Screening Procedure</th>
<th>Districts Reporting (n = 72)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of student in his or her home language</td>
<td>33 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment conducted by bilingual professional</td>
<td>14 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translator or interpreter assists in assessment</td>
<td>14 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same basic procedures used for both LEP and non-LEP students</td>
<td>14 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual education personnel included in screening process</td>
<td>12 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student's dominant language/language proficiency determined</td>
<td>11 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased reliance on non-language measures</td>
<td>9 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased reliance on nonstandardized measures</td>
<td>7 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonbiased assessment tools used</td>
<td>3 (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2
Non-English-Language Assessment Devices Most Frequently Mentioned by Sample Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Device</th>
<th>Districts Reporting (n = 58)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual Syntax Measure</td>
<td>17 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ber-Sil</td>
<td>14 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dos Amigos Verbal Language Scales</td>
<td>14 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Del Rio</td>
<td>13 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leiter International Performance Scale</td>
<td>13 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Assessment Scales</td>
<td>12 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOMPA</td>
<td>12 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WISC-R</td>
<td>12 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boehm Test of Basic Concepts</td>
<td>11 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrow Test of Auditory Comprehension of Language</td>
<td>9 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test</td>
<td>8 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery</td>
<td>8 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bender-Gestalt</td>
<td>7 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEOPLE</td>
<td>6 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin Spanish Articulation Test</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia Mental Maturity Test</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ravens Progressive Matrices</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WISC-R Performance Scale</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

that they reevaluate LEP students more frequently. Assessment of English proficiency is a standard part of the reevaluation process for LEP handicapped students in 36 out of 70 districts (51%). Those that “seldom” or “never” assess English proficiency during reevaluation totaled 11%, and 38% do so “sometimes” or “often.”

School-Family Interactions

Respondents were asked to comment upon the involvement of parents of LEP handicapped students in IEP development. Forty-three of 66 districts reported that, on the average, 51% to 100% of parents of LEP handicapped students attend IEP meetings. Comparing the IEP meeting attendance of parents of LEP students to that of parents of English-proficient students, the majority of respondents (46 districts) reported that the attendance rate of these two groups of parents was about the same. When asked how due process rights and instructional options are explained to parents who themselves are limited in English proficiency, 68 of 71 districts indicated that explanations were provided by a translator who attends the IEP meeting. Other common methods were print materials in the parent’s primary language (64 districts), primary-language print materials explained by a translator (59 districts), a bilingual person who visits the home (51 districts), and print materials written in English and translated orally (47 districts).

IEP Development

IEP forms are available in Spanish in 62 districts and in other languages in 14 districts. Forty-five districts write the IEP itself in Spanish and 11 write the IEP in other non-English languages. English language development goals were incorporated into the IEPs of LEP handicapped students “often” or “always” by 73%, or 58 of 70 districts. In contrast, primary language
development goals were part of the IEP for LEP handicapped students “often” or “always” in only 19 (or 27%) of the 70 districts. For LEP handicapped students, self-image and cross-cultural understanding goals were incorporated into IEPs “often” or “always” by 38% (or 26 of the 69 districts) replying to this query.

Educational Service Options

Respondents were asked to indicate the continuum of instructional options available to LEP handicapped students and to note which of these options were available bilingually, either in Spanish or another non-English language. Program options included, in descending order of frequency, the following: special class, regular class with special education resource assistance, bilingual regular class with special education resource assistance, special class with a bilingual aide, special education resource program with a bilingual aide, and bilingual special class. It appeared that in fewer than 10% of the special education programs did students receive a “significant portion” of instruction in their primary language from a credentialed bilingual teacher.

