Lost in Translation, Missed in Diagnosis

When Multilingual Learners Need Special Education Support, but the System Fails to Recognize Them

By Jamie Goebel

What happens when a student struggles academically for years, but the school cannot determine why? What happens when teachers repeatedly raise concerns, parents request help, and a child continues falling further behind, yet an evaluation never occurs? For Multilingual Learners, these questions reveal a troubling challenge in American public education, distinguishing the difficulties associated with learning English from those associated with a disability.

A student reading five grade levels below expectations may be told they simply need more time to learn English. A student struggling to follow directions may be viewed as a behavior student. A student who misses school to care for younger siblings may have their academic difficulties attributed to attendance rather than investigated for a possible disability.

Meanwhile, years pass. Academic gaps widen. Behaviors escalate. Opportunities for early intervention disappear. Schools have a responsibility to prevent Multilingual Learners from being incorrectly placed in special education because of language differences. But what happens when efforts to prevent overidentification contribute to another problem: students with disabilities remaining unidentified?

We have spent decades discussing the risks of incorrectly identifying Multilingual Learners for special education. We must also examine the consequences of failing to identify those who genuinely need it. Two Systems, One Student

Students who are both Multilingual Learners and eligible for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are commonly described as *dually identified* [1]. These students require support for English language development while also receiving services that address their disability-related educational needs. The number of students at this intersection is substantial.

According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA), during the 2023–24 school year, 15.2% of public school students were identified as having a disability [2]. Of those students with disabilities, 15.5% were also Multilingual Learners [2]. Meanwhile, Multilingual Learners represented 11.9% of all K–12 public school students [3].

These figures show that dually identified students are not an isolated population. They represent a significant group with academic needs which can't be adequately addressed by treating language development and disability as two separate concerns. The challenge is determining whether a student's academic difficulties result from language acquisition, a disability, interrupted schooling, insufficient instructional opportunities, or some combination of these factors.

Overidentification can put Multilingual Learners in special education when their difficulties primarily reflect language differences or inadequate instruction. Under identification, however, can deny students with disabilities access to specialized instruction, accommodations, and legal protections. Both outcomes represent educational inequities.

What Research Tells Us About Dually Identified Students

Researchers have examined the disproportionate identification of Multilingual Learners in special education and the difficulties associated with distinguishing language acquisition from disability.

The National Center on Educational Outcomes has documented the growing population of Multilingual Learners with disabilities and the importance of assessment practices that account for both language proficiency and disability-related needs [4]. The assessment guidelines emphasize that assessments must be valid, accessible, and responsive to the characteristics of Multilingual Learners with disabilities [5]. This distinction matters because academic performance cannot be interpreted independently of a student's academic opportunities.

A Multilingual Learner who experienced interrupted schooling or inconsistent access to language instruction may demonstrate academic difficulties that resemble characteristics of a learning disability. In contrast, a student with a learning disability may struggle with reading comprehension, memory, or processing in ways that cannot be explained by language acquisition alone.

An accurate evaluation therefore requires more than a single standardized test. It requires examination of educational history, language development, classroom performance, instructional opportunities, and family input.

The implications are more significant for Long-Term Multilingual learners. In California, Long-Term Multilingual Learner classification are students who have remained in U.S. schools for six or more years without reclassifying [5]. Students with unidentified disabilities may face additional barriers in demonstrating the academic and linguistic progress necessary for reclassification.

Not all Long-Term Multilingual Learners have disabilities, and a disability does not automatically prevent linguistic development. However, when schools repeatedly respond to disability-related difficulties with language instruction alone, they risk overlooking the student's actual needs.

Expected to overcome a disability through Linguistics

Teacher preparation system includes requirements related to supporting Multilingual Learners and students with disabilities [6]. General education teachers receive preparation in differentiated instruction, language development, and inclusive teaching practices. Special education teachers receive specialized preparation in disability-related instruction, assessment, and individualized educational planning.

School psychologists receive additional professional preparation in psychoeducational assessment and eligibility determination.

