

A University Program to Prepare Educational Diagnosticians to Engage in Culturally and
Linguistically Responsive Evaluation Practices for English Learners

Corinna Villar Cole

William Blackwell

Jaime Betancourt Durán

Sam Houston State University

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Evaluation Practices

From 1955 until 2005 there has been a doubling of worldwide immigration (Deen, 2006). According to the Center for Immigration Studies (Camarota, 2012), this increase in worldwide immigration is likely to continue for much of the twenty-first century. In the United States alone, the population of immigrants is projected to increase by an additional 48% to 438,000,000 by 2050 (Pew Research Institute, 2008). Data indicate that there are currently about 244 million immigrants worldwide and approximately 20% immigrate to the United States (Connor, 2016).

Immigration patterns in the United States show an increase in the number of individuals who speak multiple languages, with Spanish as the dominant second language (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Between the years 2000 and 2010, the total Latino population in the United States increased by 15.2 million people (U.S. Census, 2010). Aud, Fox, and Kewal Ranmani (2010) report that between 1999 and 2000, Hispanics became the largest racial/ethnic minority group in the country. In Texas, Latino numbers grew from 6,669,666 in 2000 to 9,460,921 in 2010 (U.S. Census, 2010), with a significant increase constituting 37.6 percent of the total Texas population. The increase in numbers of students whose native language is other than English and who are limited English proficient places considerable demands on the public education system as a whole, specifically in the areas of bilingual education and special education. These demographic data underscore the importance of developing programs that are linguistically and culturally sensitive to the needs of learners in the twenty-first century.

Historically, English Learners (ELs) in the United States experienced lack of native language support in their instructional setting until the advent of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968, which mandated bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Bilingual and ESL programs are designed to meet the general education needs of ELs

until they make the transition to general English-only education. However, other programs offering dual language instruction support the maintenance of the native language concomitantly with the acquisition of English. These programs are gaining popularity across the U.S. as they serve the dual purpose of teaching English to ELs and teaching a second language to the student monolingual English-speaking population (Maxwell, 2015).

A related issue in the forefront of special education is the over-representation of minority students in special programs. Identification of students with disabilities is fraught with complexity due to its relationship to cultural differences, linguistic background, low income, and lack of educational opportunity (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts, 2014). Since 2004, the percentage of Latino students diagnosed with learning disabilities has increased, although there were fluctuations in state data (Zhang et al., 2014). To address the problem of over-identification, researchers have recommended that eligibility procedures used by school districts ensure that cultural, language, and racial bias are minimized (Ortiz, 2002; Zhang, et al. 2014).

This has been a difficult area for school districts and educator preparation programs to effectively address. ELs with disabilities pose a unique dilemma because they require both trained special education examiners and teachers. Research in the field highlights the shortage of bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate evaluation professionals; the lack of knowledge of best practices by English-only evaluators; and the need for trained interpreters who can help examine ELs (Alvarado, 2011; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Flanagan, Ortiz, & Alfonso, 2013; Ochoa, Powell, & Robles-Piña, 1996; Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005). The current demand for education professionals in every area of bilingual and ESL education in the United States is enormous (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). There are very few university programs designed to prepare their special education students as evaluators to

meet the current educational needs of ELs. Research by Ochoa et al. (1996) highlighted invalid administration procedures used by school psychologists who tested ELs. Currently, researchers continue to emphasize the importance of using nonbiased evaluation practices for ELs (Alvarado, 2010; Blatchley & Lau, 2010; Flanagan et al., 2013).

Of particular importance to the authors is the issue of nonbiased assessment and training of evaluators for special education programs. As the EL population continues to grow, the shortage of trained evaluation professionals continues to negatively impact the educational outcomes of students who need specialized assessment. To meet this demand, a graduate program to prepare educational diagnosticians was developed with the goal of building capacity for assessment personnel by addressing the following concerns related to identification: (a) consideration of educational opportunity, (b) thorough and accurate determination of language dominance and proficiency, (c) selection of culturally and linguistically appropriate tests, (d) interpretation of assessment results in relation to culture and language, and (e) placement decisions that support students' instructional needs relevant to language and achievement levels. This paper will describe issues associated with developing a bilingual, culturally and linguistically responsive educational diagnostician program and discuss the implementation of the program.

