

Puentes: Bridging educators and families to support young multilingual learners with disabilities

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Ability labeled separation

Cultural and linguistic variation

Class, color, ethnic dissection

Oblivious rejection not connection

Habilidad

When policy, standards and identity define

Oppression can find so many lines

Us and them, all become blind

Learning labels assigned

Política justa

Strangers that have a love hate infusion

An inclusion to the point of exclusion

Empathy yet mass delusion

For othering is the best conclusion

Facultad

Traversing borders is key

In understanding a shared humanity

Roots, community, and people that are strong

Diverse lived experience song

Unidos

Abstract

While the state of South Carolina has made an intentional effort to recognize the capabilities of multilinguals in academic settings, a new challenge has arisen. The unique intersection of multilingualism and disabilities has surfaced and caused a new wave of inquiry. This article highlights an overview of this intersection and provides strategies that communities and educators can utilize to support both home and second language development.

Introduction

Imagina for a second, that you have a four-year-old child that is just a little different than the rest. Consider the self-scrutiny, wondering why your child is developing, speaking, or lagging behind the majority. Think about the questions you have as a parent but hesitate to ask for fear of the answer. Picture the process of figuring out who to ask or investigating how to find the proper resources available to you.

Alternately, contemplate what it would be like to know your child was bright, surpassing the developmental, linguistic, and educational milestones of others their age. Knowing they were capable, but this is your first child that will attend school and you are both nervous. Upon starting school, your child's teacher recommends a learning and development evaluation that reveals they do not meet educational standards and will be placed in an alternate learning environment. Further, imagine that your child had already been evaluated and found below the standard and would be now placed in an alternate learning environment.

Now suppose in either scenario, you desire to advocate for your child but cannot communicate effectively, leading to a debilitating feeling of uselessness when all you want is the best for your child. There is a language and cultural barrier between your family and a non-responsive system that leaves you and your child isolated. You attempt to advocate but are

silenced by a predetermined academic authority that denotes any other experience as irrelevant. No individual is impervious to the tests of life, nor the ability or inability of our children. To consider the above scenarios as our own creates a nuanced empathy of ‘what if’, the heart strings of our own family and how we would want ourselves or our children to be treated.

The state of South Carolina has made an intentional effort to engage our multilingual students, their families, and educators by utilizing the *South Carolina K-12 Family Engagement Framework’s* components of building relationships, communication, community partnerships, linking families to learning outcomes, and collaboration. The article, “Enlaces: Moving the Needle Towards Quality Engaged Education” by Lydia Carnesale, discussed outcomes of these efforts, a pilot project wherein teachers and learners were gathered for community learning workshops, appreciating, and tolerating language plurality, recognizing an increase in family voices, as well as a professional experience to enhance classroom engagement. This endeavor created a reinvention of family engagement, wherein communities, home language, teachers, and teaching strategies supported emergent bilinguals from their lived experience and framed them as capable producers of knowledge (Conboy, 2013 & Espinosa, 2010). Currently, there is a new barrier that needs to be recognized the identification, dual identification, and misidentification of young multilinguals with a disability and how they are engaged as learners (De Valenzuela et al., 2022; USDE 2022 & WIDA, 2023). The purpose of this article is to give an overview regarding the intersection of multilingual children and disabilities and provide strategies that communities and educators can utilize to support both home and second language development.

Enlaces: Connecting to the problem

A World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) focus bulletin noted that multilinguals have a higher probability of being identified with a specific learning disability or

language delay/issue than any other health impairment (OSEP Fast Facts, 2022 & WIDA, 2023). Nationally, there was an increase of almost 30% in the number of multilinguals with a disability between the 2012 and 2020 school years (OSEP Fast Facts, 2022). The state of South Carolina had a 40% change in students with disabilities who were multilinguals within the school years of 2012 and 2020 (OSEP Fast Facts, 2022). Finally, it has been noted that multilinguals with a disability compared to their non-multilingual counterparts receiving IDEA services are less likely to be served inside a regular class 80% or more of the day than their monolingual counterparts (OSEP Fast Facts, 2022).

While these data are staggering, there is much concern of bias when collecting, aggregating, and discerning over and under identification of multilinguals (Samson & Lesaux, 2009). A concern related to the disproportionate exemplification of multilinguals is suggested to be a result of needing to distinguish between English language development, a learning disability, varied lived experience, and home language practices (Samson & Lesaux, 2009; Limbos & Geva, 2001). Equally, though Spanish is the language considered within this article, it does not discount the over 350 languages represented nationwide that districts and schools need to serve (Hopstock & Stephenson, 2003). Though there has been guidance provided to States and Districts on how to mitigate misidentification, upon dissemination, policies are undermined or unsupported (Lhamon & Gupta, 2015). Finally, there is a deficiency of linguistically and culturally appropriate assessment tools, support and connection to home language, and lack of evidence based and effective interventions for multilinguals (Washington et al., 2019; Pham et al., 2011; Bialystok, 2018).