However, these preparation pathways do not necessarily provide equivalent depth of expertise in bilingual assessment or the complex relationship between language acquisition and disability.

A general education teacher may recognize that a student is reading years below grade level but lack the specialized knowledge to distinguish a language difference from a suspected learning disability. A special education teacher may understand disability-related instructional needs but have limited training in second-language development. A school psychologist may be qualified to administer psychoeducational assessments but lack proficiency in the student's home language.

These differences in professional preparation can leave multilingual learners dependent on whether a school

happens to have personnel with expertise across both fields. Professional resources are available through organizations such as the National Center on Educational Outcomes, the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, and state educational agencies. However, access to resources does not guarantee that educators receive consistent, practical training in multilingual disability identification.

States should establish more explicit interdisciplinary preparation and continuing professional development expectations for educators involved in special education referrals and evaluations of Multilingual Learners. Training should address bilingual assessment, interpretation of international educational records, culturally responsive family engagement, appropriate use of interpreters, and the distinction between language acquisition and disability.

Without these competencies, schools risk placing responsibility for identifying complex student needs on professionals who have only been prepared to recognize part of the problem.

7 Barriers to Evaluation

Federal law requires public schools to identify, locate, and evaluate children suspected of having disabilities who may need special education services. This obligation, commonly known as *Child Find*, also applies to Multilingual Learners as well as English-proficient students [7]. Evaluations must consider multiple sources of information and cannot rely on limited English proficiency as the determining factor for disability eligibility. Assessments must also be administered in the student's native language [7]. These protections are essential. Yet several barriers can complicate their implementation.

Barrier 1: Attendance

Chronic absenteeism can affect academic achievement, and schools must consider whether missed instruction contributes to a student's difficulties. However, attendance should not automatically prevent an evaluation when a disability is suspected.

For some Multilingual Learners, absences reflect circumstances out of their control. Families may experience economic insecurity, unstable housing, transportation difficulties, or work schedules that require older children to care for younger siblings. These circumstances deserve attention, but they do not eliminate the possibility of a disability.

For example, a student who has struggled with reading since first grade and continues performing years below grade level in middle school. If the school declines to evaluate that student solely because of attendance, it may overlook years of documented difficulties that cannot necessarily be explained by absences alone.
Schools must distinguish between examining attendance as part of a comprehensive evaluation and using attendance to prevent that evaluation from occurring.

Barrier 2: Assessment Materials
Language can become another significant barrier. Many widely used psychoeducational assessments were developed and standardized in English. Some have Spanish-language versions, but the availability of validated instruments varies across languages and assessment domains.

For students who speak Mandarin, Arabic, Vietnamese, or less commonly assessed languages, schools may struggle to locate appropriate instruments. Simply translating an English language assessment does not necessarily produce a valid assessment. Vocabulary, cultural references, linguistic structures, and standardized administration procedures may affect what a test measures.

State Departments of Education requires assessments to be conducted in the student's native language. It also requires assessments to be valid for their intended purpose and administered by trained professionals. Instead, evaluators must select methods that accurately measure the student's abilities and educational needs.
The absence of a commercially available translated test should lead to a carefully designed alternative assessment approach, not indefinite delay.

Barrier 3: Time
California Education Code §56321 requires school districts to provide a proposed assessment plan within 15 days of a referral, excluding certain school breaks and subject to statutory exceptions [8]. Once written parental consent is received, Education Code §56344 requires the initial assessment and IEP meeting within 60 calendar days.

These timelines are designed to protect students from unnecessary delays. However, Multilingual evaluations may require additional coordination involving bilingual psychologists, interpreters, specialized instruments, and educational records from other countries.
These logistical challenges do not create a blanket exception to the required

timelines. A student whose evaluation begins in October but is not completed until June may spend almost an entire school year without a determination of eligibility or a plan for specialized services. For students transitioning from middle school to high school, that delay can have lasting consequences.

