

The Wish of Belonging in Bilingual Education: Possibilities to Grow as Bilingual and Biliterate Learners When Having a Disability

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Summary

This policy brief opens with an invitation to learn about the bilingual life of Martín, a student with a speech language impairment. The story highlights complex verbal and non-verbal practices that recognize the student as bilingual at home. At school, Martín's linguistic impairment, which causes difficulty producing oral speech, can frame the student as linguistically deficient. Limited perceptions of Martín's disability can erase his true linguistic skills when measuring language in conventional ways. His story explores bilingualism for students with disabilities and possibilities for inclusion.

Today, 14% of students enrolled in K-12 public schools are identified as having a disability with specific learning disability (SLD), speech or language impairment (SLI), and other health impairments being the most common disabilities. Current research demonstrates that students dually identified as English learners and as having a disability are misidentified for language related disabilities. For example, in the past ten years, the number of students dually identified as English learners and as having a disability grew by 30%.

For decades, research on bilingual education has documented the benefits of bilingualism for all students. Particularly, key research demonstrates that bilingual students who experience bilingual education at least through elementary school show academic advantages, strengths in specific cognitive areas, and enriched creativity. Particularly, research indicates that bilingual education promotes the development of both languages simultaneously. For example, improvements in reading in the first language also help the development of the second language. Additionally, students in dual-language programs show greater advancement in math and reading in comparison to their peers enrolled in transitional programs. Furthermore, students designated as English learners in bilingual programs were found to surpass their English-only counterparts in English acquisition. Not to mention, bilingual education promises lifelong benefits, including achieving higher levels of education.

In today's global economy, bilingualism has become highly coveted with families pursuing opportunities for their children to become bilingual. With the growing interest in bilingual education, questions about equity and inclusion for marginalized and minoritized students reveal structural exclusion and issues of access. Specifically, emergent bilingual students with disabilities, despite their cultural and linguistic experiences with bilingualism, are excluded from accessing bilingual education. This ultimately compromises their opportunities to become bilingual and biliterate in spite of their linguistic and cultural resources. Specific challenges to access that are faced by emergent bilingual students with disabilities include professional counsel discouraging bilingual education programs and environments, lack of integration of special education services in bilingual education programs, and the use of bilingual education for remedial purposes and not for long-term development of bilingualism.

This policy brief presents relevant research centering the bilingual learning of emergent bilingual students with disabilities and possibilities for true equitable access. Relevant research indicates that bilingual education offers considerable benefits for all learners. Yet, emerging bilingual students with disabilities are systematically excluded from accessing bilingual education. This brief problematizes common misconceptions regarding educating emergent bilingual children with disabilities in bilingual education to highlight educational opportunity disparities. The report explores ways to make access to bilingual education equitable and illuminates areas where policymakers, researchers, and practitioners can work together to fulfill the promise of equitable access to education for all students. Ultimately, the brief advances an inclusive vision of bilingual education programs where bilingual students with disabilities can develop as bilingual and biliterate learners.

Key Recommendations

Policy Recommended Actions

- Generate policy that anticipates intersectionality of educational labels that will more fluidly allow for children to receive a variety of services simultaneously.
- Policies meant to guide the preparation of teachers to work in bilingual classrooms and in classrooms with children with disabilities need to be reformulated in conversation with each other.

Research Recommended Actions

- Design and implement more research efforts about disability from the bilingual standpoint.
- The scientific community needs to move beyond research questions on whether bilingual education is beneficial and focus on new consequential research efforts.
- Study how language learning differs from having a disability as defined in schools, and how to refine the definitions being used, for more accurate identification of needs and consequent meaningful services.

Practice Based Actions

- Teacher education programs and schools need to contribute to prepare all teachers to address the needs of students who are both ELs and have a disability.
- Bilingual education programs need to plan for, and purposefully integrate, special education services.
- Instruction must be designed assuming that students are going to be diverse in multiple ways, providing multiple options to enhance the learning experiences of diverse learners.
- We recommend embracing an expansive view of disability and disability labels as socially constructed and as marks of unique learning trajectories that are still developmentally appropriate and valuable.
- Educators must gather evidence of knowledge and language from the multiple social spaces that children navigate and take shared responsibility for the learning of all children beyond labels.

A Case for Urgent Action

Much progress has been made since the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, the first federal law requiring a free and appropriate public education for those with a disability. However, after almost half a century, this law has not been enacted to its fullest. Bilingual education poses numerous benefits for emergent bilingual children, however, as children are identified with a disability, their opportunities to learn bilingually and grow as biliterate people are limited. Ensuring more inclusive bilingual programs will allow children with disabilities, who wish to embrace their bilingualism and their disability simultaneously, the opportunity to do so. Making bilingual education a possibility for those with a disability requires renewed awareness and collaboration at the levels of policy, research, and school practice.

