

# **The Social Work Perspective on English Language Learners Entering Special Education: A Grounded Theory Study**

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## **Statement of the Research Problem**

This is a classic grounded theory study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) on English language learners (ELLs) entering special education. Not all ELLs are immigrants, though many are, some ELLs are children of immigrants, and one in five ELLs are native born children, with native born parents (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Hernandez, 2005). As immigrants move from traditionally settled immigrant areas, such as New York and California, to states that have not had many immigrants, community institutions such as schools will have to adapt to this new-to-them population (Capps, Fix & Passel, 2002). In 2001, about 50 percent of all public schools had at least one LEP student (Zehler, Fleischman, Hopstock, Stephenson, Pendzick, & Sapru, 2003, p. 28).

While the population of ELLs in special education is fairly small—about half a million or 7.4% of all students receiving special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2008)—this research addresses the time prior to a special education referral, thus including far more than just students qualified for special education. The research on ELLs entering special education is primarily from the perspective of special educators so it is focused on education related elements of the process such as language acquisition and assessment (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010).

School social workers have a unique position in bridging the gaps between school and family, family and community, and even student and family, as well as providing direct services, such as running groups. Our commitment to social justice is important when considering the needs of a vulnerable population, such as ELLs. This research was intended to identify what school social workers are doing already, what they could be doing, and their perspective and how things could change and improve prior to and during the special education referral process for ELLs.

## **Research Background and Hypotheses**

True to classic grounded theory, using a Glaserian approach, this research was based on a research area not a question (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The research area was

*ELLs entering special education* from a social work perspective. Six dimensions of ELLs entering special education were examined in the study: needs of ELLs; engaging families of ELLs; community connections; professional setting; special education process; and social work.

### **Challenges**

ELLs have a number of challenges that may affect the special education process. Most immigrant families are “mixed-status,” meaning they are composed of various immigration classifications—including legal permanent residents, naturalized citizens, refugees, undocumented immigrants, and temporary residents—and can lead to breakdowns in school-family communication due to legal concerns (Capps & Passel, 2004; Capps, et al., 2006). Immigrants experience certain psychological problems at higher rates than non-immigrants, including acculturative stress, differential acculturation, and circular migration which are unique to immigrants (McBrien, 2004; Pine & Drachman, 2005; Tapia, Schwartz, Prado, Lopez, Pantin, 2006). Compared to non-immigrant families, immigrant families are more likely to face financial problems, including problems related to poverty such as rates of crowded housing, health insurance coverage, and food shortages (Capps & Fortuny, 2006; Fong 2004; Reardon-Anderson, Capps & Fix, 2002).

### **Disproportional representation of ELLs in special education**

The impetus for this study came from the presence of disproportional representation of ELL students in special education, on the premise that it is caused by *something* during the pre-referral process. Categories of students, such as minorities or ELLs, should be represented in special education at about the same rate as their rate in the population (National Association of Bilingual Education, 2002). If a group is 10% of a school district that group should be about 10% of the special education population. That is not the case for ELLs (or other minority groups). This situation, called disproportional representation or disproportionality, can occur as underrepresentation (meaning the percentage of students in special education is less than the percentage in the general education population) but is more often overrepresentation (higher in special education than the general education population) for ELLs (e.g., Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010).

Explanations for disproportionality include: discrimination and bias (e.g., Beratan, 2008; Harry & Anderson, 1994); inadequate assessment and evaluation procedures (e.g., Palmer, Olivarez, Wilson & Fordyce, 1989); and socio-economic factors (Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb & Wishner, 1994; Donovan & Cross, 2002). Disproportionality does not occur in disabilities that require objective diagnosis, e.g., hearing impairment, but in disabilities that require subjective diagnoses, e.g., learning disabilities (Harry & Klingner, 2007; Klingner & Artiles, 2003; Donovan & Cross, 2002).