What is equally problematic is how teachers and multilingual families are prepared to collaborate in supporting their learners. As the presence of multilinguals is increasing, it is

important that all understand the intersection of language and disability of learners (Cuba & Tefera, 2024). Often multilinguals are positioned in a deficit lens, being seen as unable or overlooked for their unique linguistic repertoire or lived experience, within an invisible space, discounted in comparison to their monolingual counterparts (Cioè-Peña, 2020). Educators often utilize naive deficit "language/disability filters" to make assumptions about learners and lack the training to recognize the systemic barriers that ignore/devalue students' linguistic and cultural "assets" (Martínez Álvarez et al., 2015). As multilinguals begin to reside in new areas, districts and schools lack educational tools, training, evidence-based practices and policies to support and identify multilinguals learners with disabilities in a timely and appropriate manner (Cioè-Peña, 2020; Cuba & Tefera, 2024).

The development of oral and literacy skills of young multilinguals in their home language impacts the process and production of their second language (Conboy, 2013; Garcia, 2009; Kormos, 2017). For young multilinguals, especially those who may have disabilities, it is vital to provide access to instructional supports, language-rich practices, early literacy opportunities, and support for sound communication skills in all their languages (Cheatham et al., 2012). When marginalization and dismissive practices overshadow a students' home language practices, they become stripped of needed skill sets that support their unique growth trajectory (Garcia, 2009). Districts and schools must invest in becoming familiar with the nuanced research and strategies surrounding the intersection of multilinguals with disabilities and the development of two languages, to inform the design of effective curriculum (Kormos, 2017).

Enlaces: Strategies

The goals of the *SC K-12 Family Engagement Framework* (Framework) include building relationships, communication, community partnerships, linking families to learning outcomes, and collaboration. Each of these components are needed to develop high-quality learning experiences that meet the unique needs of multilinguals with learning disabilities. The goals of the Framework also promote a sense of belonging, as well as individualized and responsive cultural and linguistic instruction.

It has been found that despite the desire of districts and schools to welcome multilinguals and their families, the lack of racial and linguistic diversity of educators and leaders alike often perpetuates a lack of understanding of multilingual learners' abilities and needed supports (Cuba & Tefera, 2024; Espinosa, 2010; Garcia, 2009). There is a current need to teach from not only an asset-based lens, but also to take the time to develop deep understanding of the learner, their background, and the various environments in which they engage (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Samson & Lesaux, 2009). Educators must link instruction, the cultures present, and multilingualism together to develop (not remove) preexisting skills, and nurture developing ones. As strength-based teaching practices evolve, relationships are formed between multilingual students with disabilities and educators that can reveal information to inform instruction and drive decisions surrounding educational policy. This allows space to recognize hidden home language practices, a restructuring of educational history, and resolution of challenges faced by teachers, caregivers and multilinguals within the classroom (Artzi et al., 2022).

As relationships and communication flow more freely between educators and families, it is necessary for all involved to recognize that bilingualism does not cause, compound, or increase risk for students with disabilities (Baker, 2011; Cheatham et al., 2012; Garcia, 2009).

This recognition requires that families and educators alike understand their own language, beliefs, and policies surrounding multilingualism. Some families solely speak the home language and yet require their child to speak only English, while others support a blend of both languages to the best of their ability. Similarly, some educators are very aware of the benefits of bilingualism and create responsive environments honoring all languages, while others have not had the educational or lived experience to support developing multilingualism, much less when in combination with a disability. Regardless, this partnership between educators, caregivers and multilingual students requires all involved to discuss the priorities, challenges, and goals of multilingual students to recognize successes and challenges present in their educational journey (Cheatham et al., 2012). These deliberate conversations must create a clear definition of what proficiency looks like in both languages and how this is informed by current and future contexts and any possible learning disabilities (Espinosa, 2010).

It is imperative that multilinguals suspected or with disabilities not be compared to their monolingual counterparts (Cheatham et al., 2012; Grojean, 1998). Multilingual language development does not have rhyme or rhythm—it is a fluid language practice that the individual acquires through use and practice that has unique characteristics (García, 2009). Taylor and Leung (2019) acknowledge how children are still blank canvases when considering the various modes of utilizing language(s) as they equally use and explore modes of language in printed and spoken words, drawing, building, gesturing, dancing, singing, and other language rich opportunities. As we critically discern the manners in which individuals utilize literacy in multilingual lives, so that meaning making throughout literacy development is responsive, instructional approaches can be tailored and relevant to the students with and without disabilities.