Introduction

Martín is twelve years old and the youngest of five children. At home he successfully communicates with his parents in Spanish and in both English and Spanish with his older siblings. On a regular day, Martín will text his sister in English to tell her about the events that happened at school. Later that day, while helping his mother outside, he will sound out a few words or phrases in Spanish as well as use home signs to ask her questions about her garden. Martín has a speech and language impairment and is designated as an English learner. Because of Martín's disability affecting his oral language production, Martín uses multiple means of communication that go beyond oral production. For example, he uses small words and phrases, home sign systems, sounds, and writing and electronic communication. At home he attends weekly virtual speech therapy sessions where he also uses these linguistic resources. At school, Martín's bilingual linguistic dexterity, which allows him to communicate successfully in Spanish and English, can be erased when his learning disability and English learner labels forefront perceived linguistic deficits. These particular labels that focus on linguistic output would suggest that his Spanish and English abilities are very limited. Particularly, difficulties producing oral language as a result of his linguistic impairment obscure his bilingual proficiency. This is because the conventional approaches for understanding and measuring meaning-making do not recognize the array of linguistic systems he uses in everyday communication and even his ability to aptly switch languages to accommodate speakers. For instance, his elementary school prioritized his disability identification, shaping his learning opportunities around perceived linguistic and learning limitations. In comparison to his life at home, in elementary school his bilingual life and academic interests were ignored. His oral linguistic impairment was perceived as a critical barrier to inclusion in mainstream classrooms and electives. His language skills did not adequately and visibly translate into evidence that could be recognized and valued. And, because measuring language in non-conventional ways is difficult, the school portrayed Martín as having almost no language at all. Martín's case, more than anything, encourages readers to explore the multimodality of language and what it can mean to do language in ways that are less familiar without framing these practices as deficient.

Martín's life story, as told by the first author, reflects the difficulties in centering bilingual learning in schools for children with a disability. While children with a disability might have multifaceted bilingual lives, their possibilities for continuing their bilingual and biliteracy development in schools are often limited. As a result, the bilingual abilities of children with a disability might erode.¹ Limitations placed on children with a disability to learn bilingually reside in low expectations, misconceptions about their bilingual learning potential, or lack of adequate type of services or bilingual teachers that are knowledgeable about disability.

During the 2020-2021 academic year, the United States served 7,182,916 students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 20 U.S.C § 1400 (2004), representing 15% of total public school student enrollment. Disaggregated, that represents 19% Native American students, 14% Latinx/Hispanic students, 12% Pacific Islander students, 17% Black students, 8% Asian students, and 15% White students.² According to the National Center for Education Statistics, specific learning disability (SLD) (33%), speech or language impairment (SLI) (19%), and other health impairments (15%) are the most common disabilities.³ Additionally, demographic data indicates important representational differences, for example, in the state of New York 22% of students designated as English learners are identified with a disability.⁴ Moreover, other parts of the United States such as Puerto Rico, New Mexico, Montana and Illinois report a larger percentage of identification of students designated as English learners (ELs) into disability categories than non-EL students.⁵ According to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), from 2012-2020, the number of students labeled as having a disability and designated as English learners grew by almost 30% between 2012 and 2020.⁶

Examining demographic and state data reveals overrepresentation of bilingual students in socially constructed disability categories such as SLD and SLI and misidentified for language related disabilities.⁷ According to the Office of English Language Acquisition, students designated as English learners (ELs), or emergent bilinguals (a term that highlights the assets that minoritized children bring to school and often includes ELs and non-ELs), were more likely to be served for SLD, SLI, or intellectual disabilities than their non-EL peers.⁸ This is concerning as 23% of all students enrolled in public schools speak a language other than English at home⁹ and 25% of students belong to immigrant families.¹⁰ Conversely, underrepresentation of minoritized students in different states and of different age groups within disabilities categories can also be an issue as this can delay access to necessary and preventative services.¹¹

Research indicates that emergent bilingual students today are not reaching the same levels of reading by the end of high school as compared to non-emergent bilinguals, when measured in traditional ways (i.e., vertical developmental expectations aligned with school reading levels or standardized assessments that consider only one mode of making meaning).¹² Similarly, through these measures, few students with a disability are reported to reach within proficient or higher levels in reading.¹³ Both groups of students, often overlapping, have been historically positioned as performing lower in comparison to monolingual non-disabled students as they might only be able to demonstrate comprehension through traditionally less-valued means. Yet, little attention has been placed in recognizing and valuing their linguistic and cultural assets or understanding literacy as a multimodal process that goes beyond print, includes digital tools, and is embedded in popular culture to ensure more inclusive practices.¹⁴ More importantly, assessment tools of students that focus on identifying deficits have been rarely questioned. This policy brief encourages readers to consider students who, like Martín, are dually designated as emerging bilinguals and as having a disability, their access to supports and services, and possibilities for maintaining and becoming bilingual and biliterate.

