10-2021

Language Minority Students Identified for Special Education: Predictors and the Role of Parent Engagement

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Study Purpose and Background

The explicit study of special education identification patterns among language minority (LM) students with disabilities remains limited (Sullivan, 2011), despite the fact that LM students are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. public school student population (Education Commission of the States, 2013). Researchers have debated whether LM students are under or overrepresented in special education, but key predictors are still inconclusive (Hibel et al., 2010; Morgan et al., 2018; Sullivan, 2011). Understanding the role of risk and resource factors for special education identification is thus an essential focus for research. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of student characteristics, parent engagement, and school and family contextual variables on disability identification for LM students during the elementary years.

Theoretical Framework

The study was grounded in intersectionality and social and cultural capital theories to consider contexts that influence marginalized groups. For LM students at risk of special education identification and misidentification, an intersectional approach helps capture the complex intersection of language and disability. Intersectionality supports a contextual understanding of disproportionality in special education. Further, a contextual approach should include parent considerations, as parents are critical to the special education identification process. Bourdieu and Coleman's theories of cultural and social capital, respectively (Bourdieu, 1986, Coleman, 1988), supported the selection of key variables to represent home and parent characteristics.

Methodology

In this quantitative study, the researcher analyzed data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010-11 (ECLS-K:2011), which is a longitudinal,

nationally representative sample. This data source offers a rich set of variables and an adequately sized sample, expanding the power and generalizability of the study and therefore the relevance of recommendations (Tourangeau et al., 2019). The sample included LM students, defined as any student who had a home language other than English (n = 3,404). The sample also was limited students who were not previously identified for special education services prior to school entry, as the issue of disproportionality is centered on the subjective aspects of disability diagnosis of school-age children (Harry & Klingner, 2014).

Logistic regression with sequential entry of predictors and interaction effects helped identify associations while controlling for contextual factors. Variables were selected from the kindergarten and fifth grade waves of the ECLS-K:2011 dataset and weights were used to address the clustered sampling design. The dependent variable was a dichotomous variable indicating if the student received special education services in fifth grade, as determined by the student having an individualized education program (IEP). Independent variables included demographic, family, school, and academic characteristics. The researcher estimated two-way interaction effects between parent engagement (moderator) and key predictors. The regression estimates' test statistics indicated which variables were significant predictors of an LM student receiving special education services in fifth grade ($p < .05$). The researcher reported effect sizes as odds ratios (OR) with 95% confidence intervals.

Parent Engagement Scale

Researchers have operationalized the latent variable of parent engagement in various ways in acknowledgement of the multiple ways parents invest in their children's education (Anderson et al., 2015; Cheadle, 2008; Froiland et al., 2013). Cheadle (2008) identified variables of parental educational investment or "concerted cultivation" (p. 7) in the 1998 ECLS-K based

on the seminal work of Lareau (2002), who explored how parents organize their children's lives, utilize resources, and communicate. The findings suggested that parental educational investment significantly mediated SES and racial/ethnic disparities and should include measures of child participation in adult-organized activities, parent involvement in school endeavors, and access to cognitive stimulation at home (Cheadle, 2008). The current study used Cheadle's (2008) operationalized model of concerted cultivation by calculating a composite scale of dichotomous parent engagement measures to use in outcome models. Researchers have included similar measures of parent involvement and home support as components of parent engagement (Anderson et al., 2015; Froiland et al., 2013); however, parents' role in organizing their children's free time is often overlooked (Cheadle, 2008). Children's participation in adult-organized activities indicates how parents structure their children's time and provide them with opportunities to foster their skills and talents (Lareau, 2002, 2011). To measure adult-organized leisure activities, the researcher used dummy variables in the ECLS-K:2011 that asked parents about child participation in the following activities outside of school hours: clubs, athletics, religious activities, and the arts (a composite indicator of dance, music, art, or performing arts lessons). To quantify parents' direct involvement with school, the researcher used five dichotomous indicators of volunteering, and attending open house, conferences, school events, or fundraisers. The number of child's books (indicated with a dummy variable, 0 = under the median of 50 books, 1 = over the median of 50 books) and availability of a computer for the child to use were used to measure resources available for cognitive stimulation at home. To further measure cognitive stimulation at home, the researcher included the frequency of computer use (0 = less than once per week, 1 = at least once per week), whether the computer was used for learning skills, and the frequency that parents read to their child (0 = less than three

times per week, 1 = at least three times per week). Combining the selected variables into one composite sum scale helped to prevent multicollinearity from confounded concepts. The composite sum scale included 14 measures and has a Cronbach's alpha (α) of 0.715. Cronbach's alpha (α) is a measure of scale reliability that helps to ensure the composite measure consistently reflects the intended construct of parent engagement ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) (Field, 2013). Using an early measure of parent engagement prevents endogeneity, so fall of kindergarten data was used to create the parent engagement scale.