### **Methodology**

This is a classic grounded theory (CGT) study, which is the term for both the methodology and the results (Glaser, 1967). It is a qualitative study designed to discover a substantive theory related to ELLs entering special education from the social work

perspective. Following the first interviews, the notes were open coded. A core variable emerged and the codes became more focused on expanding the concepts related to that variable, also called substantive codes. Simultaneously, memos were used to expand on the concepts and explore theoretical connections. The second type of code applied to the data, which is linked to these memos, is theoretical codes. These are the codes that explain how the data is connected and contain the hypotheses for the theory. When theoretical saturation was reached, that is when the data is not supplying any new information about the core variable, sorting began. Sorting is the process of organizing the data and associated codes and memos into the grounded theory. Data analysis was done using Atlas.ti. Rigor was assured through the use of triangulation, member checking, clarifying researcher bias and confirmability.

School social workers from across Virginia were interviewed using a semi-structured interview, with open-ended questions about key dimensions of the research area. The sample for this study consisted of 11 social workers from seven cities and counties in various geographic regions of the state. Interviews lasted for about one hour, with some follow-ups to expand concepts and for member checking.

## Results

The grounded theory is that *supporting ELLs* (the core variable) resolves *the disconnect between the needs of ELLs and the resources available to them* (the main concern). The context (division characteristics, policy, discrimination and prejudice) contribute to the availability of appropriate in-school resources, such as ESOL teachers, and interpreters and translators. The context is also related to the perceptions and knowledge of ELLs of the professional staff. The ELL characteristics and circumstances (trauma, language acquisition, family characteristics, and socio-economics) are integral in understanding both the ELL as an individual and the family. The school professionals, with the exception of psychologists who are often not involved until the student is somehow engaged with the special education system, make an effort to connect the student to resources to meet their needs. The resources are often inappropriate, inaccessible, or simply unavailable. The unavailability of appropriate and accessible resources sometimes results in referrals to special education.

The theory is complex and involves multiple layers and types of codes (see Figure 1). The substance of the theory is found in the theoretical codes, which describes the relationships between codes and often overlap (Glaser, 1978, pp. 74-79). The structure of the theory is formed by the “type code family” which are codes that group concepts by kind, class or genre (Glaser, 1978, pp. 76). The type codes are context, ELL characteristics and circumstances, roles, resources, and the special education process.

Together, the context and the characteristics and circumstances of ELLs define the needs of ELLs which is central to understanding the problem (Figure 1). The context (policy, division characteristics, and discrimination and prejudice) *contribute to the availability of* ESOL teachers, and interpreters and translators, and is *related to the perspective of* administrators, teachers, and social workers. The characteristics and circumstances (trauma, language acquisition, family characteristics, and socio-economics) are *integral in understanding* the perspective of the family. The people in

roles intended to support ELLs, *try to connect* ELL student to resources designed to meet What they *often find* are resources that are inappropriate or inaccessible. They also *recognize* the need for different or more resources based on the needs of ELLs.

When there is a disconnect between the needs of ELLs and available, appropriate and accessible resources, it *can result in* special education referrals. Certainly, there are ELLs who have special needs and require special education. The participants in this research tended to talk about ELLs who had needs—such as emotional problems resulting from trauma—that manifest themselves in behaviors that could not be controlled in the classroom. This could result in a referral to special education that might have been better handled with other resources. While some were compelled to make a referral so a student could have access to some kind of services (a benevolent referral), they also recognized the *potential consequences of* special education placement could be disproportional representation and lifelong stigma.

The focus of this research was on the special education process for ELLs but that process barely registers in this theory. The interview data overwhelmingly points to something much bigger than that, to the problem of serving ELLs in the school system in general. Not all ELLs are referred to special education because of unmet needs; some needs are just left unmet. And, of course, not all ELLs have unmet needs.



The grounded theory process requires the researcher to narrow the scope of a grounded theory topic to a main concern and the core variable, so I expected to conclude this study with a focus on one or two dimensions. That is not what happened. Rather, the original six dimensions proposed for the study expanded to eight, with the addition of the school setting and the policy context. These dimensions were included initially as elements of the dimensions but not as stand-alone topics. The school setting was woven into all the dimensions and incorporated into the needs of ELLs dimension. Policy was included in two sections, the needs of ELLs and the special education process. Both topics proved important enough to be thought about as individual categories. The main concern straddles the dimensions of community connections and the needs of ELLs, and the resolving variable of supporting ELLs cuts across all dimensions.