Historical Context for Bilingual Education and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Linguistic diversity has always existed in the United States, beginning with the original Native American languages, and continuing with the languages immigrants brought.¹⁵ Immigration is a historical but also a reality that continues to be very present in our country.¹⁶ The largest minority in the country is now formed by Latinxs, who by the middle of the twenty-first century are expected to make up a quarter of the total population in the United States.¹⁷ It is important to learn to maintain children's languages and cultures through education, a process that has not always been supported in the United States where assimilation and English-only movements have resulted in new generations that soon lose the language of their ancestors.¹⁸

The Bilingual Education Act (BEA) of 1968 promoted in some ways bilingual learning because it provided initial federal funding, and by the mid-seventies bilingual education was strengthening its space in schools. Yet, this transitory period was short lived. Subsequent reauthorizations of the BEA beginning in the 1980's quickly led to funding for English-only and preference for dual-language programs that slowly differentiated themselves from bilingual education.¹⁹ By the 1990s a few propositions surfaced in specific states to prohibit the use of two languages in classrooms. For example, in 1998 California voters approved Proposition 227 which restricted bilingual education in California and only recently repealed it in 2016. In 2001, the Bilingual Education Act was replaced by Title III with the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, and like other legislation at the time, also placed its focus on the learning of English. Scholars suggest that this shift in bilingual education to dual-language or two-way immersion programs no longer prioritized a bilingual education for emergent bilinguals but instead on their transition to English and on access to a neoliberal multicultural education for monolingual students.²⁰

The history of the pressure for immigrants to learn English can be rooted in the lack of possibilities for bilingual children to continue their education in a way they could understand instruction. The landmark 1974 *Lau vs. Nichols* litigation ruled that it was discriminatory failing to provide instruction in a language that children could understand. The consequent *Lau Remedies* required that schools designed appropriate pedagogical approaches for bilingual children. Such language favored bilingual education, but it did not mandate it.²¹

Despite the sociopolitical resistance, bilingual education continues to grow.²² While bilingual education is expanding in some ways, the priority when using the native language for instruction has not always been to develop bilingual and bicultural individuals who are biliterate in two languages. In fact, the term bilingual education has been erroneously used to refer to different forms of instruction in the United States. For instance, if Martín had received some language support in Spanish and since his speech services were in two languages, some educators might describe his learning as being bilingual. However, the Spanish education he received was extremely limited and subtractive in that it was not conducive of long-term bilingualism and biliteracy development. The main difference between programs using children's home languages in schools resides on the larger focus of the bilingual instruction, where children never exit out of bilingual education. This main difference is directly connected to the number of years through which a bilingual curriculum is maintained,²³ and the non-hierarchical relationship of the two languages.

While the term bilingual education should be technically used only to refer to instruction that employs two languages to teach content and literacy and aims for bilingualism and biliteracy (i.e., dual language programs),²⁴ it has been often used to describe transitional programs where two languages are used in limited ways. Education that uses two languages when teaching emergent bilinguals, but that is motivated by an effort to promote English, and that is transitional or subtractive in nature,²⁵ should rather be defined through what it offers (i.e., a native language transitional support program). Programs that employ the native language for instruction of English become monolingual as soon as children demonstrate enough proficiency. Under this perspective, children, in a way, eventually exit out of bilingual education. While these transitional native language programs persist, dual language programs that aim at helping children grow as bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate individuals and are maintained throughout at least the entire elementary school years, have grown rapidly in the last ten years.²⁶ These additive programs can be described as one-way if participating children are from the same linguistic background and two-way when children include both EIs and non-EIs. Both these programs pose numerous benefits for bilingual children who speak a language other than English at home and should be a possible option as part of the effort to ensure access to free public education for children with disabilities, outlined in our federal laws.

In 1975, the federal government passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHC) guaranteeing free and appropriate public education for all students with disabilities in all states and localities. In 1990, EAHC was reauthorized and became known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA ensures free public education for students with a disability and provides students with necessary and appropriate services designed for their needs.²⁷ Furthermore, Child Find, a mandate of IDEA, requires states to have procedures in place to ensure that all children with disabilities in any state from birth to age 21 are located, identified, evaluated, and receive needed special education and related services. These services, are designed to serve students in the least restrictive environment (LRE) possible and only remove students or provide separate schooling when services and aids are not successful in the general educational environment.²⁸ Despite the affordances and protections granted by IDEA, for bilingual students with disabilities and their families, more can be done to ensure that these protections ensure the same opportunities to grow bilingually and biliterate as their peers and that their disabilities do not become markers for exclusion.

