In the light of educational reforms aimed at promoting greater inclusive policies and practices, it is important to put a more pronounced emphasis on the needs of English language learners (ELLs) with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Simultaneously, a focus should also be placed on understanding and dealing with the disproportional representation of English language learners in special education categories. This dual and arguably sometimes mutually reinforcing phenomenon, along with its potential implications for education policy and practice, needs to be discussed against a convergent analytical framework drawn from bilingual and special education. The cross-fertilisation of these disciplinary fields can provide a multimodal and comprehensive approach to meeting the intersectional needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students with special educational needs. To this end, it is important that issues of culture and language should become indispensable aspects of the special education knowledge base in inclusive classrooms.

Key words: inclusive classrooms, bilingual education, pedagogy, curriculum.

Introduction: inclusive education and second language learning

Inclusive education is a globally mandated education policy phenomenon that promotes students’ right to quality education by means of adopting new educational approaches and arrangements to meet the needs of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) effectively. ‘Broad’ definitions of inclusive education (Ainscow and César, 2006) extend beyond the notion of disability to include learner diversity on the grounds of students’ varied ethnic/race, linguistic, biographical and developmental characteristics. A broad definition of inclusion denotes an intersectional dimension of students’ ‘disabled identities’ (Thomas, 1999) that results from the interactive relationship between their innate characteristics/needs and socio-political/cultural contextual dynamics. This is especially true for English language learners (ELLs) with special educational needs (SEN), who experience the accumulative and intersecting effects of social disadvantage on the basis of their ability and linguistic characteristics. Thus, the notion of special educational needs should be understood in relation to students’ cultural and linguistic background in order to distinguish and identify effectively their language- and disability-related needs (Ortiz, 2001; Klingner and Artiles, 2003).

A very significant development with regard to a human rights approach to disability and difference was the enforcement of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on 3 May 2008. The convention recognises the relative and contextually contingent nature of disability, which is the result of the interaction of a person’s impairment with institutional and environmental barriers that undermine ‘their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’ (United Nations, 2008, p. 1). This perspective chimes with intersectional understandings of a student’s identity that highlight the ways in which special educational needs rest upon and emanate from diverse and overlapping forms of social disadvantage, which need to be addressed simultaneously (Liasidou, 2012a, b). Goldstein (1995, p. 463) very appositely attributes the creation of a ‘learned learning disability’ to inappropriate teaching methods and strategies that are ‘devoid of political content’ (Goldstein, 1995, p. 464), thereby pointing to the necessity to view teaching as a political act, which is profoundly concerned with the ways in which social and cultural dynamics interact with students and construct their identities. In this sense, it is acknowledged that meeting students’ diverse needs entails a systemic and interdisciplinary approach in order to address effectively and efficiently their full continuum of needs.

Nevertheless, despite the above consideration and the enhanced concerns about advancing inclusive education (Slee, 2011), there is considerable empirical evidence suggesting that educational services do not meet the needs of
culturally and linguistically diverse students with SEN, who are more likely, in comparison with their peers, to leave school early and to experience educational failure (Artiles and Ortiz, 2002). This phenomenon can be attributed to the occasional failure of educational policies and practices to conjure up and act upon students’ needs in holistic and multidimensional ways, thereby losing sight of the necessity of adopting an intersectional approach to education policy and research (Wilkinson, 2003). That said, in terms of bilingual and special education there are some recurrent and interrelated issues that should be discussed and analysed so as to meet the needs of ELLs with SEN effectively. The needs of this group of students are complex and multifaceted; hence their needs should be assessed not only in relation to their linguistic needs but also in relation to their cognitive, emotional, social and cultural needs.

Second language learning and special educational needs

Globalisation and the gradual blurring of national barriers have precipitated unprecedented demographic shifts that have altered ethnic homogeneity in many parts of the world. The influx of immigrant students in many English-speaking western-centric countries necessitates new pedagogical considerations regarding the ways in which educational systems should accommodate learner diversity on the basis of their ability and linguistic/cultural differences. It is estimated that English language learners have more than 400 native languages and they differ hugely in terms of their biographical experiences and their relation to the mainstream culture (Artiles and Ortiz, 2002).

In the USA alone there are at least a million learners of English as a second language who have serious learning difficulties that entitle them to special education services. Nevertheless, despite the great numbers of linguistically diverse students with SEN in mainstream schools, educators systematically fail to address concurrently students’ language- and disability-related needs (Ortiz, 2001; Hart, 2009), an issue that should seriously inform debates on bilingual special education. To this end, it is important to re-evaluate the contribution of bilingual and special education programmes, as well as the role of the various professionals implicated in these programmes, in order to determine their effectiveness in meeting students’ needs, and to identify scope for improvement.

