RIDE Rhode Island Department of Education

IDENTIFIYING MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS WHO ARE DIFFERENTLY ABLED: CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY RESPONSIVE APPROACHES

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NOVEMBER, 2019

Practitioner Brief

This brief is designed to support educational professionals in understanding multilingual learners, implementing MTSS, conducting special education evaluation, and making eligibility determination for multilingual learners who are differently abled.

This brief provides support to educational professionals in

- Understanding various linguistic, culture and learning difference factors of MLLs when explaining their performance.
- Utilizing culturally and linguistically responsive progress monitoring and intervention for MTSS.
- Considering culture- and language-related factors in special education evaluation and eligibility determination process.

INTRODUCTION

American schools have experienced an increase in culturally and linguistically diverse student population. Today, culturally diverse students make up almost half of the U.S. public school student population; approximately 10% of public-school students are multilingual learners (MLLs) or English learners (ELs) (National Center of Statistics, 2017). Educators increasingly encounter MLLs, and continue to improve the practices that accurately identify MLLs who are differently abled[1] and providing a continuum of educational interventions.

Historically, MLLs were overrepresented in special education programs. Since the implementation of the Response to Intervention (RTI) or Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), there is a growing concern about both over-identifying and under-identifying MLLs for special education services. In some cases, if MLLs don't make the same academic and English language growth as their peers during RTI, they are referred for a special education evaluation. In other cases, educators hesitate to make a special education referral because they fear they might not give enough time to MLLs to learn English, and let MLLs continue the RTI process. Both approaches are problematic and a disservice for MLLs. For example, a special education intervention program for students with an IEP may be geared to help processing difficulties involved in understanding or in using language; such a program is ineffective to address the language-related needs of MLLs who do not need special education. For MLLs who truly are differently abled, they will have a better opportunity to be successful in school if their individual needs are identified and supported (Hamayan, Marler, Sanchez-Lopez, & Damico, 2013). Identifying such MLLs requires culturally and linguistically responsive practices.

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[1] Note: within the document the term "differently abled" is used interchangeably with the term "students with disabilities" currently in use by the U.S. Department of Education.

MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS WITH AND WITHOUT AN IEP

The over-representation and under-representation of MLLs in special education programs indicate that educators have difficulty distinguishing MLLs who truly are differently abled from those who are struggling for other reasons, for example not yet being proficient in English or having difficulty adjusting to the school culture. To determine whether poor academic performance reflects a need for an IEP for an MLL, educators must begin with the understanding of exclusionary factors that might impact learning such as language and culture. The Rhode Island Department of Education (n.d.; 2019) developed an MLL Toolkit and Planning Evaluations for Diverse Learners Resources to help educators identify and respond to MLLs' learning needs.

Linguistic Backgrounds

Diverse native language backgrounds. Although the majority of MLLs come from Spanish speaking backgrounds, it has been estimated that approximately 350 different languages are spoken by MLLs nationally (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). While learning English as a new language, MLLs will apply knowledge from one language to another language. For example, a Spanish speaking student may say "*What a bright moon! Look at her*", because grammatical gender is assigned to nouns in Spanish, in which the moon is feminine. MLLs may display language errors that are caused by borrowing patterns from the first language. It is important to keep in mind that not all MLLs demonstrate similar language errors because the effect of different native languages on English can be different. Learning about an MLL's native language can help understand specific linguistic patterns of the MLL.

Various levels of native language development. MLLs represent a wide range of language abilities in their native languages. A large proportion of MLLs were born in the United States and may not have had any formal schooling in their native language. On the other hand, many immigrant MLLs enter school with a great deal of formal schooling in their native language. Other immigrant children may have experienced interrupted or inconsistent formal schooling or other disruptive events. Some MLLs may develop spoken English alongside their home language from a very early age in which case they are considered as emergent simultaneous bilinguals. Other MLLs may acquire their home language first and be exposed to English for the first time when they enter school. They are regarded as sequential bilinguals. In both cases, when assessing young MLLs' native language, it is important to acknowledge that young MLLs may not have the opportunity to develop their native language fully (RIDE, 2018). Without continued native language support in instruction, many MLLs will experience loss of their home language.