Direct Child Assessments

For this study, direct child assessment data was included in the content areas of reading and mathematics. Direct assessments measured knowledge, skills, and development (Tourangeau et al., 2015). Item Response Theory (IRT) procedures were used to create theta scores for the direct cognitive assessments (Tourangeau et al., 2015). Theta scores estimate the child's ability in a domain based on performance on the items administered (Tourangeau et al., 2015). The metric for theta scores ranges from -4 to 4, with lower scores indicating lower ability (Tourangeau et al., 2015). All assessments used in this study were administered in English to all students (Tourangeau et al., 2015).

Social Skill Scales

In the ECLS-K:2011, teachers responded to questionnaire items used to generate social skill scales. Composite scales are based on responses ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (very often) for each behavior area. For externalizing behaviors, teachers responded to five questions used to create a mean rating, and higher scores indicate that a student demonstrated more problem externalizing behaviors. Approaches to learning represent seven items on the teacher questionnaire, including how often the student kept belongings organized, showed eagerness to

learn new things, worked independently, easily adapted to changes in routine, persisted in completing tasks, paid attention well, and followed classroom rules. Higher scores indicate that the child demonstrated positive behaviors more often (Tourangeau et al., 2015).

Research Questions

1. What are the leading predictors of special education identification by fifth grade for language minority (LM) students?
2. How does parent engagement relate to special education identification by fifth grade for LM students?

Results

RQ1: Predictors of Special Education Identification by Fifth Grade among LM Students

In RQ1, the researcher questioned, what are the leading predictors of special education identification by fifth grade for language minority (LM) students? Table 1 provides estimates from logistic regression models of special education identification by fifth grade on demographic, family, and academic variables among LM students. Model 1 included demographics: race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), and parents' oral English proficiency. Model 2 added baseline school characteristics including private school, response to intervention (RTI), school mean reading and math test score for sample at school entry, and school percentage of ELs, minority students, and students receiving FARMS. Model 3 added fifth grade variables including EL services in fifth grade, student mobility, and the academic and behavioral measures.

School percent FARMS, student mobility by fifth grade, and fifth grade reading scores were significant predictors of special education identification by fifth grade among LM students. Model 3 provides the estimated main effects for these variables. LM students who attended

schools with higher FARMS percentages, a proxy for increased poverty in the school composition, had lower odds of receiving special education services (OR = 0.981). LM students who changed schools by fifth grade also had lower odds of receiving special education services (OR = 0.462). Fifth grade reading was negatively related to special education identification (OR = 0.168), indicating that LM students with higher reading ability had lower odds of having an IEP. Of interest, response to intervention (RTI) and English learner (EL) services were not significant predictors of special education placement among LM students.

RQ2: The Role of Parent Engagement for Special Education Identification by Fifth Grade for LM Students

To address RQ2 (how does parent engagement relate to special education identification by fifth grade for LM students?), the reader is directed to Model 4 in Table 2. Parent engagement was measured as a composite scale that included child participation in adult-organized activities, parent involvement in school endeavors, and access to cognitive stimulation at home.[1] Higher scores on the parent engagement scale demonstrated higher levels of engagement based on the given measures. The parent engagement scale was not significant as a main effect, indicating that parent engagement was not related to special education identification for LM students when demographic, school, and academic factors were controlled. Parent expectations for child's educational attainment was also not significant as a main effect. The researcher tested for interaction effects to estimate the effect of parent engagement as a moderator of the relationship between student factors and special education identification. However, no interaction effects were significant and therefore these were left off the final parsimonious model.

Conclusions

[1] The scale included 14 measures and has a Cronbach's alpha (α) of 0.715, indicating the composite measure consistently reflected the intended construct of parent engagement.