English language learners with SEN are disadvantaged due to the lack of educators who are capable of simultaneously addressing their language- and disability-related needs (Ortiz, 2001). It is empirically documented that educators frequently fail to distinguish the difference between learning disabilities and limited English proficiency. Even in cases when linguistically and culturally diverse students with disabilities receive special education services, they make inadequate progress because these services fail to address their socio-cultural and linguistic characteristics (McCray and Garcia, 2002). Klingner and Harry (2006) document the perfunctory attention given to the pre-referral strategies for supporting English language learners, due to the erroneous assumption that students’ poor academic performance and challenging behaviour result from their innate characteristics, thereby indicating their eligibility for special education.

That said, English language learners are disproportionately assigned to SEN categories—something that is indicative of the ways in which language-related needs are misinterpreted as learning difficulties due to lack of knowledge or prejudice. Paradoxically, the opposite phenomenon of underrepresentation is also reported as being rife, due to the placement of English language learners with disabilities in bilingual education without paying due attention to their disability-related needs so as to enable them to fulfil their potential (Artiles and Ortiz, 2002).

ELLS with special educational needs can hugely benefit from special education services that can effectively meet their dual needs (Hart, 2009). To this end, it is important to transcend disciplinary fragmentation and dichotomous forms of provision so as to forge cross-disciplinary alliances, and to provide a convergent pedagogical approach to addressing students’ intersectional needs. The following sections are given over to exploring the above considerations and discussing some implications for educational practice and educational professionals’ training.

Bilingual special education: issues of disproportionality in special education

The issue of over-representation of minority students in disability categories is not a new phenomenon. A considerable number of studies have long documented issues of over-representation across diverse ethnic minority groups (Artiles and Ortiz, 2002; McCray and García, 2002). These observations highlight a number of major issues: on the one hand, issues of prejudice and discrimination which might lead to biased assessment (Dyson and Kozleski, 2008); on the other, erroneous assessments due to the inability of various professionals to distinguish between English language acquisition and actual learning disabilities (Hart, 2009).

Paradis (2005) discusses the pragmatic challenges that are endemic in assessments of language and learning disabilities for students whose first language is not English. These challenges are further compounded by the ways in which the identification and assessment processes are more affected by educational professionals’ values, beliefs and vested interests than by students’ intrinsic characteristics (e.g. students designated as having learning difficulties or social, emotional and behavioural difficulties). Dyson and Kozleski (2008) discuss the ways in which the identification of non-normative categories of disability is highly dependent on subjective professional judgements which are occasionally
skewed by prejudice and discrimination. The increase in the identification rate in non-normative categories of disability documents the complex and interactive ways in which the notion of SEN is inexorably linked with contextual cultural and social factors and professional interests.

Given the complexity of the needs faced by ELL students, it is important that the various professionals implicated in the assessment procedures devise and use appropriate instruments for the accurate diagnosis of disabilities. These instruments and procedures should not be confined to standardised tests exclusively designed for monolingual students, but rather they should be carefully designed so as to address simultaneously students’ language- and disability-related needs (Artiles and Ortiz, 2002). This dual emphasis can eliminate disproportionate placements for English language learners. Moreover, in assessing a student’s performance it is important that this is conducted in both languages by means of formal and informal forms of assessment, observations, interviews and linguistic analyses. These assessments should be student-centred and criterion-referenced (Mitchell, 2008) so as to provide valid data with which to devise appropriate and comprehensive educational interventions (Hart, 2009).

Another important issue that needs to be addressed is the inadequate educational provision experienced by this group of students. Artiles et al. (2000) pointed to the fact that the English language learners who were placed in special education programmes were those who received the least language support; in particular, those learners who were solely exposed to instruction in English were three times more likely to be in special education resource rooms than their peers who received some educational support in their native language. At the same time, this group of students was found to be consistently under-represented in gifted and talented programmes (Hart, 2009). The above considerations foreground the necessity to provide a critical examination of the ways in which socio-political, educational and special education placement practices for English language learners interact and contribute to their educational failure (Artiles and Ortiz, 2002).

For instance, the vicious circle of the underachievement of ELLs is exacerbated by policies that promote high-stakes testing whereby schools are held accountable for attaining certain prescribed quantifiable measures of educational excellence (Sindelar et al., 2006). The increasing preoccupation with this kind of testing renders certain groups of students undesirable as they are expected to undermine test scores. As a result, English language learners with or without SEN are systematically excluded or hastily relegated to special education categories so as to justify their exclusion (Artiles and Ortiz, 2002).