Developing a Program for Bilingual Educational Diagnosticians to Engage in Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Assessment Practices

In order to meet the need for bilingual educational diagnosticians who engage in culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment practices, our university has developed a targeted program consisting of seven didactic courses, three assessment courses, and two practicum classes. Didactic courses include a study of second language acquisition, a survey of disabilities with a school-site study, a methods course for mild-moderate disabilities, a behavior

intervention course, a seminar in cognitive and low-incidence disabilities, a class that addresses family support and in-home training, and a seminar that explores current issues in special education including legal issues. The initial assessment course addresses technical characteristics of standardized testing, determining language proficiency in the native language and English, establishing language dominance, and training in the administration of Spanish and English achievement tests and curriculum-based assessments. The second assessment course provides instruction in bilingual cognitive assessment, and the third assessment course includes tests of adaptive behavior, additional cognitive instruments, report writing, and cross-battery assessment. The first practicum class requires graduate students to complete a single-subject case study for a student with academic deficits. The candidate conducts a literature review for a research-based intervention, implements the intervention with the student, collects data, and analyzes the results. During the final practicum course, the graduate student assists an educational diagnostician in a public-school setting by conducting assessments, reviewing records, attending IEP meetings, providing staff development, and assisting with record-keeping and other legally required tasks.

The Bilingual Educational Diagnostician Program mirrors our established program for regular educational diagnosticians. However, we have made programmatic changes. First, since educational diagnosticians in Texas do not diagnose emotional and behavioral disorders in their role as assessment specialists, we have substituted the course in second language acquisition for the course in emotional and behavioral disorders. The candidates do take a course in behavioral intervention, which includes information on the characteristics of students with emotional and behavioral disorders and the development and implementation of functional behavioral assessments and behavior intervention plans. Secondly, the initial assessment course provides an in-depth study of establishing language proficiency in the native language and English and

determining language dominance, since this is a major issue with ELs. In this course, we provide instruction in fewer achievement tests as compared to the regular diagnostician program in order to cover language proficiency testing in English and in the native language. The second assessment course differs from the regular educational diagnostician course in the instruments used to assess cognition. All required assessments for national accreditation are part of both diagnostician programs, although the program of study differs slightly. Additionally, all candidates in the Bilingual Educational Diagnostician Program are certified bilingual teachers, ensuring their knowledge base for bilingual phenomena as well as proficiency in Spanish.

Gathering Support from the University System and K-12 Partners

In developing the Bilingual Educational Diagnostician Program, we needed to garner support from our university system and our K-12 educational partners to develop and implement this program designed to provide qualified bilingual educational diagnosticians who can meet the needs of our increasingly diverse population. To accomplish this, we focused on five areas that provided the justification and impetus for engaging in this work: (1) legal requirements of IDEA, (2) roles and responsibilities of evaluation personnel, (3) growing need for bilingual assessment personnel, (4) identified competencies for culturally and linguistically responsive diagnosticians, and (5) need for culturally responsive, meaningful collaboration with families.

The legal requirements of IDEA. The evaluation provisions are a central tenet of the Individuals with Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004). School districts are charged with providing qualified evaluators who utilize sound evaluation techniques that are administered on a non-discriminatory basis. The IDEA requires that trained and knowledgeable personnel conduct special education evaluations. The law also mandates that evaluation professionals select nondiscriminatory instruments and procedures (2004). Special education evaluations must be

completed using the student's "native language or other mode of communication and in the form most likely to yield accurate information" (IDEA, 2004). Bilingual educational diagnosticians are able to conduct an evaluation in the language most familiar to the student thereby increasing the likelihood that results will provide valid information regarding the student's true strengths and weaknesses. When using inappropriate assessment instruments, methods, and procedures, results may highlight ELs' lack of English language proficiency versus low abilities, resulting in incorrect diagnosis of behavioral, communication, or academic deficits.