### **The School Setting**

The characteristics and experiences of school divisions are wide ranging, but none have completely adequate support for ELLs. Some divisions have over 100 first languages spoken in their schools and have had a high percentage of ELL students for many years, and some have just one first language (Spanish) barely come into contact with ELL students and families. Yet all the participants in the study report the need for improvement in some area of school support for ELLs. Particularly concerning is the high ELL divisions with concerns about appropriate resources, such as bilingual counseling.

### **The Policy Context**

School social workers feel the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* is restricting the ability of school personnel to meet the needs of ELL students. Social workers see teachers and administrators under such great pressure to make adequate yearly progress that they are sometimes afraid they will lose their jobs if student scores do not improve. Because ELL students might bring down adequate yearly progress (AYP), the students might be referred to special education, rather than have their needs met while in the regular classroom, thus preventing their scores from negatively impacting the classroom average. There are leniencies in the law to allow ELL students to delay or modify tests but social workers do not believe these are adequate to allow time for academic language acquisition or to address other needs of ELLs.

### **The Needs of ELLs**

Trauma is a key concern for social workers, particularly in understanding behaviors and emotional problems in ELLs, as is understanding language acquisition. Social workers, even those in divisions with smaller numbers of ELLs, are aware that language acquisition is a lengthy process and believe it is misunderstood or not well supported in the schools. Participants wanted more education and training on this topic and were often frustrated at the lack of knowledge about language acquisition among other professionals. Consistent with the literature (e.g., Capps & Fortuny, 2006; Fong, 2004), participants in this study painted a picture of ELL students from families struggling with low paying jobs, living in overcrowded housing and other issues related to poverty.

### **Engaging Families of ELLs**

Participants struggled with engaging families especially due to language, work schedules, and cultural understandings of mental health, disability, and the role of parents in education. Though non-ELL students from families with socioeconomic problems have the same challenges as non-ELL students in similar economic positions, there are unique challenges associated with ELL families overcoming socioeconomic problems. These problems include legal documentation and language barriers, which make it very difficult to secure family involvement in the ELL student solution.

### **Community Connections**

ELL students and their families have emotional, social, economic, legal, and health needs that could be alleviated or improved with access to appropriate community resources, which could then serve to alleviate the school-based problems. Unfortunately, many of the resources are not available, or are available but not appropriate or accessible by the families. Not having access to resources has the potential to contribute to disproportional representation in special education. A major problem for accessing resources is that ELL students may be from “mixed status” families, meaning some members have legal documentation for being in the United States and some do not. Parents might be hesitant to engage with the school, or may not know how to access services or whether or not their children qualify for them.

### **Professional Setting**

In this study, the social workers seemed generally content with levels of professional collaboration, particularly in formal meetings. Social workers did express some frustration with teachers’ and other professionals’ understanding of trauma and language acquisition, and when to make special education referrals. There was mixed experiences in regard to support from the administration or classroom teachers for addressing the needs of ELLs.

### **Special Education Process**

Special education is intended for children in need of services because of a disability. But in some cases, it is viewed as a last resort to provide ELL student with support services; a pragmatic approach to accessing services that can be called a benevolent referral. This is certainly not universal—some of the participants emphasized that unless the child has a disability, special education is not a good option and will not provide the types of services they need (though the students are still being referred there).

Social workers who discussed pre-referral interventions generally referred to these as classroom or instruction based and had no or little role in implementation of the interventions. Some specifically mentioned “Response to Intervention” (RTI), though this is being used to varying degrees in different schools. Interestingly, on a national level RTI is designed to include strong participation from a variety of professionals, including social workers but Virginia’s version of RTI is called “Responsive Instruction” and is focused on instructional techniques only.

There is also great variety in the ability to conduct linguistically and culturally competent assessments from the perspective of participants. While some schools struggle with when and how to assess ELLs, others are using the Ortiz matrix (a linguistically and

culturally relevant approach to assessment). In fact, believing it be the best approach, one division chose to use the Ortiz matrix to re-evaluate ELL students qualified under different assessments.