Barrier 5: Finding an Interpreter
Schools may employ bilingual staff who can communicate effectively with families but have no specialized training in psychoeducational assessment. Interpreting a parent conference and interpreting a standardized cognitive assessment are very different responsibilities.

An assessment interpreter must understand the importance of standardized language, the limitations of translation, and the consequences of altering test administration. A bilingual employee should not automatically be considered qualified to interpret specialized assessment instruments simply because they speak the student's language. Districts need access to appropriately trained bilingual assessment personnel and interpreters who understand the requirements of special education evaluation.

Barrier 6: Parental Participation

Parents are essential members of the special education process. Yet meaningful participation requires more than attendance at a meeting. Families must understand the purpose of assessments, the meaning of evaluation findings, their rights, and the potential implications of special education eligibility. For parents who are not proficient in English, untranslated documents and meetings without appropriate interpretation can create significant barriers.

Some families may also be unfamiliar with the special education system. Others may come from countries where disability identification carries substantial stigma or where special education services operate very differently. Federal law includes requirements concerning interpretation at IEP meetings and communication of procedural safeguards in a parent's native language. Schools must ensure that families understand their rights rather than assuming that participation in an English-language meeting constitutes informed involvement.

Barrier 7: Overlooked Diagnoses
Students arriving from other countries may already have documented learning difficulties, medical diagnoses, or educational assessments. However, terminology and eligibility criteria vary

internationally. A diagnosis issued in another country may not directly establish special education eligibility. However, these records should be considered.

A child who demonstrated significant learning difficulties in their home country and continues to struggle in the U.S. presents a different assessment question from a child whose difficulties appear only after beginning English instruction. Disregarding international records can mean disregarding years of important evidence.

Barrier 8: Fear the Label
Some families resist special education evaluations because they fear stigma, lowered expectations, separation from peers, or negative consequences for their child's future. These concerns should not be dismissed as a lack of parental involvement. Schools must build trust, explain the evaluation process, and clarify that agreeing to an initial assessment does not automatically mean agreeing to special education placement. Parents have the right to make informed decisions about consent. At the same time, schools remain responsible for explaining available supports and continuing to address the student's educational needs.

Three Students, Three Different Barriers: A Mini Case Study

The following cases are based on the educational experiences of three Multilingual Learners in a California school district. Their circumstances illustrate how persistent academic difficulties, evaluation barriers, and missed opportunities for intervention can intersect.

Student A: A Diagnosis at the End of the Road
Student A arrived from Taiwan in second grade, completed third grade in the U.S., and returned to Taiwan during the COVID-19 pandemic. After completing fourth and fifth grades abroad, the student returned to an American school for sixth grade. Across both countries, educational records documented difficulties with comprehension, following directions, and academic achievement. By middle school, the student was reading at a second-grade level. Teachers in Taiwan had reported similar concerns, and the family described an earlier diagnosis from Taiwan Doctor's comparable to ADHD in the U.S.

During sixth grade, the Student Study Team process began. Concerns continued into seventh grade, when six teachers recommended further

evaluation and parents requested testing. Unfortunately, the evaluation did not proceed at that time due to school psychologistic recommendations. Academic performance deteriorated even more. Earning mostly Cs and Ds during sixth and seventh grades, the student failed all academic classes in eighth grade and behavioral concerns intensified.

The evaluation process finally began in October of eighth grade. Difficulties obtaining appropriate Mandarin language assessment materials and locating a qualified interpreter contributed to several delays. An extension was requested in January, and the findings were not presented until the final week of school in June. The evaluation identified multiple learning disabilities, and the team recommended a more supportive academic placement for high school in special day classes.

By then, the student had spent nearly three years in middle school without a completed special education eligibility determination. The transition to high school introduced additional difficulties. According to the case account, the student was not enrolled in a Multilingual Learner support class and did not receive school counseling services. During ninth grade, the student experienced multiple arrests related to drug sales and was eventually expelled. The student subsequently entered a county-operated school serving expelled students. In that smaller educational environment, academic performance improved, and the student completed ninth grade with Cs.