Following the completion of the special education referral, school personnel will schedule an Individualized Education Program (IEP) team meeting to review the evaluation and any proposed programming and placement options. Parent participation in this process is considered a priority. If the provision of an interpreter is needed to ensure that parent(s) are able to participate in and comprehend the discussion in the IEP team meeting, then school personnel are required to provide the interpreter (IDEA, 2004). Bilingual educational diagnosticians are trained to facilitate these meetings. Often, parents are more likely to participate in these meetings if they are able to communicate with a professional in their native language.

The roles and responsibilities of evaluation personnel. In many school districts in the United States, special education evaluation personnel are integral members of the campus' student intervention team. In a number of states, educational diagnosticians often participate in these team meetings and are considered valuable resources with regard to students with disabilities. During the initial problem-solving stages, the second language acquisition expertise of trained bilingual educational diagnosticians is critical. At this point, they may be able to discern whether the students' difficulties are more related to learning English rather than to a possible disability. If language acquisition issues are identified, bilingual educational

diagnosticians can then recommend culturally relevant language-based strategies and interventions that address the students' specific difficulties.

According to the Council for Exceptional Children, key components of educational diagnostician's roles include (a) working collaboratively with other assessment personnel; (b) interpreting the results of the evaluation for parents, teachers, administrators, and students; and (c) providing ongoing consultative services (CEC, 2014). Bilingual educational diagnosticians assume the role of liaisons between home and school, as they are better able to establish meaningful relationships with ELs and their families. Following the completion and review of a bilingual special education evaluation, if the school committee determines that the student meets eligibility criteria as a student with a disability, the committee will look to the bilingual diagnostician for educational programming recommendations for the student's IEP. The bilingual diagnostician's ability to interpret and explain evaluation results regarding a student's strengths, weaknesses, and unique instructional needs to educators and parents or caregivers can be critical for student success.

Growing need for bilingual assessment personnel. With the growing number of ELs in the state of Texas and in the United States (National Center for English Language Acquisition, 2014), some of these students require intensive special education services and supports, over and above the basic general education support. Discerning whether a student has a language learning issue versus a federally defined disability condition is critically important. This is one of the reasons why it is essential to employ bilingual special education evaluation personnel who are trained to assess accurately ELs' English and native language proficiency. When examiners can first determine levels of proficiency in each language, subsequent decisions can be made regarding which language to use for cognitive testing. Cole (2014) emphasized the need to

measure native language abilities of ELs regardless of educational placement in order to obtain the true picture of students' overall language abilities in each language. The native language remains a very important part of the makeup of ELs even when their proficiency levels in English increase. Bilingual evaluators must be able to not only conduct appropriate evaluations but also to provide valid test interpretation. Furthermore, in many cases, bilingual evaluation personnel are called on to build relationships with families and to serve as a liaison between home and school. These relationships can be critical in setting the stage for successful programming for these students.

Identified competencies for culturally and linguistically responsive diagnosticians.

The Bilingual Educational Diagnostician Program is designed to equip future evaluators with a specialized set of professional knowledge and skills that are informed by the unique circumstances present when a student is from a different culture or is an EL. The educational diagnostician seeks to ensure that the results of assessments and evaluations are part of a carefully conceived and reflective process. A culturally responsive and skilled educational diagnostician will implement assessment procedures that are culturally valid and non-biased regarding culture and language by identifying and implementing appropriate assessment practices (Hoover, 2009).

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)'s Advanced Professional Standards (2012) for the preparation of educational diagnosticians were highly influential in informing the development and implementation of our university program. Specifically, the standards address the knowledge and skill base that these professionals should possess, including addressing issues such as the effects of the cultural and environmental milieu of the student and the family on

behavior and learning; over/under representation of individuals with cultural and linguistic diversity who are referred for assessment; and needs of different groups in a pluralistic society.