Respondents described the varying roles of special education and bilingual education in the provision of services to LEP handicapped students. When asked the approximate percentage of LEP handicapped students served by special education only, the mean response of districts (n = 59) was 26.3% (SD = 34.9). The mean percentage served by bilingual education only was 7.6% (SD = 21.1) and the mean percentage receiving services from both special and bilingual education was 49.4% (SD = 42.1). A few students remained in regular classes with no service from either special or bilingual education (mean = 0.7%, SD = 4.2), and an average of 16% received service via Bilingual Individual Learning Programs (BILPs) in which instruction is largely individualized.

Needs of Sample Districts

Districts were requested to describe the unique difficulties they encounter in providing appropriate educational services to LEP handicapped students as well as the current staff development needs of instructional personnel who work with this population. Although 6 (or 17%) of the 35 districts answering this question said they experience no major difficulties in providing special education services to the LEP population, other districts specified the need for improved identification and assessment techniques (34%), an increased number of bilingual professionals (31%), and a greater number and variety of instructional materials appropriate for the LEP handicapped student (17%).

Identified staff development needs reflected a continuing interest in information about identification and assessment of LEP handicapped students and a need for instructional strategies and curriculum materials for this population. In addition, respondents indicated a need for their instructional personnel to gain more knowledge about language acquisition, particularly acquisition of second languages, and a need for staff to become bilingual or to at least increase their ability to speak the languages of their students.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This descriptive study has reported on educational service delivery for LEP handicapped students in California. The primary limitation of the study centered around the self-report nature of the data. The fact that districts frequently reported practices that were contrary to legal mandates, recommended practices, or both, tended to enhance the credibility of their responses, however. Another major difficulty was the lack of internal consistency in the data reported. Many responses had to be disregarded due to the faulty arithmetic of the respondents. Finally, the absence of a state data bank on district-level special education ethnicity made it difficult to draw implications from prevalence findings. The information base that did emerge, however, provides considerable insight into educational service systems for LEP handicapped students in California.

Proportional Representation

One of the most important findings of the study was the proportional representation of LEP students in special education. For this sample, the prevalence of handicapped students among the LEP population was not significantly different from the prevalence of handicapped students among the total population. This was true both for special education as a single entity and for all categories of special education, with the exceptions of severely emotionally disturbed
and other health impaired students, where LEP students were underrepresented. Further, the prevalence rate of LEP students within the handicapped population was proportional to their prevalence within the total school population. This was true both for LEP students as an entity and for each of the six language groups for which survey data were collected. Tests for differences in variance for these comparisons were not significant.

**Student Referral, Screening, and Assessment**

Questions concerning referral, screening, and assessment of LEP students for special education revealed a variety of practices.

**Referral.** Respondents tended to believe that the number of referrals of LEP students to special education was reflective of the numbers needing special education; this belief is congruent with the proportional special education representation reported for the sample. Referrals were most frequently made by the regular classroom teacher, with the bilingual education teacher accounting for less than 20% of referrals. While one might expect that the bilingual educator would be better qualified to differentiate second language acquisition problems from learning disorders and, thereby, to refer LEP students for special education screening and assessment, the ancillary role of the bilingual education teacher may account for the finding that a majority of referrals is made by regular class teachers.

**Screening and Assessment.** Responses indicated that language considerations play an important role in the special education screening and assessment of LEP students. The most frequently mentioned assessment procedure was oral translation of tests commercially available in English. Unfortunately, this is a practice widely criticized as being the least valid and reliable. It is interesting to note that oral translation of written documents also was the most frequently mentioned way of explaining due process rights to parents. Emphasis on establishing language dominance was the second most frequently mentioned difference in the screening and assessment procedures employed with LEP and non-LEP students. Another frequently cited difference was the use of assessment instruments available in the primary language of the student. Examination of the tests listed reveals that primary language tests are most often used for language screening/dominance considerations and for ability testing. Fifteen districts did list Spanish-language achievement tests, with only two measures mentioned by more than one district: the Spanish version of the Woodcock-Johnson battery (8 districts) and the Morena reading tests (2 districts). Overall analysis of the screening and assessment procedures of sample districts suggests that there is little consistency across the state and that academic achievement measures are not emphasized.