Unfortunately, transitional use of children’s native language for learning has been very popular in the United States, particularly as a way to supposedly accelerate English learning for children with a disability.²⁹ In fact, bilingual children’s possibilities to learn in dual language bilingual programs diminish when they are identified with a disability.³⁰ Processes that discriminate children with a disability away from dual language bilingual education need to be questioned as short term bilingual approaches do not lead to the best outcomes for children. Most of the benefits that bilingual education provides for emergent bilinguals, including those with a disability, manifest in models that embrace long term bilingual education and that, teaching language and content in two languages, promote bilingualism and biliteracy.

The upcoming subsections explore the research that supports these ideas, including the benefits of bilingual education for all learners and access to bilingual education for children with a disability.

The Benefits of Learning Bilingually for Bilingual Children and Children with Disabilities

There are documented benefits that emergent bilingual children, including those with a disability, gain from learning bilingually and becoming biliterate. Bilingual children who learn in bilingual education for extended periods of time that last at least throughout their elementary school years, demonstrate academic advantages, strengths in specific cognitive areas, and enhanced creativity. A summary of the research findings regarding these benefits for bilingual children, including those with a disability, follows.

Academic Advantages

Compilations of the research bodies regarding instruction with emergent bilinguals have documented that teaching students to read in their first language also advances their reading in English.³¹ In fact, the longer the length of bilingual instruction for emergent bilinguals, the better their English achievement. Progress toward full English proficiency takes at least six years for most children, with the beginning progress being quicker, but the learning from intermediate to full English levels taking longer.³²

Longitudinal research findings show enhanced academic outcomes, and narrowing of the perceived achievement gap involving emergent bilinguals, in one-way and two-way dual language bilingual programs over any other language support programs.³³ Furthermore, dual language bilingual programs can improve the school community onto an inclusive space for all.³⁴ Extensive research documenting the learning benefits of dual language bilingual programs for the last 40 years shows that emergent bilinguals in dual language bilingual programs not only become proficient in English and achieve levels of reading, writing, and Math that parallel or surpass those of ELs in English only programs, but that children in bilingual programs possess more positive attitudes toward school and grow bilingually, communicate with their family, and perceive multiple advantages over those not learning in these programs.³⁵ While it may seem that the longer the time, the better the learning outcomes, merely extending the time in a bilingual program is not enough for all bilingual children to gain the same benefits. Rather, good challenging language and content instruction is necessary.³⁶

When looking at the academic advantages of bilingual learning with children with disabilities, research is more limited. However, most of the studies looking at bilingual learning or bilingual disability-related services indicate that, at the very least, bilingualism does not result in added challenges for children with disabilities and that having a disability does not impede bilingual development. This has been documented with children labeled with autism spectrum disorder^{37 38 39} and with children with intellectual,^{40 41 42} SLI,^{43 44 45} and SLD^{46 47 48} disability labels.

In summary, bilingual learning is possible for children with and without a disability, does not generally pose added challenges, and can lead to academic and language development. When dual language bilingual education is consistently implemented for five years or more and includes instruction that stimulates immigrant children to further develop their linguistic competences, it poses advantages for emergent bilinguals across the academic areas, including English development, that can be expected to parallel those for children with disabilities.

Cognitive Strengths: Executive Function and Metalinguistic Awareness

In terms of cognitive strengths, bilingual children have shown enhanced performance in certain cognitive areas when compared to monolingual children. The specific areas where they demonstrate benefits are metalinguistic awareness and executive function.

Emergence of metalinguistic awareness, or the ability to think and understand language, associated with bilingualism surface after a period of about 5 years of bilingual exposure.⁴⁹ That is, the advantages in metalinguistic awareness have been only observed when children achieve high levels of bilingualism.⁵⁰

Closely connected to bilinguals' metalinguistic awareness is the ability to recognize cognates and to employ that ability to enhance vocabulary knowledge. Cognates are pairs of words that are spelled and pronounced similarly across languages and that also have the same meaning. Research with young bilingual and non-bilingual children suggests that bilingual children perform better in measures of cognate recognition than non-bilinguals and that this advantage is still present with bilingual children who have a language disability (i.e., speech and language impairment labels). For example, while bilingual children with a language disability might name fewer pictures in measures of picture vocabulary, they demonstrate similar cognate advantages than non-disabled bilingual children,⁵¹ and they show cross-linguistic transfer⁵² and greater gains in naming cognates than non-cognates vocabulary terms^{53 54} during interventions targeting cognates. On the other hand, executive function is the ability to plan before taking action and staying focused so that one can achieve long term goals. Executive function is most often described through the four components of inhibition, interference control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility.⁵⁵ As one can expect, executive function is closely related to learning and academic performance, and it is important for all children.