This outcome does not establish that earlier special education identification would have prevented the student's disciplinary or legal involvement. However, it raises important questions about the consequences of delayed assessment, inadequate transition planning, and the availability of supportive learning environments. Why did a student with years of documented difficulties as well as teacher and parental testing requests have to wait until the end of middle school to receive an eligibility determination?

Student B: Six Years of Signs

Student B was born in Japan, speaks Chinese, and entered an American public school in kindergarten. The student attended the same elementary school through fifth grade. Academic difficulties were consistently documented. Report cards reflected the lowest achievement ratings across academic subjects, and statewide assessments beginning in third grade showed performance at the lowest

achievement level. Behavioral concerns emerged during fourth and fifth grades. By sixth grade, the student was reading at first-grade level and performing mathematics at a second-grade level. The student was failing every academic class.

Attendance was also a concern. Since kindergarten, Student B had accumulated 124 absences. Following two SST meetings, three teacher recommendations, and a recommendation from the multilingual learner coordinator, school and district psychology personnel declined to initiate an evaluation, citing attendance concerns.

Student B remained without a special education eligibility determination. As the school year progressed, academic disengagement and behavioral concerns increased. The school continued scheduling SST follow-up meetings every eight weeks.

Attendance is a legitimate factor in understanding academic performance. But six years of documented academic difficulties, combined with multiple professional recommendations, raise questions about whether the student's needs were being adequately investigated.

How many years of academic failure must a student experience before a school determines that further evaluation is warranted?

Student C: Family Responsibilities

Student C arrived from Mexico and entered an American school in first grade. The student attended the same elementary school through fifth grade. Teachers consistently described a student who worked hard, wanted to please adults, and demonstrated a positive attitude toward learning. Yet academic performance remained low. Statewide assessment results fell within the lowest achievement ranges, and by sixth grade, the student was reading at a second-grade level.

Student C initially passed academic classes with low Cs, but by seventh grade, reading performance remained largely unchanged, and the student failed every academic class during the first reporting period. Attendance became a significant concern. As the second oldest of four children, Student C frequently stayed home to care for younger siblings. The oldest sibling no longer lived in the household, increasing the family's reliance on student C. Two SST meetings occurred during sixth grade, followed by another in seventh grade. The school psychologist expressed concerns about attendance,

while the student's mother expressed reluctance about special education identification. She didn't want her daughter labeled and emphasized the importance of her daughter's responsibilities within the family. No special education eligibility determination was made.

Meanwhile, the student demonstrated increasing behavioral and social difficulties, including challenges maintaining friendships and a growing reliance on adult relationships at school. Student C's experience illustrates how academic difficulties can intersect with family responsibilities, parental concerns, and the limits of school-based interventions. The family's circumstances deserve understanding. The student's educational needs deserve equal attention. A child's responsibilities at home should not determine whether their learning difficulties are taken seriously at school.

Three Students, Same Pattern

Although these students come from different countries and experienced different circumstances, their educational experiences reveal striking similarities. All three entered middle school performing far below grade level. All three had academic concerns documented across multiple years. All three experienced increasing behavioral or social difficulties. All three had educators who recognized the need for additional support. Yet only one received a completed special education eligibility determination, and that determination occurred 2 years after the first request.

For Student A, assessment delays and language-related logistical challenges prolonged the process. For Student B, attendance became the primary reason an evaluation did not proceed. For Student C, family responsibilities and parental reluctance complicated efforts to determine the student's needs. These cases do not establish that all three students have disabilities or that every school decision was unlawful. They reveal why referral practices, assessment access, communication, and institutional accountability deserve closer examination. They also raise concerns about Long-Term Multilingual Learner classification.

When a Multilingual Learner spends years struggling academically, schools must investigate whether existing language instruction is sufficient and whether additional educational needs are going unrecognized. Without appropriate evaluation and support, students may continue with interventions that do not address the underlying causes of their difficulties.

The result can be years of academic stagnation, diminished confidence, disengagement, and reduced access to advanced coursework and postsecondary opportunities.

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