This research presented findings of the significant predictors of special education identification by fifth grade among LM students in the nationally representative ECLS-K:2011 sample. The significant predictors of special education identification by fifth grade among LM students included: school percentage of students receiving FARMS, student mobility by fifth grade, and fifth grade reading performance. Parent engagement not a significant predictor of special education identification among LM students. Analyses revealed findings in the areas of family characteristics, school context, and academic factors. These areas are discussed in the following sections.

Parent Characteristics

Among the LM sample, parent engagement was not significant as a main effect or as a moderator for the relationship between other factors and special education identification. An interesting finding was related to parents' oral English proficiency. Approximately 15% of the LM sample had no parent that spoke English. While qualitative researchers have voiced concerns about the lack of interpretation services available for families in the special education process (Cummings & Hardin, 2017; Rivera-Singletary & Cranston-Gingras, 2020), parents' English proficiency was not found to be a significant predictor of LM students receiving special education services.

School Factors

Among LM students, socioeconomic status (SES) was not a significant predictor. School percentage of students receiving free and reduced-price meals (FARMS) was a better predictor of special education identification than individual-level SES. Students who attended a school with more students receiving FARMS had slightly lower odds of receiving special education services. These results suggest that school concentration of poverty may be more predictive of

special education identification than individual SES. It is worth noting that certain anticipated school-level predictors were not significant. Contrary to findings of Hibel et al. (2010), school achievement was not a significant predictor in the present study. Additionally, response to intervention (RTI) was intended to improve the accuracy of special education referrals, however there were no significant differences for students who attended a school that implemented RTI. Researchers have argued that early RTI implementation was inconsistent (Bineham et al., 2014), which may explain the lack of effect. The school concentration of English learners (ELs) was not significant, despite prior findings that districts with higher proportions of ELs were less likely to have disproportionate representation of ELs in special education (Sullivan, 2011). Unlike findings by Anderson et al. (2015), students who attended private school did not have lower odds of receiving special education services. However, this finding was not confirmed in the LM sample possibly due to limited variation. Only 6% of the LM sample attended private school.

Academic Factors

The basis of disability identification is academics and behavior, and therefore researchers anticipate these factors to be the primary predictors of special education identification (Hibel et al., 2008, 2010). Among LM students, reading was the strongest predictor of special education identification by fifth grade. LM students who struggled in reading by fifth grade had over 80% increased odds of special education placement. This finding indicates the importance of early intervention in reading.

Behavior was not a predictor of special education identification for LM students. This aligned to the findings of Gage et al. (2013), who argued that LM students are unlikely to qualify for special education because of behavior. IDEA declares that students who are “socially maladjusted” are excluded from the emotional disturbance (ED) disability category (Gage et al.,

2013, p. 133). ED and social maladjustment are confounded constructs with no measurement to distinguish between them. As LM students require a period of social adjustment due to learning English, it is difficult to qualify them for special education services under the ED category (Gage et al., 2013).

Student mobility was a predictor of special education identification for LM students. LM students who changed schools at least once between kindergarten and fifth grade had over 50% reduction in odds that they were identified for special education services. This finding suggests that LM students who transfer schools may be overlooked for special education services. LM students, specifically, who changed schools were at a disadvantage for disability referral. Disability diagnosis can be especially complex for educators identifying LM students for special education due to confounded processes between language acquisition and disability indicators. When LM students change schools, unless formally engaged in the special education referral process, there is typically little communication between schools. The new school must ensure that the student has adequate opportunities to learn, and families need to time to acquaint to the new school. These factors may explain the underrepresentation of LM students who have changed schools in special education.

In the LM sample, 65.4% of LM students were classified as ELs at school entry and by fifth grade only 24.8% of these students remained in EL services. The researcher tested for the effects of EL services, in kindergarten and at each critical timepoint separately. EL designation was not a significant predictor of special education identification. This was an interesting finding, as language instruction services have been considered a potential reason for delayed special education identification in former studies, though not explicitly investigated (Artiles et al., 2005; Guiberson, 2009). One reason that EL services were not significant may be that

academic performance indicators had a stronger relationship with disability referral. Reclassification is confounded with academic achievement, as academic assessments are the criteria for exiting English language services.

Limitations

This study applied a non-experimental design and therefore cannot claim causation. As a large dataset, the ECLS-K:2011 was beneficial for finding patterns. To examine patterns of disproportionality, the researcher relied on categorization. While the researcher applied an intersectional approach to select variables and create categories, as a quantitative study, aspects of inequality may still be overlooked (Codiroli Mcmaster & Cook, 2019). Categorization may mask within-group or individual differences (Artiles et al., 2005). Additionally, national-level analyses can mask local-level patterns.