The relationship between bilingualism and executive function has been well documented. After controlling for age and parent education and income, bilingual children as young as kindergarteners outperform other children in executive function tasks related to managing attentional demands.⁵⁶ Bilingual elementary aged children across socio-economic levels and ethnicities outperform non-bilingual children on measures requiring exhibition and rule-switching, which are specific aspects of executive function.⁵⁷ In fact, metalinguistic awareness and executive function improve as children progress in their bilingual education. In other words, enhanced cognitive strength is connected to learning in long-term bilingual programs.⁵⁸

Executive functioning and visual processing struggles are often reported in studies among children with attention problems. Since executive function is positively connected to improved academic performance, particularly in Math,⁵⁹ it is of interest to understand whether the cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism cushion against these struggles. Studies comparing bilinguals experiencing difficulties with attention, including those labeled with attention deficit disorder, and those without such difficulties are still inconclusive. One study documented bilingual advantages in executive functions⁶⁰ while another one suggested that there are no bilingual advantages in interference control but there are advantages in visual processing in bilinguals experiencing difficulties with attention,⁶¹ which resonate with other research conducted with older bilinguals.^{62 63}

More studies looking into interference control advantages with children with disabilities are needed to better understand the patterns of advantages of growing as bilingual individuals.

Creativity

Creativity can be defined as the “imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value” (p. 30).⁶⁴ Creativity refers to the ability to create something that is innovative and offers something to society⁶⁵ and it includes multiple aspects. Six main dimensions have been described as contributing to creative activity, which are mental flexibility, problem solving, metalinguistic ability, learning capacity, interpersonal ability, and the aging process. A review of more than 200 articles shows that bilingualism stimulates creativity.⁶⁷

Aspects such as the level of bilingualism, or the verbal versus non-verbal nature of creative performance, impact the way bilingualism and creativity relate. For instance, adult participants with high bilingualism may excel in convergent thinking, a non-verbal ability, but those with lower bilingualism show higher divergent thinking, which is more influenced by verbal ability.⁶⁸

While creativity research has often neglected the contributions of people with disabilities, theorists propose that people with a disability experience the world in ways that might be generative of creative endeavors.⁶⁹ For instance, research suggests that people with learning disability have a creativity advantage as they have an enhanced capacity to perceive objects in holistic ways and this might give them an advantage for creating art. There is also some indication that the benefits in divergent thinking are also present in bilingual children across different disability categories.^{70 71 72}

Bilinguals may have an advantage in non-verbal creativity while monolinguals have it in verbal creativity. There are however contradictory reports on this aspect with some research documenting advantages in both manifestations of creativity for bilinguals.^{73 74} Researchers explained that findings could be related to variability of creativity aspects over the lifespan since most research about creativity and bilingualism have been conducted with children.⁷⁵

Other Benefits

Among other positive developmental aspects from growing bilingually that are surfacing is the greater capacity to empathize with others, which is related to sociolinguistic awareness and perspective taking ability;⁷⁶ strengths in communicative competence;⁷⁷ more flexible learning in babies;⁷⁸ or delays in developing Alzheimer’s disease.⁷⁹ Finally, bilingualism promotes a fully embodied identity through which immigrant children can define who they are.

The multiple advantages bilingualism poses for emergent bilingual children, and that are starting to be documented with children who also have a disability, further reinforce the need to ensure that they have access to long term bilingual education leading to biliteracy. However, as explained in the following sections, access to bilingual education for children with disabilities is more of a wish than a widespread reality.

Bilingual Education and Children with Disabilities

Despite the established benefits of bilingual education, bilingual children labeled as having a disability experience less access to high-quality bilingual programs.⁸¹ At the intersection of language, disability, and race, bilinguals with disabilities systematically struggle to maintain their bilingualism and become biliterate. Distinct challenges include: 1) education experts discourage bilingual education programs and exposure to bilingual contexts, 2) programs ignore necessary intersectional bilingual special education services, and 3) when bilinguals with disabilities do experience bilingual instruction it can often be remedial. As a result, bilingual learning for bilinguals with disabilities currently is structurally exclusionary.