Many of the professional competencies of the bilingual educational diagnostician revolve around concepts of equality, fairness, and respect for diversity. For example, they may suggest methods teachers and educators can use to identify and analyze their own beliefs and principles regarding multicultural learners; they may ensure that, whenever possible, evaluations are administered in the student's native language; they may develop awareness of the student's level of acculturation; and they may watch for instances of disproportionate representation in special education programs.

Other competencies are devoted to evaluation involving the administration of formal measurement devices, and the interpretation of student responses. Required knowledge and skills include obtaining observational and interview information about each student's basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) versus their cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP, Cummins, 1984), evaluating the extent to which ELs were included in the norm sample, identifying biases in standardized assessments that will not accurately reflect the student's functioning and level of achievement, ensuring evaluation measures are used for the specific purposes for which they are designed, possessing the professional expertise and qualifications to administer and interpret specific evaluation and assessment measures, utilizing a combination of quantitative and qualitative assessments to obtain a complete and true picture of student potential and levels of achievement, and reflecting on ways to provide meaningful interpretations and explanations of assessment findings and specialized terminology to parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

In addition to standardized, formal evaluations, the bilingual educational diagnostician can seek further information about a student's culture and language through many informal measures. These informal measures are used in concert with formal assessments to seek confirmation of student's needs and abilities. These could include curriculum-based assessment; performance-based assessments, including oral performance assessments; portfolio assessment that may include contributions from the parents or caregivers; and dynamic assessment, which is sensitive to small changes in a student's behavior (Spinelli, 2008). In addition, Mercer, Mercer, and Pullen (2011) suggest interviewing "significant people in the student's life with the same cultural background to determine how effectively the student communicates in the primary language" (p. 202). The collection of informal assessment information informs the instruction of classroom teachers. Educational diagnosticians can collaborate with teachers in the provision of culturally responsive instruction that is explicit and systematic and includes the use of new technologies. Musti-Rao, Cartledge, Bennett, and Council (2014) stated that "such instruction is beneficial to all learners, but especially to CLD (culturally and linguistically diverse) learners, who start their school experience behind their more affluent peers and fail to catch up without more intensive, systematic instruction" (p. 195 – 196).

The need for culturally responsive, meaningful collaboration with families. In order to gather appropriate developmental, educational, and family history, trust must be developed between the family and the diagnostician. If trust is not developed, the validity of the information obtained may be suspect, so it is vital that diagnosticians are aware of culturally responsive practices. Dana (2005) suggests that CLD families may view the assessment process differently from the majority culture. Dana states that the assessment process may be viewed positively or negatively depending on cultural, religious, ethnic, or racial identity, so investigating these issues

before evaluating the student may suggest the best approach when developing a relationship with the family. Other issues that affect the assessment process are family structure and gender roles (Geva & Wiener, 2015). At times grandparents may play a key role in their grandchild's education, but there are important issues that may have a positive or negative effect on the grandchild (Arenas, 2017), and even though the mother may seem to be more involved in a child's education, the father may be the decision maker (Geva & Wiener, 2015). These are only some of the issues that diagnosticians must be aware of, but many others exist (Sattler, 2001), and a typical diagnostician preparation programs may not address cultural and linguistic issues with any depth.

Discussion of Implementation Promises and Challenges

The Bilingual Educational Diagnostician Program gives graduate students the opportunity to further their education and to prepare them to advocate for students and parents that are sometimes unprepared to deal with special education issues. The program also provides graduate students with the opportunity to play a positive role in the lives of the students they evaluate as well as in the lives of their parents and the community members at large. The role of bilingual educational diagnosticians extends beyond that of examiners; they become parent educators, advocates for the students and their families, and language interpreters as well as interpreters of the language and culture of special education. This endeavor is not always easy as parents are entering a new world filled with unfamiliar language and acronyms. Assessment and evaluation practices that are culturally and linguistically responsive are also intended to reduce unnecessary referrals for special education and disproportionate representation in special education.