While this study examined special education identification by fifth grade, the data available in the data source used were not fine grain enough to identify the precise timing of identification. Another limitation was reliance on self-reported data for most parent characteristics variables, including those used in creating the parent engagement scale. As a quantitative study, proxies were necessary to measure the latent variable of parent engagement. Parents' self-reporting may overestimate parent engagement and expectations due to "social desirability" (Zhan, 2006, p. 973). Additionally, while the researcher aimed to utilize an inclusive construct of parent engagement, it may not best represent the ways that some parents engage with their children's development and school.

Educational Implications

The findings of this study have implications for policy and practice. Among LM students, fifth grade reading performance predicted special education identification. LM students who

struggled in reading had higher odds of special education placement in fifth grade. These results support efforts for early reading intervention; efforts should be made to provide high quality instruction and supports for LM students in the early years. The federal government requires states that demonstrate an overrepresentation of racial/ethnic minorities in special education allocate funds to serve the overidentified population through comprehensive coordinated early intervening services (IDEA, 2004). These funds are aimed to prevent students qualifying for special education services in later years by investing in early childhood education and tiered intervention systems. The findings of this study support continued investment in early childhood education and intervention, as early academic performance predicted later special education placement for LM students.

The basis of disability identification should be academics and behavior (Hibel et al., 2010); when other factors predict special education placement, misidentification is a concern. School resources were an alarming predictor of disability identification for LM students. Students who attended schools with a higher percentage of students receiving FARMS, a proxy for concentration of poverty, had slightly lower odds of receiving special education services. Resources should be allocated for schools serving underprivileged communities to improve disability screening methods. Another concerning predictor among LM students was student mobility, as students who changed schools by fifth grade had lower odds of being identified for special education services. Improving communication between schools and continuity of pre-referral academic supports may prevent LM students who change schools from being overlooked for disability screening. LM students may also be overlooked for special education services based on behavior. The equity of processes to identify behavioral disabilities and qualify CLD students for services warrant further consideration.

Tables and Figures

Table 1

Logistic Regression of Education Identification by Fifth Grade on Demographic, Family, and Academic Variables, among Language Minority Students Only

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	OR	[CI]	OR	[CI]	OR	[CI]
Intercept	0.060***	[0.012, 0.304]	0.080	[0.004, 1.749]	15.559	[0.465, 521.025]
Demographics						
Black[a]	0.781	[0.139, 4.393]	0.770	[0.121, 4.898]	0.584	[0.082, 4.151]
Asian/PI	1.034	[0.241, 4.447]	1.002	[0.193, 5.192]	1.091	[0.177, 6.722]
Hispanic	1.095	[0.423, 2.837]	1.316	[0.458, 3.778]	0.961	[0.361, 2.554]
Female	0.955	[0.650, 1.404]	0.944	[0.649, 1.375]	1.028	[0.616, 1.716]
SES	0.862	[0.473, 1.571]	0.725	[0.428, 1.225]	1.116	[0.689, 1.806]
Parent Eng proficiency	0.949	[0.579, 1.555]	0.910	[0.533, 1.553]	0.997	[0.593, 1.675]
School characteristics						
Private school			1.206	[0.252, 5.776]	1.128	[0.224, 5.687]
RTI			0.951	[0.509, 1.780]	1.188	[0.610, 2.315]
% FARMS			0.988*	[0.978, 0.999]	0.981***	[0.970, 0.992]
% EL			1.006	[0.992, 1.020]	1.004	[0.989, 1.019]
% Minority			0.997	[0.985, 1.010]	1.001	[0.988, 1.014]
Mean achievement			1.007	[0.939, 1.080]	1.013	[0.944, 1.086]
5th grade variables						

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	OR	[CI]	OR	[CI]	OR	[CI]
EL services					1.356	[0.876, 2.099]
Changed schools					0.462*	[0.234, 0.912]
Math theta					0.432	[0.184, 1.011]
Reading theta					0.168***	[0.064, 0.446]
Approaches to learning					0.689	[0.431, 1.101]
Externalizing behaviors					0.986	[0.646, 1.504]
			Model fit			
Pseudo-R^2						
McFadden	.002		.016		.135	
Cox and Snell	.001		.008		.061	
Wald χ^2	1.722		22.713*		131.809***	
df	6		12		18	

Note. OR = odds ratio; CI = 95% confidence interval; PI = Pacific Islander; SES = socioeconomic status; PE = parent engagement; RTI = response to intervention; FARMS = free and reduced-price meals; EL = English learner.

