

ESL students with special needs fail to get language instruction, study finds

March 1 2018, by Amy White

Students learning English as a second language who also have special needs are more likely to fall between the cracks of elementary school education, finds researcher Sara Kangas of Lehigh University in a paper to be recognized March 28, 2018, by the International Research Foundation for English Language Education (TIRF).

Her study is the first to examine in depth the access English [language](#) learners with disabilities have to educational services.

For the ethnographic study, Kangas, an applied linguist and assistant professor in Lehigh's College of Education, spent seven months observing classrooms, interviewing teachers and administrators, and collecting documents in a bilingual public charter school in the northeastern United States. The findings surprised her:

"I expected a bilingual school to safeguard language services for English language learners (ELLs) with special needs, given its educational mission to foster bilingualism for all students," she said. Yet, she discovered the school forfeited its bilingual mission in order to preserve special education services for these students. In fact, some educators felt bilingualism was too lofty a goal when students also had a disability, so they did not prioritize language services. "In the end, English language learners with special needs received inadequate services compared to their peers," Kangas said. "In this way, their intersecting language and disability needs created a disadvantage for them in school."

Students were identified as being both English language learners and having a language disorder or learning disability in reading or math. The school self-identified as using a two-way immersion 50/50 model in Spanish and English. While charter schools often lack resources to provide appropriate special education and related services to students with disabilities, Kangas said her findings don't just reflect a "charter school problem." According to the U.S. Department of Justice and Department of Education, providing both language and special education services makes the top 10 list of issues facing English language learner education, with schools persistently failing to comply with federal law in providing services to English language learners with special needs.

"Thus, this case study, despite its charter school location, represents a common experience in service delivery for English language learners with special needs: inequitable distribution of resources for intersectional students," Kangas writes in the article. "Such inequitable allocation ... can happen even in a bilingual school that is explicitly committed to language development."

Research shows English language learners with special needs have higher academic performance and linguistic development when exposed to both languages, even for more severe disabilities like developmental delay, Kangas said. "My research findings show how educators can buy into the myth that ELLs with special needs have limited capacity for language learning," she said. "In reading how this myth plays out in schools, I hope administrators, teachers and parents can learn to believe in and advocate for their students' bilingual development."

Provided by Lehigh University

Citation: ESL students with special needs fail to get language instruction, study finds (2018, March 1) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-03-esl-students->

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