Various levels of English proficiency. MLLs go through five predictable stages of second language acquisition (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Unlike the universal process for the first language acquisition, acquiring an additional language assumes knowledge in a first language to learn the second language. MLLs will progress from no knowledge of the new language to a level of competency that closely resembles that of native speakers. Some patterns of language errors are normal developmental language learning. It is also important to recognize some MLLs will go through a silent period at the

initial stage in which they are unable or unwilling to communicate orally in the new language. Although all MLLs encompass the similar process of second language acquisition, the length of time that takes students to acquire English proficiency varies a great deal due to different variables, such as oral and literacy proficiency in the first language, quality of instruction and language programs.

Second Language Acquisition Stages and Classroom Support

Stages	Time Table	Classroom Support
Pre-Production/Silent Period MLLs focus solely on comprehension, without worrying about production skills.	1-6 months	• Use gesture, point and movement • Speak clearly and slowly • Teach basic classroom direction • Use visual signals
Early Production Comprehension has now expanded into production. MLLs can comprehend and use up to 1,000 words. Speech is limited to one- or two-phrases.	Up to 1 year	• Use variety of visuals • Write key words • Focus on authentic language and materials • Model correct language but avoid excessive language correction
Speech Emergence MLLs can comprehend and use up to 3,000 words. Sentences become longer but often have grammatical errors.	Up to 2 year	• Encourage more peer interaction and small group discussion • Provide support for oral and writing expression, e.g., sentence starters • Build vocabulary
Intermediate Language Proficiency MLLs can comprehend and use up to 6,000 words. Sentences are more complex with a wider vocabulary. Their speech contains fewer grammatical errors.	Up to 3 years	• Emphasize on academic vocabulary • Use graphic organizers to support oral and writing expression • Introduce academic writing
Advanced Language Proficiency MLLs' grammar and vocabulary are comparable to that of native English speaking peers.	5-7 years	• Expand vocabulary development • Emphasize writing • Provide more error correction

Different types of language proficiency. MLLs develop two types of language proficiency, namely basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive and academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 2017). BICS are language skills that MLLs utilize to interact with their peers in social activities. CALP refers to formal academic language that involves with skills essential to academics such as listening, speaking, reading and writing about a subject matter. Under ideal conditions, it takes MLLs 2-3 years to acquire BICS and 5-7 years to acquire CALP. A common misconception is that if an MLL has proficiency in his or her social language skills, the MLL is able to use the language for academic learning. It is important not to assume that MLLs who can converse easily in English have academic language to fully access content-based information. On the other hand, it is equally important to recognize that MLLs can learn subject matter and meet academic demands with appropriate program and instructional support when they are making progress toward English language proficiency.

Cultural Backgrounds

MLLs come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Acquiring detailed factual information about a student's cultural background and integrating such knowledge into teaching is a culturally responsive practice. In the same way that MLLs go through stages of English acquisition, they also go through stages of cultural adaptation. Most MLLs go through culture shock before they become comfortable with their new language and culture. Some MLLs new to school may demonstrate disruptive behaviors in the classroom when they are at early stages of their cultural adjustment process. It is important to keep in mind that their behavior could be emotional reactions to adjusting to the new cultural environment. It is also important to know that adjusting to a new culture is a process, and not always a linear one. Teachers may observe students experiencing ups and downs, or making one step forward and two steps back.

Cultural Adjustment Stages

- *Honeymoon*: MLLs are excited about their new lives and their environment.
- *Culture Shock:* MLLs recognize differences between the new culture and their own. They are frustrated because of limited communication and unreadable social signals. MLLs may feel overwhelmed and may seem sleepy, irritable, or uninterested.
- *Adjustment:* MLLs start to deal with the differences between their home culture and new culture. They learn to integrate their own beliefs into their new environment and begin to find ways to exist with both cultures.
- *Adaptation:* Students enter and prosper in the mainstream culture. They accept both cultures and combine them into their lives. Some students will adopt the mainstream culture at school and follow the values of the home culture outside school.