### **Social Work**

Social work responsibilities differ widely from school to school. Social workers might participate in child study teams; intervene when there are behavior problems; conduct evaluations—or not. However, the commonality is that social workers are usually the ones responsible for bridging the gaps between school and home and home and community. This is sometimes done in conjunction with or without help from a liaison or a visiting teacher, but most often this is the sole responsibility of the social worker. What they *often find* are resources that are inappropriate or inaccessible. They also *recognize* the need for different or more resources based on the needs of ELLs.

### **Utility for Social Work Practice**

Based on the findings in this study, there are many areas for practice change and improvement for social workers and, to some extent, school personnel as a whole. Suggestions for change include the need for increased in and out of school collaboration and advocacy. The ability for social workers and other school personnel to appropriately assess ELL students varied greatly from division to division. Despite the recognition that not all schools will have the same needs, it was startling that some schools struggled greatly with assessment and others felt they had a strong approach with appropriate attention to cultural and linguistic differences. School divisions need to disseminate information about what works in their system, as well as collaborate about how to improve processes. There is a need for increased advocacy for resources to meet the needs of ELLs. The data clearly demonstrates the need for adequate, appropriate, and accessible resources for ELLs, including addressing the fear many ELL families have of legal implications of receiving services.

Social work education needs to include topics related to ELLs. The participants in this study reported learning by “doing” and participating in workshops, not through formal education. There is no Council for Social Work Education (CSWE) standards requirement for competency in responding to the needs of immigrants or their children, despite the growing numbers of ELLs in schools and requiring social services. Immigrants and their needs can be considered in the context of cultural competence requirements for all social work students. Standards for the specialization or certification of school social workers should be extended to include required content on immigrant policy and direct practice with immigrant children and their families both within the school system and their communities.

Participants did not provide specific recommendations for how NCLB might change; however, based on my experience with this project, I would recommend a strengths approach to policy development (Chapin, 2011). The first two steps are to “define the needs or social problems and strengths in partnership with clients” and “document needs, strengths, and goals in partnership with clients” (Chapin, 2011, p. 171).

With a larger view of the stake-holding population more efficient and effective changes might be possible.

There are also implications for further research, including theory testing and assessment research. Theory testing would involve an examination of the relationship between needs and resources, and the extent to which identifying needs and matching to resources reduces disproportional representation in special education. Social workers need adequate and appropriate assessment and evaluation tools for ELL students. The Culture-Language Interpretive Matrices (C-LIM) and the Vineland Adaptive Behaviors scale require further testing. Though it is primarily an educational assessment tool, social workers should be supporting and encouraging research on this and culturally and linguistically appropriate bio-psycho-social assessments.

### **Contribution to the understanding of disproportional representation**

Disproportional representation of ELL students in special education was a driving problem for this research. This study did not collect data about the existence of disproportional representation, though some participants mentioned that their school did have some disproportional representation. This study also did not definitively point to a cause of the problem, nor was that the intention. Rather, the social work participants were able to describe some of the problems with meeting the needs of ELLs which could lead to disproportional representation.

Special education assessment and evaluation can sometimes cause disproportional representation. For example, one district with a high ELL population chose to use a culturally and linguistically relevant assessment to re-evaluate students who had already been found eligible for special education, suggesting that the previous approach to assessment was flawed and may have allowed over representation of ELLs in special education through mis-identification of the presence of a disability. The findings of this study suggest that psychologists were sometimes using non-culturally or linguistically relevant assessments, which could lead to disproportional representation. Some divisions, though, had assessments normed for ELL students and had bilingual assessments available which to the participants, mitigated against disproportional representation.

Finally, the existing literature and participants in this study both pointed to the lack of resources as a major concern and a possible cause of disproportional representation. While many divisions reported adequate access to interpreters and translators, some acknowledged not having translated forms; not having access to interpreters in every language; not knowing how to use an interpreter; and frustration with not having bilingual staff. When school resources are limited some participants reported knowing referrals are made as an effort to obtain resources for ELL students.

Participants mentioned discrimination, bias, and socio-economic factors as problems in the school setting and the community. However, the participants found assessment, evaluation, and access to and availability of resources, as the main underlying causes of disproportional representation. More research could consider how bias and discrimination leads to differential availability of adequate assessment and resources.

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