School districts benefit from their bilingual teachers' participation in our program because the future diagnosticians will be highly qualified professionals helping to appropriately identify ELs with disabilities and making placement recommendations in the most appropriate settings for their success. Most administrators are supportive of their teachers' obtaining a Master of Education in Special Education and an educational diagnostician certification. The program provides graduate students with the unique opportunity to form strong bonds with other students in the program. Shared endeavors and challenges enable the graduate students to build a strong community of learners. Furthermore, this program gives bilingual teachers an avenue to grow in a sought-after profession in the field of education in a relatively short time in a cohort model taking less than two years.

Finally, graduate students reported their personal satisfaction of having the opportunity to demonstrate to their children and students, that in spite of the language barriers, they were able to follow their version of the "American dream." In spite of many difficulties and sacrifices, most students indicated optimism in their belief that they form part of a new group of professionals who seek to inspire others to follow their footsteps as we enter into a new era of demographic and economic changes in the United States.

Based on feedback from students and instructors, we have identified key challenges encountered during the implementation of this program. Some of the issues relate to the design and implementation of the program. Graduate students recommended specific orientation meetings outlining the program prior to beginning the first semester to give students a clear vision of the entire program. Students initially experienced confusion related to the logistics and expectations of the program. We have begun to address this issue by holding information sessions at the start of each semester that address issues such as course delivery format,

comprehensive examinations, time management, practicum hours, and certification test preparation.

Another challenge identified by students is the difficulty in balancing the demands of participating in this program while also teaching full-time in K-12 school settings and continuing with their responsibilities within their family systems. The toll of taking time-intensive graduate classes on top of their responsibilities as teachers, parents, and caregivers has been considerable at times. An added dimension to this challenge has been that many of the students in our program are working as either bilingual education teachers or general education teachers. They have previously had limited exposure to coursework specifically focused on special education. Program faculty have worked to address these challenges by offering courses in multiple formats (e.g., face-to-face, online, and hybrid), meeting with students on weekends and holidays to provide supplemental instruction, and helping them to complete practicum hours within their current places of employment to the extent possible.

A final challenge encountered in the program has been the considerable costs of materials and assessment kits for both the students and the program faculty. Students report that the costs of course textbooks is burdensome. Program faculty have navigated a somewhat similar challenge in trying to find budgetary resources to buy enough assessment kits for students to use in the assessment courses and to purchase updated testing kits when released by publishers. As a means of addressing these issues, course faculty have worked to identify free and low-cost online resources to supplement, and in some cases, replace more expensive course textbooks. Within the university, program faculty have cultivated administrative allies who understand the unique costs associated with diagnostician courses and assessment kits. These administrators have essentially met the program faculty “half-way” on budget requests for assessment kits.

Conclusion

As the EL population continues to grow in the United States, the public education system must adapt to meet the demands of students with disabilities whose native language is not English and who are not yet proficient in English. Texas is rapidly becoming the state with the fastest growing Latino population in the nation (U.S. Census, 2010). Bilingual and ESL programs abound in Texas; however, there is a significant shortage of education professionals in the field of bilingual special education. In response to this need, this university has created the Bilingual Educational Diagnostician Program, which prepares certified bilingual teachers as evaluators in the field of special education.

The positive impact of the program will extend to ELs with disabilities. These students will benefit from fair and timely evaluations conducted by bilingual and bicultural professionals who can make appropriate educational recommendations as well as communicate with the students' parents. The program will also raise awareness for the need for other certified bilingual teachers to become part of a program that develops cultural and linguistic awareness and will positively influence the Texas public school system. Finally, graduate students in the program fulfill their personal dreams of one day changing the image of the Latino population in the United States from one of recipients of services to that of highly qualified professionals giving back to a country that has provided them with opportunities for growth.

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