

Aidé González Espíndola, M.A. Special Education, Southwest Organizing Project Board Member and Secretary, ATF & APS Special Education Task, ATF Federation Representative.

Cultural and linguistic responsiveness in Special education

QUESTION In what ways can we improve teaching culturally and linguistically responsive in Special education?

Rationale

Two main motivators for doing this research had been the recent *Yazzie and Martinez v State of New Mexico* lawsuit and the decision and Order issued on July 2018 by Judge Sarah Singleton. What she found that “the State had violated the Education Clause, the Equal Protection Clause, and the Due Process Clause of the New Mexico Constitution” according to the Legislative Education Study Committee in August 2018. This briefing summarized the judge’s decision that the “state has failed to provide at-risk students with programs and services to make them college or career ready” and the judge also noted that “New Mexico is not meeting the Requirements of Bilingual Multicultural Education Act of Federal Law related to ELs”. My second motivator was a reflection on my own experience as a bilingual Special education teacher, in my School District and conversations with parents that had expected for their kids to continue learning Spanish literacy in special education.

Literature Review

Cultural and linguistic responsiveness in education is not a new topic. For over 50 years, it has been an argument of the Equal education opportunity, civil rights (Cervantes & Baca p.3) and lately as an argument for the increasing influx of immigrant children to the US. However, the concept of cultural and linguistically responsiveness had not been fully extended to Special education. Special education programs do not admit the full potential of students because they are not recognizing what students already know, which is their language and culture. Cummings (1989) argues that bilingual education can improve self-concept and empower students, which is one area that students coming to special education lack. Moreover, the current Special education program that we have in Bilingual Schools is a subtractive program. A Bilingual subtractive program “is the replacement of the first language by the second” (Baca & Cervantes, p.145). Students in this type of programs many times demonstrate limited language abilities in both languages and have cognition deficits (Cummings, 1979). Therefore, students not only suffer exclusion in the special education classroom but they suffer exclusion from their communities by not being able to communicate efficiently in their home language.

Regardless, the extensive research on bilingual education, Bilingual Schools go against research that states that is best for students to learn literacy skills in their first language in order to acquire the second language (Smith, 1994). Students in bilingual programs that qualify for special education lose the opportunity to acquire literacy skills in their first language and are immediately place in an English Only classroom.

Study Design

For this qualitative research, I observed three different classrooms at three different schools in Albuquerque. Only one school was a charter school. All of the schools had a bilingual program. All the classrooms observed were Cross-Categorical. The language of instruction was English.

The subject area was indicated as Literacy time. After each observation, I interviewed the teachers. School A had only one Special education teacher for the whole elementary and middle school and the gifted program. School B had a total of three special education non including gifted. School C had a total of three cross-categorical teachers non including gifted and two special education teachers in the extra support program.

Data Analysis

My three observations and interviews showed a wide range of special education practices. The special education teacher in School A did not have ESL/TOEFL training and reported as not needing it, perhaps because students and teachers did not have to interact much due their computer-based reading program. The computer-based program seemed to fit for a teacher that has to serve elementary, middle school (oversize caseload) and the gifted program. Gifted students also used the same computer-based program as peers in special education. (differentiation imbedded in the program). All students in students in special education were Hispanic. The total school population was 50% Hispanic and 50% White, (over representation of Hispanic in special ed). Students knew the expectations of getting their computer and work.

Special education teachers in School B and C followed the district's program in two different ways. School B teacher provided instruction with the program provided by the district and supporting it with ESL strategies. School C teacher had his Educational assistant teach program provided by the district and he focus on other reading strategies and vocabulary enrichment by using books chose by students. Educational assistants did not use Spanish with any of the students, during the observations. Teacher knew the importance of teaching vocabulary for comprehension. The teacher provided interaction opportunities among students and at the same time promoted language learning.

Teacher in school C provided graphic organizers to support student's comprehension and writing work. Teacher used other ESL strategies such as small groups and scaffolding. High interest material by having students chose their book. Teacher had an agreement with his Educational assistant to give instruction using the program provided by the district. Using rotation of stations seemed to help students stayed focused and wanting to continue working in other stations. Teacher had the opportunity to interact with all students.

Teacher B and C mentioned during the interview that the way they supported their EL students is by providing ESL strategies. Students whose first language was Spanish, received sheltered ESL instruction by another teacher in school. Teachers mostly used Educational assistant as an interpreter to communicate with families. No other support was provided by their district. They reported a lack of training on ESL and special education. All teachers reported that ESL service time was reported in the IEP but they did not include a goal for English language development in student's IEP.

All three teachers reported to have little collaboration with general education teachers. It was hard to schedule collaboration time that works for everyone, especially if you have different grade levels. The staff's main form of communication was through email. Teacher in School A emails teachers a weekly schedule for the students they shared. Student's schedule changed each week because "he had to make up time".