Adapted from Lysgaard (1955)

The U-Curve adaptation by Oberg, 1960; Chang, 1973, proposes the following stages:

- honeymoon period
- crisis period
- adjustment period
- biculturalism period.

Classroom Support for Cultural Adjustment

- *Prepare students for culture shock*: MLLs may not be aware of their culture shock symptoms. Offering one-on-one conversations and individual coaching will help them understand what to expect and what to do.
- *Establish classroom routines with visual support*: Visuals such as written schedules and pictures/signs for school activities can help MLLs anticipate what happens next to reduce anxiety. Bilingual labels in classrooms will help MLLs who have already acquired literacy in their first language get familiar with the surrounding.
- *Encourage native language*: MLLs feel connected and understood when they are encouraged to use their native language. Providing digital literacy resource support such as using language translation software can encourage MLLs to share their thinking and learning.
- *Promote multicultural learning environment*: MLLs will accept and learn the new learning environment when all students' languages and cultures are valued. Multiculturalism in the classrooms can be encouraged through having materials and activities connecting with all students' home cultures and inviting parents and community members to the class to share a particular nation, ethnicity, or language group.

Multilingual Learners in Special Education

Differently abled MLLs are students who have both language- and qualifying special education needs for which they receive services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 accommodation plan. MLLs who have IEPs may be identified as having one or more of 13 different categories under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), including, autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment including blindness.

MLLs with specific learning disabilities (SLD) are by far the largest group among all disability categories in which they represent almost half of the MLLs with disabilities (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2018). It has been observed that some MLLs who are still progressing toward English proficiency may be misidentified as having learning disabilities (Fernandez, 2013; Wilkinson, Ortiz, Robertson & Kushner, 2006); or their learning disabilities are overlooked (Hui-Michael & Garcia, 2009). Both phenomena indicate the lack of effective practices to distinguish the causes of similar learning difficulties such as struggles with English reading shared by MLLs and students who are differently abled. The U.S. Department of Education (2017) has provided a toolkit with resources for addressing MLLs who are differently abled and making educational decisions. Among the tools, a chart that illustrates learning behaviors and indicators of whether that behavior could reflect a language learning or a potential learning disability. Determining the root of an MLL's performance profile (i.e., language learning vs. learning disability) not only requires the understanding of language and cultural characteristics but also the knowledge of learning disabilities and special education evaluation and identification process.

Since the implementation of RTI, key changes have occurred in the education of MLLs in the last decade. The RTI Action Network (n.d.) created a toolkit that provides guidance for determining special education eligibility for MLLs. Educators emphasize the shift from the deficient view of a SLD to focusing on providing the best instruction for all students, placing a greater emphasis on effects of interventions, and considering students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and English language proficiency during the RTI and special education referral process.

MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT FOR MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

The Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) has evolved over the past two decades incorporating the essentials of RTI. MTSS is a school-wide, data-driven prevention model that ensures early support for all students including those who have differing learning and behavioral abilities. The MTSS process begins with high-quality instruction and universal screening of all students in the general education classroom and provides struggling learners with interventions at increasing levels of intensity to accelerate their rate of learning.

MTSS Essentials

***Data driven decision making*:** It involves collecting and interpreting of assessment data to determine student progress during the course of instruction or intervention. The process also takes into account an evaluation of instructional effectiveness and implementation of meaningful changes.

Multi-tiered support: A student's responsiveness to the provided instructional or behavioral support is monitored. The need for additional support/intervention is made by the evidence of the student's performance.

***Universal screening and progress monitoring*:** Schools use universal screening, formative assessment, informal assessments relevant to the curriculum, and progress monitoring measures to identify students' needs and monitor their progress.