Educators can mutually support each other and families in building a tiered learning approach to support multilingual children with disabilities (NCECDTL, 2023). When working with multilinguals who are suspected of or that have disabilities, creating environments of learning embedded with additional supports is important (Cheatham et al., 2012; Grojean, 1998). Environmental factors are an important component to consider for these learners, as they must appropriately support their language needs. Develop checklists that ask and recognize the unique cultural and linguistic characteristics of each child and their ability, not a generalized form that answers yes or no questions. Notice the assets the multilingual brings with their language abilities, not just their disability, and or how their prior educational experiences may differ from the majority. This will assist in building confidence as a learner and developing a positive sense of self (Cheatham et al., 2012; Garcia, 2009; Grojean, 1998). Finally, be sure that comparisons in progress are made with similar learners in mind, to avoid creating a platform of failure, and instead forging/emphasizing a path towards success.

These considerations may require curriculum modifications, will ensure solid daily observations, and anecdotal note-taking of the students within the classroom (Cheatham et al., 2012). Tracking these details and data points can be done using an activity matrix (NCECDTL, 2023). This tool helps plan and organize the curricular activities of the student, ensuring multiple opportunities to practice skills and assess their progress. Moreover, while utilizing this tool, educators must also be mindful of how they adjust their teaching based upon the outcomes each day.

Finally, as multilinguals with disabilities learn and develop, educators must discuss learning outcomes and collaborate with peers, families, and the students themselves. There should be an awareness of what comprehensive guidance is available surrounding dual

identification of multilinguals with disabilities. This information should denote how the district and school will effectively support dually identified multilingual learners and their families (WIDA, 2023). Conversations with and among colleagues are necessary. Educators need to create spaces that afford opportunities to address common questions, evaluate existing anecdotal notes or data, and the effectiveness of curricular modifications surrounding multilinguals with disabilities. Dialogues should highlight the varied perspectives of the educators, how long and when language(s) should be used within instruction, and what these language practices should look like to obtain the outcomes sought for the student (Thordardottir, 2010). Finally, educators should not feel hesitant in collaborating with the experts outside of their classrooms and should seek their opinion within collaborations and planning.

Bridging a school-family dialogue when considering multilinguals with a disability is challenging, due to the need of certified translators and interpreters, but it is a right of these students and families (ED, 2022). Multilingual families, who are often excluded from the decision-making part of this process, must be involved (Thordardottir, 2010; NCECDTL, 2024 & WIDA, 2023). They not only leverage a large part of the linguistic make-up of the student, but also need to understand the disability, resources available to them, and means to provide a collaborative support system at home. Affirming the important role that the language and culture of a family has in the growth and development of a multilingual with disabilities builds not only trust between families and educators but ensures that the learning goals are built off the mutual needs and realities of the student.

Enlaces: Implications and Conclusion

There is a gap of scholarship and understanding when considering the dual identification or misidentification of multilinguals with a disability (Thordardottir, 2010; NCECDTL, 2023;

WIDA, 2023). Multilingual learners are a key part of the community and schools of South Carolina. Currently, schools are facing multiple challenges, responding to cultural and linguistic diversities and the novel intersection of multilingualism and disabilities.

There is concern when considering what best practices, academic achievement, and linguistic proficiency look like for multilingual learners as active members of their classrooms. There is a disconnect between educators and the understanding of family values, opinions and goals, often shadowed by linguistic barriers. Finally, there is a lack of expertise among the teachers who interact with these students and families day to day. Educators need support of how to tier, scaffold, and provide supported and meaningful learning experiences to multilingual learners with disabilities.

Scholarship surrounding services and practices for multilingual students with disabilities is scant; thus, more research and resources are still needed in this area to better support educators. (Cheatham et al., 2012; Espinosa, 2010; Thordardottir, 2010). As a state, South Carolina aims to enhance the capacity of *all* learners, but to do so it must recognize the importance of language(s) and bridging home and school, teachers and families. This ensures that teaching is appropriate, responsive, and inclusive for the best academic achievement of each learner. This article, built from the foundation of the *SC K-12 Family Engagement Framework*, attempts to emphasize the opportunities for educators and multilingual families to weave bridges and uncover, through relationships and meaningful novel strategies, ways to support multilinguals with disabilities.

Resources

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