Another under-investigated yet crucially important issue is the under-representation of certain ethnic minority students in disability categories. The phenomenon of under-identification is an equally problematic issue because it is responsible for providing inadequate and inappropriate disability support services for ELL students who have additional disability-related needs. Hui-Michael and Garcia (2009) provide the example of Asian-American students whose special educational placements are disproportionately lower than their non-Asian-American peers.

Professional practice and development in inclusive second language classrooms (assessment and classroom pedagogy)

As already pointed out, one major problem in meeting the needs of ELLs is the reported lack of specially trained teachers with dual expertise in special education and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) (Garcia and Ortiz, 2006). Students cannot achieve unless they have access to quality first teaching, an issue that needs to be seriously taken into consideration when discussing the reasons why some groups of students underachieve and are disproportionately placed in special education categories. It has been reported that English as a second language (ESL) learners are taught by the least qualified and experienced educators, an issue that significantly contributes to their educational failure (Artiles and Ortiz, 2002). Moreover, there is evidence suggesting that there is a lack of emphasis on supporting students’ needs during the pre-referral process, something that can be attributed to factors such as misinterpretation of limited English proficiency as a learning disability, as well as negative and biased attitudes towards a student’s ethnic and racial origin (Hart, 2009).

During the pre-referral process it is important that ELLs are exposed to positive and effective learning environments that are culturally and linguistically responsive. It is important that their socio-cultural, linguistic, racial/ethnic and other biographical experiences are taken into consideration at all stages of the pre-referral process (Garcia and Ortiz, 2006). Educational differentiation entails developing teaching programmes and activities based on quality first teaching, evidence-based teaching and behavioural strategies in meeting students’ diverse needs (Mitchell, 2008). To this end, teachers are expected to utilise appropriate pedagogical approaches, as well as specialised interventions, instructional alternatives and support strategies such as the total physical response (TPR), which has long been used in second language teaching for students who have little or no command in the second language. This approach has been subsequently adopted for students who have varied language and learning needs. Language is presented both orally and kinaesthetically, thereby providing a multimodal approach to teaching and learning. Students are expected to produce linguistic utterances that are ushered in by physical acts. In this way English language learners, who are not yet fluent in the target language, can participate and comprehend concepts by emulating the physical acts of their teachers and peers (Hart, 2009).

In cases where learners do not progress despite these modified and individualised forms of instruction and
intervention strategies, it is likely that they might have a learning disability (Ortiz, 2001).

The stages of educational intervention outlined above chime with the principles underpinning the multi-tiered Response to Intervention (RTI) or, as otherwise referred to, Response to Instruction promoted in the Individuals with Disabilities Act (2004) in the USA, with the aim of reducing special educational referrals for students whose learning difficulties can be attributed to ‘poor’ or ‘inadequate’ instruction. RTI is an approach that moves away from the notion of categories and special interventions and concentrates on providing appropriate, high-quality and effective education for all students, including students with disabilities. Moreover, this approach ensures an early intervention approach to meeting students’ needs, thereby moving away from a ‘wait to fail’ model. The RTI model can effectively respond to the needs of ELLs with and without special educational needs (Brown and Doolittle, 2008).

The first ‘tier’ of response concentrates on providing high-quality and evidence-based instruction for all children in general classrooms. The early intervention principle is applicable at this stage through universal screening assessments in order to single out students at risk in terms of reading and behaviour. ‘Tier two’ refers to targeted small-group instructions and additional assistance provided by teachers in general classrooms, and is available to those students who might have problems in specific skill areas. These targeted interventions should be brief (around six weeks) and students’ progress should be systematically reviewed and monitored. Finally, ‘Tier three’ focuses on very intensive instruction intended for students who do not make adequate progress in Tier two. This final stage might also involve formal assessment procedures in order to determine eligibility for special education provision (McLaughlin, 2009; Rothstein and Johnson, 2010).

Brown and Doolittle (2008) discuss the significance of adopting an ecological framework for RTI. They suggest that current educational practices for English language learners fail to meet the requirement of the first tier of response. Even though there is a large body of work on effective reading instructional strategies for ELLs, not all ELLs have access to appropriate forms of instruction. It is estimated that only 20% of the 56% of public school teachers who have at least one ELL student in their classrooms are qualified to teach ELL. Another important issue is the inability of the members of multidisciplinary teams who are called upon to take special education eligibility decisions for ELLs, to distinguish language difference from a learning disability. That said, the use of RTI is problematic unless it is underpinned by culturally and linguistically appropriate instruction strategies, otherwise RTI can further contribute to the disproportionate placement of ELL in disability categories. Hence, in order to ensure that ‘RTI does not become one more discriminatory system’, it is necessary to devise a linguistically and culturally informed RTI framework that can address the needs of ELLs (Brown and Doolittle, 2008, p. 67).