Recommendations

While the New Mexico Constitution recognizes the value of bilingualism as an educational tool (Article 12, Section 8), we are not extending this value to special education programs. We need to question ourselves why there is not bilingual special education at least in schools that provide a Bilingual program. According to Baca & Cervantes, the “primary goal of bilingual education is the promotion of the maximum cognitive development of the student” (p.30). Therefore, bilingual special education seems to be a more inclusive approach because students can learn concepts in their home language while they are also developing English language skills. Once students learn a second language, they can transfer the concepts they learned in their first language.

For a Bilingual Special education program to succeed, special education teachers (including related services providers) would need knowledge of learning a second language and strategies used to teach English as a Second Language, as well as developing collaboration with the Department of Language and Cultural Equity in our District or other Bilingual/ESL teachers that can share their expertise on teaching bilingual students with Special education teachers. We need to provide an adequate and inclusive program for bilingual special education students that recognizes their culture and language. Providing ESL strategies does not make up for enhancing student’s culture and language specially in schools where their mission statement is to promote bilingualism and biculturalism.

Finally, in order for the state to provide better programs and services for at-risk students, we need a program that no longer continues stigmatizing having a disability as an impediment to fully learning a second language. Dyslexia does not happen only in one language. Districts need to provide training for Bilingual Special education and continue applying second language acquisition research to our teaching practices perhaps this would help with the over representation of English language learners in special education.

References

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Cummings, J. (1979). Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. *Review of Educational Research*, 49 (2), 222-251.

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Appendix: Observation Summaries

Observation 1 School A: School had a 90-10 Bilingual program. In the special education classroom, there were three adults. One teacher and two education assistants. Educational Assistants spoke Spanish. The teacher served a total of 45 students only 31 students were elementary school, 8 of those students were in their Middle school program. All of the students in the classroom were identified as having a disability were Hispanic. From those 45 students that teacher serve 14 students were gifted. All of these students were White. The activities and materials used for students, in the no gifted part of special education, were computer-based programs.

During the observation, teacher had 9 students in the classroom. Students received instruction for different subject areas. Students came in, took a computer and did their work. The interaction between adults and students was when they welcomed the kinds into the classroom and teachers redirecting students to their computer work. Students did not ask for support. Teacher reported that they did not use a phonics-based program for reading, instead he used a word recognition program, also on the computer. The reasoning for choosing a word recognition program was as a recommendation from their Speech and language Therapist “students have Spanish as first language and they would not be able to pronounce correctly the English phonics”.

The Special education teacher had 20 years of experience as an administrator and 12 years as Special education teacher. Teacher did not speak a second language, but had taken “Spanish in High School”. Teacher did not have an ESL/TOEFL endorsement, according to teacher “it was not necessary because he had lots of experience teaching”. His teaching experience was mostly in Texas and small schools in the Mescalero, and Zuni Reservations.

Observation 2 School B: School had a 50-50 Bilingual program. In a special education classroom, there were two adults, a teacher and the Educational assistant. The educational assistant spoke Spanish. Teacher had a total of 15 students. During the observation, there were 7 students in the classroom. Teacher was given reading instruction to 6 students, using a multisensory reading program. Educational assistant was working one-one-one with a student. From those students in this class, 3 students were Hispanic, one was African American, one was Native American and two were White. Students had phonics instruction provided by the teacher. Students read a story from their workbook, teacher asked comprehension questions during the reading including questions about the meaning of words in the story. For example: Teacher asked “What is a rag?” and a student answered “It’s like a blanket”, then teacher said “ It’s made out of fabric, that’s right! but is smaller and you can use it to clean” then she added we have one here in the classroom that we use to clean our tables. A student got up, walked toward the sink, grabbed the rag and showed it to the kids. Student went back to the table to continue working. The special education teacher had 15 years of experience. Her First language was neither Spanish or English. She spoke English as a second language. Teacher had ESL/TOEFL endorsement. Her teaching experience had been in three different districts and two different states.

Observation 3 School C: School had a 90-10 program. In a Special education classroom, there were two adults. The educational assistant spoke Spanish. The teacher served a total of 23 students. In the classroom, at the time of the observation, there were 15 students. 10 students

were identified as Hispanic, 3 African American and one White. Students were divided into small groups; each group had a station to go to. There were four centers: writing station had 5 students, working on multisensory program with EA station with 3 students, computer program with students 3, and station working with the teacher had 4 students. Each group rotated stations every 20 minutes, according to the timer in the room. Teacher was guiding students to read. Teacher and students retold the last chapter they read. Teacher used prompts like “after the boy went missing, what happened? Who remembers?” students would raise their hands and answer the question. After a few minutes, students were reading and if students got “stuck” on a word, teacher would help them figure it out using different reading strategies. Students had created a dictionary, the words that they had in their dictionary were from the book they were reading. Teacher would give them clues to find the meaning of words or they would look them up on the online dictionary.

The special education teacher had 7 years of experience. His first language was English. He was ESL/TOEFL endorsed. His teaching experience had been only in that school.