***Family, school and community partnership*:** MTSS requires a dedicated team approach. A school MTSS team collaborates with families and communities to create and embed systems of support, as well as to provide training and resources for those who will be implementing the systems.

Caveats and Recommendations for MTSS for MLLs

Implementation of MTSS in schools that have MLLs requires culturally and linguistically responsive practice. Teachers are sometimes frustrated that some MLLs are not learning quickly. While analyzing the causes of slow growth of a student, the discussion should begin in the examining and improving instruction rather than centering on what could be wrong with the student. While the field is still developing effective practices for struggling MLLs, cautions and consideration about screening and progress monitoring processes should be taken when implementing district-wide measures and procedures. Research-and evidence-based practices on effective screening, monitoring progress, instruction and intervention for MLLs suggest the consideration of addressing both MLLs' academic content and language learning needs (Esparza Brown & Sanford, 2011; Garcia & Ortiz, 2006; Hoover, Baca, & Klinger 2018; Vaugh & Ortiz, 2010).

***Consideration for screening and progress monitoring*.** In addition to screening and monitoring progress for English language development, MLLs also participate in district-wide MTSS assessment system. Implementing appropriate data collection procedures and using valid and reliable screening and monitoring measurements are critical for the successful implementation of MTSS for MLLs. MTSS assessments need to be linguistically and culturally congruent.

- It is important to screen MLLs' native language skills. MLLs who have solid first language skills need to be instructed differently from MLLs who don't demonstrate proficiency in either native language or English
- If MLLs receive instruction in their native language, their native language also needs to be monitored.

- If a reading assessment tool is normed on monolingual English-speaking students, and does not account for the needs of MLLs who are learning a new language while also learning contents, it is not suitable for MLLs.
- Because MLLs also acquire a new language, their progress of academic achievement needs to be analyzed by comparing with peers who share similar linguistic, cultural and experiential backgrounds.
- If adequate growth of English language development has not been met, it does not necessarily indicate a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language. The length of time each student spends at a particular language development level may vary greatly due to quality of instruction and language programs.
- Using authentic and curriculum-based measures and procedures provides an alternative method to monitor MLLs' academic and language growth. These types of measurements will allow teachers to consider students' learning a second language experience (e.g., mispronounced words, accent), provide onsite support, and interpret data appropriately.

Explicit and scaffolded instruction. Explicit instruction is characterized as a series of supports or scaffolds to guide students through a systematic, structured and direct learning process with clear explanations and demonstrations until independent mastery has been achieved (Archer & Hughes, 2010). Teachers can help MLLs connect with a lesson by explicitly explaining a new concept with supplementary materials, such as video clips, pictures, realia, and models. Research has shown that explicit instruction enhances MLLs vocabulary development, for example, explicitly teaching to MLLs how to apply learned linguistic knowledge (e.g., word patterns) to decode unknown words (Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007). Scaffolded instructional strategies provide substantial amounts of support by modeling a new concept or problem, and then gradually decrease the amount of support as MLLs learn the new knowledge and skills through multiple practice opportunities. MLLs who struggle will benefit from scaffolding and multiple learning opportunities through modeling, guided practice and independent practice.

Oral language development. Oral language provides the foundation for literacy development. MLLs benefit from ample opportunities to actively interact with the teacher and peers. Through interaction they will develop oral language skills, developing a deeper understanding of topics, and reducing problematic behaviors. When interacting with students who are learning English language, it is important that teachers provide a strong language model but be mindful about excessive "teach talk". Teachers can increase MLLs' active participation by asking different types of questions, promoting students' elaboration of responses, providing pair and small group work, and inviting students to share their ideas in their native language.

Language instruction and intervention. The goals for MLLs learning during MTSS must also include English language development. Besides content objectives, language learning needs to be addressed in MTSS instructional and intervention planning. Language learning can include academic and functional

language use. MLLs are given opportunity to develop listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in their instructional activities. For example, for a math lesson, teachers can identify and include content specific and across-content academic vocabulary in lesson objectives, and develop instructional activities and assessment to support the language learning.