To this end, teachers need to be equipped with the relevant attitudes, knowledge and skills in order to provide culturally and linguistically informed learning opportunities for ELLs, and to distinguish second language learning difficulties from actual learning disabilities, or at least to have easy access to professionals who are able to do so. ELLs’ language and culture should be seen ‘as strengths upon which to build an education’ (Brown and Doolittle, 2008, p. 67) and their progress should be reviewed and monitored against the progress of their ‘true peers’ (similar language proficiency and cultural experiences). In cases where several ‘true peers’ underachieve, this is a sign of an ineffective second language learning environment (Brown and Doolittle, 2008).

Hart (2009) discusses some other assessment techniques that need to be adopted by classroom teachers as well as other educational professionals in order to assess learners’ needs in effective and comprehensive ways. Analytic or, as otherwise stated, clinical teaching (Ortiz, 2001) is premised on the necessity to modify teaching strategies systematically, to observe closely, monitor and document students’ progress as a means of identifying their needs and designing appropriate interventions. These practices can be supplemented by language-sampling procedures which can provide useful linguistic data to distinguish language- and disability-related needs during the process of second language acquisition.

Studies that come from the field of bilingual education point to the necessity of dual-language use in classrooms. Even though bilingual command might not be feasible in many cases, it is nevertheless expected that general and special educators demonstrate their respect for a student’s first language and they should actively encourage code switching as a means of facilitating spontaneous language use, which subsequently leads to increased use of English. Educators should also use some basic words from a student’s first language as prompts to encourage increased use of English (Hart, 2009). The role of bilingual learning support assistants (LSAs) in mainstream inclusive classrooms can also be instrumental in providing support for learning in increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms (Cable, 2003).

An inclusive education reform agenda necessitates that the predominance of ‘professional monologue’ in education (Ware, 1994) is transformed into a fertile and continuous dialogue among the various professionals implicated in bilingual special education programmes, through the constitution of interdisciplinary professional teams intended to enable learner diversity to fulfil their potential. Multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) should work closely with educators in order to introduce effective assessment procedures to identify relevant educational programmes and interventions for ELLs with and without special educational needs. It is important that these teams consist of ESL teachers who can advise on the processes and factors that influence second language learning, as well as family and
community members who can provide valuable insights into a number of biographical and experiential factors that influence learning, etc. To this end, professional training should be multidisciplinary in terms of participants and also in terms of enabling professionals to forge closer collaborative working relations. It is important, for instance, that general, bilingual and special education teachers forge close working relations in order to draw upon each other’s knowledge and expertise to address the intersecting needs of this group of students (Artiles and Ortiz, 2002).

Conclusions

A radical human rights approach to inclusive education policy and practice concentrates on redressing inequalities of power and systemic injustices, not only on the basis of disability, but also on the basis of other forms of social disadvantage linked to race/ethnicity, socio-economic background, biographical characteristics and diverse developmental trajectories (Armstrong and Barton, 2007). This perspective also necessitates adopting an intersectional approach to understand and subsequently to meet students’ cumulative and overlapping needs.

Understanding the intersectional nature of students’ needs and addressing the multifaceted nature of factors that disable certain groups of students entail critiquing educational policies and institutional arrangements that maintain and perpetuate social and educational injustice by adopting mono-dimensional approaches to meeting these needs. These approaches might inadvertently place the onus on individual students to respond to educational modifications and interventions, while ignoring the intersectional and reciprocal relationship of disability with race/ethnicity and the ways in which the latter disadvantages certain groups of students linguistically and culturally.

Consequently, in terms of bilingual special education, particular emphasis should be placed on challenging, for instance, the ways in which certain students experience institutional racism, which is evidenced in the ways in which minority ethnic languages, histories and cultures are neglected (Ali et al., 2001), while ascribing an individual pathology perspective to those students who have English as a second language. It is important to ensure that all students’ ‘voices and experiences are addressed and valued justly’ (Johnson, 2004, p. 146) by means of providing quality first teaching and creating amenable pre-referral conditions for all students to learn without finding recourse to remedial and compensatory measures of support provided by unnecessary and catastrophic special education placements (Lloyd, 2008).

References


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