Access to Bilingual Education and Environments

Bilinguals with disabilities and their families face difficulties accessing bilingual education and maintaining bilingual environments. Research finds that these children who are both emergent bilingual and have a disability (i.e., bilinguals with disabilities) are often not perceived as being capable of learning in multilingual classrooms or services despite research suggesting the benefits of bilingual inclusive classrooms.⁸² In some cases, bilinguals with disabilities are removed or excluded from dual language immersion programs or bilingual speech therapy services in favor of English instruction and English language services.⁸³ For example, families of children labeled as having disabilities related to language impairments are often discouraged from speaking their home language to their children.⁸⁴ In some cases, specialists such as speech language pathologists, can insist that the use of multiple languages is harmful for the child and that mixing languages causes or aggravates language impairment.⁸⁵ Research also suggests that families of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) fear the use of multiple languages will cause linguistic confusion or the possibility of exacerbating linguistic impairments.⁸⁶ Scholars have identified and challenged this false dichotomy highlighting that children are already developing successfully in bilingual homes and in bilingual environments. Unfortunately, at the recommendation of school practitioners, parents may oppose bilingual education or prioritize an English only education trusting that to be the best for their children.⁸⁷

Scholarship has found no evidence linking linguistic confusion as a consequence of bilingualism, instead, research shows that learning in the first or second language ultimately promotes underlying linguistic proficiency in both languages.⁸⁸ Conclusively, fears that bilingual education or bilingual environments are related to linguistic confusion or academic difficulties are baseless. Some scholars argue that these fears indicate that professionals (including school practitioners and speech therapists) do not believe bilinguals with disabilities have the capacity to learn bilingually, as this fear is only rationalized for students with disabilities.⁸⁹ This was the case with Martín whose labels and untraditional means of communicating led to his bilingual life and academic interests being disregarded while learning in school.

Other studies suggest that practitioners in schools advise families against bilingual environments arguing that this might hinder English development.⁹⁰ These misconceptions are not based on existing empirical evidence⁹¹ that demonstrate multilingual environments leading to or aggravating language impairment.⁹² Relatedly, special education professionals might discourage or deny bilingual or immersion opportunities for bilinguals with disabilities⁹³ as these children might not be perceived as the demographic for these, often exclusionary, learning programs.⁹⁴ Examination of clinical and practitioner family counsel demonstrates that bilinguals with disabilities currently do not have the same access to develop as bilingual or biliterate as their peers. As this section demonstrated, the counsel of school professionals in regard to a child's abilities to learn in bilingual and biliterate environments can be misinformed. Yet, the consequences of these recommendations can deeply impact the opportunities a child has to grow bilingually and even to connect with their families and communities in meaningful ways.

Lack of Disability Related Services in Bilingual Programs

Furthermore, bilinguals with disabilities experience a lack of special education services and support in bilingual programs leading to high attrition rates.⁹⁵ Specifically, bilingual programs are often not prepared to support bilinguals with disabilities resulting in the prioritization of either bilingual instruction or special education services in a self-contained English-only classroom.⁹⁶ In some instances, for example, the disability label is understood as carrying more institutional significance prioritizing special education services over development of home language proficiency.⁹⁷ In addition, the lack of special education services in bilingual programs can lead to late disability identification⁹⁸ and pose negative consequences for the academic achievement of these students over their academic trajectory. Furthermore, the exclusion of special education services in bilingual programs promotes attrition of bilinguals with disabilities from bilingual programs and bilingual learning opportunities.

It is not uncommon for bilinguals with disabilities to eventually be removed, excluded, and or pushed out of bilingual programs as the need for services becomes more pronounced.⁹⁹ Research suggests that parents and practitioners come to the conclusion that bilingual education and special education services cannot be provided simultaneously.¹⁰⁰ Prioritizing bilingual education or special education services instead of integrating needed services into bilingual programs is exclusionary and demonstrates that bilinguals with disabilities are not granted a fair opportunity to receive the services they need in a program that can further both their English language development and their home language.

Bilingual Education as Remedial for Children with Disabilities

Research indicates that access to bilingual education for children with disabilities is often utilized to bridge to English-only instruction.¹⁰¹ This use of bilingual education as remedial suggests that the intent is not to reach bilingualism but instead subtractive in nature.¹⁰² Specifically, students with speech language impairments are especially more likely to lose their home language in comparison to students who do not have a disability.¹⁰³ Scholarship indicates that when children with disabilities do receive bilingual education, this is often perceived as temporary and remedial in nature intended to temporarily aid in English acquisition with no long-term goals for bilingualism or biliteracy.¹⁰⁴ More work needs to be done to examine how children with disabilities can access bilingual programs that prioritize both their bilingual education and appropriate services that lead to true long-term bilingualism and biliteracy.