[a] Reference group is white, non-Hispanic.

[b] Reference category is high school or less.

n = 3,404; *weighted N* = 671,103.615.

***p < .001 **p < .01 *p < .05.

Table 2

Logistic Regression of Special Education Identification by Fifth Grade on Parent Engagement and Demographic and Academic Variables, among Language Minority Students Only

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	OR	[CI]	OR	[CI]	OR	[CI]	OR	[CI]
Intercept	0.060***	[0.012, 0.304]	0.080	[0.004, 1.749]	15.559	[0.465, 521.025]	8.236	[0.200, 338.982]
Demographics								
Black[a]	0.781	[0.139, 4.393]	0.770	[0.121, 4.898]	0.584	[0.082, 4.151]	0.569	[0.083, 3.896]
Asian/PI	1.034	[0.241, 4.447]	1.002	[0.193, 5.192]	1.091	[0.177, 6.722]	1.092	[0.175, 6.795]
Hispanic	1.095	[0.423, 2.837]	1.316	[0.458, 3.778]	0.961	[0.361, 2.554]	0.897	[0.330, 2.439]
Female	0.955	[0.650, 1.404]	0.944	[0.649, 1.375]	1.028	[0.616, 1.716]	1.025	[0.616, 1.707]
SES	0.862	[0.473, 1.571]	0.725	[0.428, 1.225]	1.116	[0.689, 1.806]	1.050	[0.664, 1.660]
Parent Eng proficiency	0.949	[0.579, 1.555]	0.910	[0.533, 1.553]	0.997	[0.593, 1.675]	0.978	[0.570, 1.678]
School characteristics								
Private school			1.206	[0.252, 5.776]	1.128	[0.224, 5.687]	1.030	[0.202, 5.264]
RTI			0.951	[0.509, 1.780]	1.188	[0.610, 2.315]	1.183	[0.607, 2.305]
% FARMS			0.988*	[0.978, 0.999]	0.981***	[0.970, 0.992]	0.982***	[0.971, 0.992]
% EL			1.006	[0.992, 1.020]	1.004	[0.989, 1.019]	1.004	[0.989, 1.019]
% Minority			0.997	[0.985, 1.010]	1.001	[0.988, 1.014]	1.001	[0.988, 1.014]
Mean achievement			1.007	[0.939, 1.080]	1.013	[0.944, 1.086]	1.011	[0.945, 1.082]
5th grade variables								
EL services					1.356	[0.876, 2.099]	1.358	[0.881, 2.093]

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	OR	[CI]	OR	[CI]	OR	[CI]	OR	[CI]
Changed schools					0.462*	[0.234, 0.912]	0.464*	[0.235, 0.915]
Math theta					0.432	[0.184, 1.011]	0.407*	[0.170, 0.973]
Reading theta					0.168***	[0.064, 0.446]	0.160***	[0.061, 0.422]
Approaches to learning					0.689	[0.431, 1.101]	0.683	[0.431, 1.082]
Externalizing behaviors					0.986	[0.646, 1.504]	0.992	[0.645, 1.526]
Parent factors								
Parent engagement (PE)							1.063	[0.966, 1.170]
Par educ expectations								
Some college[b]							2.122	[0.477, 9.436]
Bachelor's degree							1.367	[0.366, 5.108]
Graduate/ terminal							1.723	[0.555, 5.354]
Model fit								
Pseudo-R^2								
McFadden	.002		.016		.135		.140	
Cox and Snell	.001		.008		.061		.063	
Wald χ^2	1.722		22.713*		131.809***		138.835***	
df	6		12		18		22	

Note. OR = odds ratio; CI = 95% confidence interval; PI = Pacific Islander; SES = socioeconomic status; PE = parent engagement; RTI = response to intervention; FARMS = free and reduced-price meals; EL = English learner.

[a] Reference group is white, non-Hispanic.

[b] Reference category is high school or less.

n = 3,404; *weighted N* = 671,103.615.

***p < .001 **p < .01 *p < .05

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