Background connections. MLLs bring experiences that are quite different from the mainstream culture. Standardized core curricula may rely on the assumption that students have related prior knowledge to reading materials. It is critical that teachers build background knowledge to fill the gaps and help students to connect what they know with what they will learn. Teachers can encourage MLLs to share their native language and cultural perspective toward a topic.

MTSS requires a shared leadership approach. It is important for educators who bring different areas of expertise to share and focus on problem-solving. Although an MLL can be referred for special education evaluation at any language development stage, many factors need be cautiously checked before making a referral.

Questions Before Submitting a Special Education Referral for an MLL

- ✓ Is there any evidence that the student demonstrates a chronic history of learning problems, including learning problems in his/her primary language?
- ✓ Have the student's basic physical needs been met and have sensory concerns (e.g., low vision, hearing impairment) been ruled out?
- ✓ Has the student had sufficient time to adjust to a new physical and cultural setting?
- ✓ Has the student been presented with an appropriate learning environment in the general education program?
- ✓ How long has this student been receiving English language or bilingual instruction?
- ✓ Is the teacher who provides language instruction and intervention fully credentialed?
- ✓ Which research- and evidence-based instructional program and intervention have been provided, and for how long?
- ✓ What ongoing attempts have been made to differentiate and adjust instruction to provide comprehensible input for the student in the general education setting?
- ✓ Has a community liaison who is familiar with the student's language and culture been consulted?
- ✓ Are the school monitoring assessments appropriate for MLLs? Is there any evidence that the assessment tools have been validated for MLLs?
- ✓ Does data gathered from the parents, teacher observations and other sources support your suspicion of a disability?

SPECIAL EDUCATION IDENTIFICATION PROCESS FOR MLLS

Once a referral has been made, a group of parents and qualified individuals from multiple disciplines, also known as the evaluation team will review initial data to determine if a full special education evaluation is needed to determine whether the student requires special education services. An essential practice for the evaluation team is to require a comprehensive evaluation conducted by a variety of professionals to ensure an accurate picture of a student's performance compared with others at the same grade level. An evaluation team for MLLs must take various cultural, language, and learning factors into consideration in the special education evaluation and eligibility determination process to ensure appropriate practices (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2019).

Building a Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Evaluation Team with Family Participation

An evaluation team is expected to consider all aspects of a student's learning and behavior relevant to school performance. Ideally, an evaluation team for MLLs has someone who has expertise in both ESL/bilingual education and special education. Otherwise, the team must have specialists from both fields to share knowledge in language/acculturation and disabilities in order to sort through possible explanations of an MLL's performance. ESL/bilingual teachers who have training in the second language acquisition and acculturation process can help the team understand characteristics of stages of learning a second language and adjusting to a new culture. Special education teachers bring knowledge that might be different from that of ESL/bilingual teachers. For example, special education teachers have knowledge of types and severity range of various disabilities. They understand learning and behavioral characteristics of a particular disability. Working together, special education and ESL/bilingual teachers can exchange their observations of their MLL, analyze learning needs from both a special education and language development perspective, and conduct further assessments. It is particularly important to have family involvement during the special education decision-making process. Understanding students' home and school histories is important when making special education eligibility decisions. The evaluation team seeks input from parents who can provide valuable insight about their children's strengths and needs that may explain behaviors in a cultural norm. If it is necessary the team must have a community liaison who can facilitate communication among parents and professionals, and serves as an advocate of the students and families.

Key Principles for Special Education Evaluation and Eligibility Determination

The Rhode Island Department of Education (2019) developed a resource to assist special education eligibility decision-making for MLLs. The U. S. Department of Education (2017) provided several key points on appropriately identifying MLLs who are differently abled, including the decision being made in a timely manner, considering English language proficiency in determining assessments and procedures, conducting special education evaluation in the MLL's native language, and ruling out learning English as a new language as a possible reason for the MLL's struggle. Given this, recommendations are offered to improve special education evaluation and eligibility process.