Current Access to Bilingual Programs for Children with a Disability

Learning in bilingual contexts has been shown to promote the development of L1 and L2. Concerns that bilingual instruction hinders English language acquisition have been found to be baseless.¹⁰⁵ In fact, studies repeatedly show no evidence of detrimental linguistic consequences in children's linguistic acquisition.¹⁰⁶ Instead, bilingual interventions were particularly encouraged for students with speech and language impairments.¹⁰⁷ Other scholars perceive bilingual education for bilingual students as a human right, for example, Cioè-Peña explains that, "for these children, being bilingual is not a privilege, it's a part of their identity and as such, a right" (p. 265).¹⁰⁸

Recommended Actions for the Education of Emergent Bilinguals with a Disability

Given the findings from the review of the empirical data in this policy brief, we make several recommendations. These are organized around the focus or core of the recommended actions, either as addressing policy, research, or practice actions. Despite this organization, these different recommendations are closely connected and should be in conversation with each other.

Policy Recommended Actions

1. Policies guiding EL and disability services

Generate policy that anticipates intersectionality of educational labels and that will allow more fluidly for children to receive a variety of services simultaneously. Issues of disproportionality documented in this brief show that children can be identified with more than one label and require the provision of different forms of services. These services are currently understood as being separate. Policy should be developed also to ensure the services can be provided in a more intersectional way to ensure the needs of emergent bilingual children with a disability are directly addressed when hiring professionals and implementing services.^{109 110 111}

2. Policies about the preparation of teachers

Policies meant to guide the preparation of teachers to work in bilingual classrooms and in classrooms with children with disabilities need to be reformulated in conversation with each other. There is a need for pathways that recognize the need of teachers that understand how these two forms of being in schools (i.e., emergent bilingual and disability) intersect. Policies at the state level should reconsider the number of requirements (i.e., courses and certifications) teachers need to address the intersection of bilingualism and disability. Clear pathways need to be created for teachers who aim to gain certifications for the childhood bilingual classroom where children with and without a disability learn.^{112 113 114 115}

Research Recommended Actions

1. Social scientists studying bilingual education

Design and implement more research efforts about disability from the bilingual standpoint. Given the findings in this brief, researchers studying bilingual education cannot ignore disability and can contribute to advancing the field by embracing disability as part of the bilingual education complexity. The disproportionality of minoritized children in special education and the deficit-oriented ways through which the learning of bilingual children with a disability is portrayed requires more researchers who use bilingual education frameworks to cross lines with research on disability. These researchers can work on designing and understanding novel forms of instruction and assessment that are rooted in fluid dynamic understandings of languages and cultures. A fluid dynamic perspective will better represent bilingual children's ways of speaking and other knowledge. Research on bilingual assessment and instruction should not only continue to focus on deficits, but rather focus on unearthing children's ways of speaking and the knowledge they carry.^{116 117}

2. Social scientists studying the benefits of bilingual education

The scientific community needs to move beyond research questions on whether bilingual education is beneficial and focus on new consequential research efforts. The findings show that bilingual education is beneficial for emergent bilingual children and that children with a disability can also benefit from learning in long term bilingual programs. There is a need to shift the focus of most research toward better understanding ways through which bilingual programs can become inclusive of children with a disability. Research is needed to document what successful inclusive bilingual designs look like. Furthermore, research needs to elucidate when and how bilingual education is not inclusive of children with a disability. This double effort will help in better understanding current discriminatory practices taking place in bilingual education and assist the field in moving toward more inclusive bilingual spaces.^{118 119}

3. Social scientists studying bilingual education and disability eligibility processes

Study how language learning differs from having a disability as defined in schools, and how to refine the definitions being used for more accurate identification of needs and consequent meaningful services. The demographics shared in this policy brief highlight the importance of conducting research about processes of identification within bilingual programs where educators and professionals can more holistically understand children's knowledge and assets as distributed across their languages. Documenting and analyzing eligibility milestones can illuminate the social processes that lead to the documented over and under representation.^{120 121}

Practice Recommended Actions

1. Speech and language pathologists (SLP) and medical professionals

It is important to confront misconceptions regarding bilingualism for students designated as having a disability.

The evidence provided in this report highlights cases in relevant literature in which speech-language pathologists and medical professionals discourage the use of home languages other than English, even when this is the family's primary language. However, research indicates that bilingual instruction and bilingual exposure does not exacerbate disability, nor does it cause linguistic confusion or academic difficulties. Instead, research shows students with a disability can learn multiple languages without that hindering their academic or linguistic development. Conversely, discouraging the learning of the family's home language leads to linguistic isolation. From an equity and ethical standpoint, we encourage professionals who provide families with counsel services to be aware of bilingual and multilingual language development, the appropriate services for linguistically diverse students with a disability, and the common misconceptions regarding the education of bilingual students with a disability.^{122 123}

2. Preservice teachers

Teacher education programs and schools need to contribute to prepare all teachers to address the needs of students who are both ELs and have a disability.