**Staff Development Needs**

Respondents recognized a need for expanded knowledge and skills relating to assessment, although frequently these concerns focused more on the availability of bilingual assessment personnel, not on identification, selection, and use of assessment instruments and procedures. The next most frequently cited need was information on instructional strategies and curricula for this population. Increased knowledge of language acquisition processes was also cited. Four districts indicated that they did not assess LEP students for special education. This response suggests that some districts are under the mistaken impression that state regulations preclude the identification and placement of LEP students in special education. Information on state mandates and recommended program practices may be an additional staff development need.

**Educational Programming**

A majority of respondents indicated that IEP forms were available in non-English languages, most typically in Spanish. Over half of these districts also wrote IEP goals and objectives in the non-English language of the form (again, most typically, Spanish). IEPs usually included English language development goals, but goals for primary language development were typically not incorporated. Similarly, only a small number of districts indicated that self-image and cross-cultural understanding goals were included in IEPs. Approximately half of the LEP handicapped students were served by both special education and bilingual education. The remainder received
services from bilingual education only (23.6% in bilingual education programs and BILPs combined), special education only (26.3%), or regular education only (less than 1%). It appears, then, that approximately one-half of the identified LEP handicapped population receives (or does not receive) services from both programs, and that approximately one-half receives services from either bilingual or special education but not both.

Typically, only a small portion of special education instruction is delivered in the primary language of the student. While the scarcity of bilingual special educators may be an influencing factor, these findings nonetheless run counter to recommendations of leading bilingual education theorists (Cummins, 1978, 1981; Krashen, 1981). These authorities maintain that continued development of the student’s primary language and the provision of academic instruction in that language, in conjunction with attention to cross-cultural understanding, result in higher levels of cognitive development, better acquisition of English, enhanced self-confidence, and improved academic achievement. The implications of practices reported in this study may bear further investigation relative to their potential for adversely affecting the educational development of LEP handicapped students.

**Spanish Emphasis**

A decided Spanish emphasis was apparent throughout the study. Although this was not surprising, given both national and state demographics as well as those of the specific districts sampled, it does deserve mention. For the majority of the LEP population in California (74.8%), within the sample districts (75.9%), and for the identified LEP handicapped population (80.4%), Spanish was the primary language. The majority of professional bilingual education staff employed by school districts appears to be concerned with the needs of Spanish-speaking students. These staff are more likely to be involved in the screening and assessment of LEP students for special education, whereas for other language groups non-educator community members are more likely to be involved in the assessment, parent communication, and program planning steps. IEP forms are more likely to be available in Spanish than in other languages and it is more typical to find IEP goals written in Spanish than in other languages. Although special education programming is typically provided in English only, when another language is used, it is most likely to be Spanish. Non-English language assessment instruments appear to be most readily available in Spanish.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The results of this study and their implications suggest several potential avenues of pursuit relative to educational service delivery for LEP handicapped students. These include:

1. Expanded efforts at providing information to districts on the relevance of both bilingual and special education mandates for the education of LEP handicapped students.
2. Continued dissemination of information and training on recommended assessment procedures and instrumentation for identification of and program planning for LEP handicapped students.
3. Development of materials for inservice preparation of special education, bilingual education, and regular class teachers in regard to cross-cultural understanding, primary language development, and second language acquisition.
4. Development of appropriate curriculum materials that incorporate understanding of the cultural background of LEP handicapped students and that reflect their primary language development needs and second language acquisition needs.
5. Expansion of the number of appropriately trained personnel to work with LEP handicapped students.

To address these recommendations adequately requires the attention of both bilingual and special education personnel at all levels of professional endeavor. It will take the concerted, systematic efforts and resources of both bilingual and special education if truly exemplary educational programs for LEP handicapped students are to become a reality.

**REFERENCES**


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