

## Bilingual Learners and Special Education

**C**ULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE LEARNERS, WITH OR without suspected disabilities, pose an ongoing challenge for educators. When working with these students, it is inappropriate to focus on the disability or its indicators without simultaneously exploring the impact that other factors may have on a child's learning and behavior. Understanding the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students requires a process of inquiry. Educators need to acquire a necessary knowledge base to assist them in making informed decisions (B. Williams, personal communication, February 3, 2000; [Gonzalez, Brusca-Vega, & Yawkey, 1997](#)). To understand this process of inquiry and attain necessary information, this site will:

- Focus on the culturally and linguistically diverse learner;
- Examine key issues for understanding and meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners with disabilities that are identified or suspected;
- Link to resources that provide more in-depth information on the identified issues.

For information on assessing English language learners for special needs, please see Question 6 of the [Standards-Based Assessment](#) section of this Web site and the related links for [resources](#) and [research](#).

### **The Field of Bilingual Special Education**

The field of bilingual special education is a dynamic field of education supported by a strong research base, with established successful models, and with an increasing body of publications. It has played a key role in providing research based knowledge and procedures to assist educators, administrators, and policy makers in making informed decisions regarding: evaluation and placement, program design and delivery, curriculum and instruction, and professional development that specifically addresses the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students with special needs.

Having emerged in 1973 as a new field, bilingual special education integrates the knowledge base, legislation and policies of two distinct educational fields: Bilingual Education and Special Education. The need for a merger became apparent with the realization that neither program could independently meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities ([Collier, 1998](#)). Today there exists a growing body research in the field, spurring the development of specialized educational and teacher training programs, as well as curricula and strategies ([Baca & De Valenzuela, 1994](#)).

To address the complexity of effectively identifying, assessing and instructing culturally and linguistically diverse students suspected of having a disability requires that school systems have personnel that fully understand the issues. To accomplish this goal, schools must have the following ([Garcia & Ortiz, 1988](#); [Garcia & Malkin, 1993](#); [Baca & Cervantes, 1998](#)):

- Personnel that have received specialized training.
- A strong pre-referral process that includes bilingual/bicultural personnel.
- Support services and programs outside of special education that meet the needs of this population.

Support within general education is necessary, since not all learning problems

experienced by these students are necessarily due to a disability (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). Factors that may influence a student's behavior and ability to learn may be due to a variety of factors, such as culture clash or the process of acculturation, to second language acquisition, to socioeconomic factors, to experiences with discrimination, to interrupted education, etc. Researchers indicate that it is critical to identify and distinguish the possible sources that cause a student difficulties in school in order to select appropriate interventions, to justify a referral to special education, or to identify needed sources of support outside of special education (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988; Collier, 1990; Barrera, 1995).

Presently, Baca and De Valenzuela (1994) indicate that the field of special education has come under attack by researchers in special and bilingual special education. Experts question the underlying assumptions of special education and the effectiveness of the programs as a whole. This has led to a call for change and improvement in the field. Baca and Valenzuela (1994) state that bilingual special education is also in need of restructuring, if it is to achieve the goal of reducing misclassification and of providing students with placement in the least restrictive environment.

The following articles are recommended for more information on the topic:

- "General Guidelines for Monitoring Minority Overrepresentation in Special Education" by Alfredo Artiles and Robert Rueda  
<http://www.nccrest.org/PDFs/Artiles-Rueda.pdf>
- "Reconstructing the Bilingual Special Education Interface" by L. Baca and J.S. De Valenzuela  
<http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/pigs/pig20.htm>
- "Legal Support for Bilingual Education and Language Appropriate Related Services for Limited English Proficient Students with Disabilities" by Alberto Fernandez  
[http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/nabe/brj/v16/16\\_34\\_fernandez.htm](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/nabe/brj/v16/16_34_fernandez.htm)
- "Preventing Inappropriate Referral of Language Minority Students to Special Education" by Shernaz B. Garcia and Alba Ortiz  
<http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/classics/focus/05referral.htm>

#### References:

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- [return] Garcia, S. B., & Ortiz, A. A. (1988, June). Preventing inappropriate referrals of language minority students to special education. *FOCUS/NCBE, 5*, 1-17.

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For more information about the Teaching Diverse Learners site, send e-mail to: [TDL@alliance.brown.edu](mailto:TDL@alliance.brown.edu)

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