All teacher education programs should provide pre-service teachers with professional training to serve students with a disability and students who come from diverse backgrounds, as well as students who are both ELs and have a disability. This policy brief has demonstrated that today's classrooms will continue to increase to be diverse in multiple ways, and all teachers should be prepared to serve students who are diverse in multiple ways. Additionally, schools should provide professional development opportunities for in-service teachers to keep developing skills to serve students with a disability, ELs, and students at the intersection of both. We encourage teachers to be prepared to explore and develop ways to communicate with their students that are flexible and adaptive.¹²⁴

Bilingual education programs need to plan for and purposefully integrate special education services. Bilingual programs that fail to provide adequate support or that prioritize special education services over bilingual education ultimately exclude students from receiving a bilingual education. This policy brief provides powerful evidence of the negative consequences of delaying necessary support and services and of students with a disability being denied, excluded, or eventually pulled out of long-term bilingual programs. Bilingual education programs need to be more intentional about including and integrating services for students with a disability. Bilingual education cannot be equitable without incorporating support and services to truly be inclusive of all students, particularly those with a disability.^{125 126}

3. Student and classroom diversity

Assuming that students are going to be diverse in multiple ways, we need to provide multiple options to enhance the learning experiences of diverse learners.

In this brief we have reported that 14% of students enrolled in public schools today are identified as having a disability and 23% speak a language other than English at home. The data in this brief demonstrates that classrooms and students attending today's schools are diverse in a multitude of ways and often, in ways that overlap. Research indicates that all children can thrive in inclusive classrooms. We encourage teachers and educators to prepare their classrooms and schools to be inclusive of all students and their learning needs. All students, regardless of labels and designations, deserve the best opportunities to learn. Diversity should not be a barrier to access learning opportunities, instead, diversity should encourage exploring new ways of doing inclusive education that benefits all students. Additionally, in classrooms with multiple teachers, some that might specialize mostly on working with students with a disability, educators should see the classroom as a collective space.^{127 128}

4. Medicalization of processes for educating students with disabilities

We recommend an expansive view of disability and disability labels as socially constructed and as marks of unique learning trajectories that are still developmentally appropriate and valuable. Federal legislation ensures that students who need support and special services receive them. In this policy brief we have emphasized the educational importance of receiving support and services and that these can successfully be integrated into bilingual education programs. While it is of utmost importance for students with disabilities to receive appropriate services, we encourage teachers and educators to not medicalize services beyond what is essential. What is essential should be carefully decided upon medical professionals' recommendations and the safety of the child. The promise behind IDEA is that students with disabilities can be successful learners, and this includes high quality bilingual programs that, as shown, provide exceptional benefits for emergent bilingual children. Our recommendation is that educators take a more humanistic approach to including students with disabilities in the classroom. In order to promote equity, the successful integration of special education services in classrooms needs to be part of a larger motive of meeting the humanistic needs of all children. This recommendation assumes that all teachers can teach and be teachers for all children, including children with disabilities.¹²⁹

5. Educators making eligibility decisions

Educators must gather evidence of knowledge and language from the multiple social spaces that children navigate and take shared responsibility for the learning of all children beyond labels. For instance, bilingual children with disabilities who do not use a lot of oral language might be expressing things in a combination of multimodal and bilingual ways in the home and in their communities. It would be important for school personnel to learn and value these communicative approaches as part of the child's linguistic and communicative repertoire when making instructional decisions. When disability is not the pathway for giving children help, educators need to create a collective plan for providing services without labels.^{130 131 132}

Conclusion

This brief opened with the life story of Martín, a young bilingual person with a disability whose communication modes differ from those typically valued in educational processes. Martín's bilingualism was often ignored in school as educators and professionals aimed to address his disability first. However, Martín, as well as other bilingual children with disabilities in our schools, are both bilingual and have a disability.

This policy brief surfaced the multifaceted benefits long-term bilingual education poses for bilingual children. It also shows that children with disabilities, like Martín, can learn bilingually. These two bodies of research collide in this brief to highlight the need to continue to design inclusive bilingual programs where bilingual children with disabilities can develop as bilingual and biliterate learners. Ensuring that children with a disability have access to bilingual education is essential in implementing the vision within IDEA, the federal law that promised a free public education for students with a disability within least restrictive environments. Without inclusive bilingual education programs, families who wish to embrace bilingualism and biliteracy with their children with a disability will not be able to achieve this within our public education system.

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