Acknowledging limitations of standardized assessments. Although many districts mandate the use of formal measurements as one source of data for special education evaluation, educators must be aware of validity and reliability in standardized assessment. Educators can ask questions and evaluate if a particular standardized assessment tool is appropriate for their students.

Questions to Understand the Appropriateness of a Standardized Test

- ✓ Is the test appropriate for students who are still acquiring English language proficiency?
- ✓ Are my students proficient in the language of the test?
- ✓ Is the test culturally appropriate for MLLs?
- ✓ Do my students have the cultural backgrounds that match the test items?
- ✓ Who is included in the norm-referenced group?
- ✓ Are multilingual learners and differently abled students part of the norm group?
- ✓ Does the test allow students to demonstrate their knowledge in the native language?
- ✓ What accommodations are available to MLLs and differently abled students?
- ✓ Are the test items developmentally appropriate and age appropriate for my students?

Assessing both languages. IDEA (2004) regulations set criteria for identification for MLLs including ruling out limited language proficiency as the reason for poor school performance, and assessing MLLs' primary languages. When assessing an MLL's native language, it is critical to know whether the MLL has received bilingual instruction, or whether the MLL has literacy skills in his/her native language. For MLLs who do not have bilingual instruction and literacy skills, native language assessments need to focus on oral language, such as student interviews, parent interviews, asking the student questions after having the student listen to a story in his/her home language. If an MLL is differently abled, the related learning characteristics also appear in the usage of the native language. Comparing the student's native language and English language skills would offer insights whether the student qualifies for special education or is just simply developing his/her English language proficiency.

Conducting Multiple Assessments. Reliance on any single criterion for evaluation is not comprehensive, nor is a group assessment, such as universal screening or statewide academic assessment tests, adequate for evaluation. Several types of data to inform the team about students' abilities can include their educational performance, development and social history, and information generated from formal assessments and informal measurements. Various professionals are involved in the data collection including classroom teachers, ESL/bilingual teachers, special education teachers, school psychologist, and/or coaches and MTSS specialists. Parents and professionals can share their data through written records (e.g., school files, teacher notes), observation (home, classroom, other school settings and community), and interviews (teacher, parents and staff). Because of the limitation of standardized assessments, authenticity-based assessment data can provide valuable diagnostic information. Authenticity-based assessment methods include observations, interviews, end of

lesson/unit assessments, self-made checklists/rubrics, essays, oral presentations, open-ended problems, hands-on problems, real-world simulations and other authentic tasks.

Examining multiple factors in data analysis and interpretation. Special education eligibility decision-making for MLLs involves examining multiple factors in the context. The evaluation results need to be analyzed by taking into account specific ecologies of MLLs, including, native language, English language proficiency (e.g., ACCESS and other language assessments), immigration pattern, family structure, home culture, and past and current educational experiences. Considerations are needed to reduce bias in eligibility decision-making (Gottlieb, 2016; Roseberry-McKibbin, 2018).

- Assessment data should be interpreted in the context of previous and current educational programs to rule out a lack of opportunity to learn or ineffective instruction.
- Review test results with family members to gain additional insides that may be helpful for data interpretation.
- Detailed description of the students' learning and behavioral characteristics including native and English language must be provided in the written report.
- Narratives recording a student's behavior in taking a standardized assessment and cautions about the assessment can provide additional explanation when interpreting the test scores.
- Data interpretation must be done in a team setting to ensure accuracy and consistency.

CONCLUSION

In summary, MLLs who are potentially differently abled need to be identified and served effectively and in a timely manner. Neither the approach of letting MLLs wait to become proficient in English before making a referral nor inappropriately placing them in special education to get some help is successful to address their needs. The assessment, instruction and intervention for MLLs take account of language acquisition and development, sociocultural factors, and individual learning differences. Culturally and linguistically responsive practices in MTSS, special education evaluation and eligibility decision making processes require educational professionals from diverse fields to work collaboratively with families and among each other.

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