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## **The Representation of English Language Learners In Special Education: A Campus-Level Study**

Ruby Lopez

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THE REPRESENTATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN SPECIAL  
EDUCATION: A CAMPUS-LEVEL STUDY

A Thesis

by

RUBY LOPEZ

Submitted to Texas A&M International University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

May 2018

Major Subject: Special Education

The Representation of English Language Learners in Special Education: A Campus-level Study

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May 2018

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## ABSTRACT

The Representation of English Language Learners in Special Education: A Campus-level Study.

(May 2018)

Ruby Lopez, Bachelor of Science, Texas A&M International University;

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This study examined the representation of English language learners in special education programs in elementary, middle, and high school campuses in two school districts in Texas. Data was collected from the Texas Education Agency's *Public Education Information Management System* for the 2016-2017 school year. Relative risk ratios were calculated and reported for each elementary and secondary campuses for both school districts. The relative risk ratios were calculated utilizing total student enrollment, total English language learner enrollment, total special education enrollment, and total English language learner in special education.

Results indicated that English language learners were both underrepresented and overrepresented in both school districts. Furthermore, underrepresentation was greater in the elementary campuses, and overrepresentation was greater in the secondary campuses. It was concluded that campus-level data can provide disaggregated data that district, state, or national-level data cannot provide.

**DEDICATION**

To my grandfather in heaven, my dime.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank God for the abilities given to me to fulfill my small vocation. “Wherever God has put you, that is your vocation. It is not what we do but how much love we put into it” -Mother Teresa

Secondly, would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Linn, and my committee members, Dr. Brown, Dr. Kim, and Dr. Hachar, for their guidance and support during my time at Texas A&M International University. Thank you for the countless number of hours each and every one of you spent towards preparing course material for which I gained knowledge, and for sharing your passion towards education.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	3
Purpose of the Study.....	4
Research Questions .....	4
Significance of the Field .....	4
Definition of Terms .....	5
Limitations .....	6
II LITERATURE REVIEW.....	7
Disproportionality.....	7
Disproportionality: Then and Now .....	8
Disproportionate Representation of English Language Learners .....	11
Representation of English Language Learners in Texas .....	16
Summary of Review of Literature .....	18
III METHODOLOGY.....	20
Research Design.....	20
Population .....	20

Data Sources.....21

Data Collection.....22

Data Entry .....23

Data Analysis .....24

Summary.....24

IV RESULTS.....26

    Relative Risk Ratios .....26

    Research Question One.....27

    Research Question Two .....30

V DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.....35

    Discussion of Findings .....35

    Conclusions.....38

    Implications.....40

    Limitations of the Study .....41

    Recommendation for Future Research .....42

REFERENCES.....44

VITA.....51

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 3.1: District A and District B: Student Population .....	21
Table 4.1: Relative Risk Ratios of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District A Elementary School Campuses.....	27
Table 4.2: Relative Risk Ratios of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District A Secondary School Campuses .....	28
Table 4.3: Underrepresentation of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District A Campuses .....	29
Table 4.4: Overrepresentation of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District A Campuses .....	30
Table 4.5: Relative Risk Ratios of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District B Elementary School Campuses.....	31
Table 4.6: Relative Risk Ratios of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District B Secondary School Campuses .....	32
Table 4.7: Underrepresentation of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District B Campuses .....	33
Table 4.8: Overrepresentation of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District B Campuses .....	33
Table 5.1: Relative Risk Ratios of English language learners in Special Education: Statewide, District A, and District B in 2016 .....	38

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

A seminal court case that arose during the civil rights movement, *Brown v. Board of Education*, found that “separate but equal” violated the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment. Becoming a stepping stone for education, students from diverse backgrounds, such as African Americans and later on individuals with special needs, benefited from the verdict as it became an opportunity for equal educational opportunities. In 1975, the United States Congress enacted Public Law 94-142, better known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). Subsequently, it was amended and reauthorized to what is known today as Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Education Act of 2004 (IDEA). As a nation, 6.6 million children (or 13%) of all public-school students, ages 3-21, received services under IDEA, Part B during the 2014-2015 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). According to the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES, 2017), the total number of English language learners (ELLs) in United States public schools was 9.3% of the total student population in the school year 2013-2014. Also, in the school year 2014-2015, 13.8% of the total ELLs population received services under special education. With the increasing population of students who are ELLs and available information on their language, studies have identified that ELL students may be either overrepresented or underrepresented in special education programs throughout the states.

Special education serves a diverse student body; however, a major area of concern is the disproportionate representation of students of color. First introduced over 50 years ago, Dunn’s (1968) seminal article found that African Americans were disproportionately represented in special education. Sullivan and Bal (2013) summarized the research on disproportionality:

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This Thesis follows the style of *Exceptional Children*.

Disproportionality was formally acknowledged in the special education literature more than four decades ago (e.g., Dunn, 1968) and has since garnered considerable attention throughout the literature, federal policy (e.g., 2004 amendments to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] requiring state monitoring of disproportionality), case law (e.g., *Guadalupe Organization v. Tempe Elementary School District No. 3*, 1978; *Larry P. v. Riles*, 1984), and professional arenas (e.g., national technical assistance centers, training programs). (p. 476)

One group that has often been overrepresented and underrepresented in special education is English language learners (ELLs). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides a policy under Part B that students are guaranteed a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Disproportionality rates of students of color in special education is an area of concern as a student may be denied their right to IDEA mandates, such as a FAPE. When the focus of research is on national, state, or district-level data, disproportionality statistics may only give the picture of what is on the surface and not down to the students themselves, especially for ELLs receiving services in special education. “Just as it is important to prevent the overrepresentation of groups of students who may be misidentified, it is also critical to be sure that those students who could benefit from special education services are not overlooked” (Dever et al., 2016, p. 65). Though there is a concern of overrepresentation and underrepresentation in special education, there appears to be a limited amount of campus-level data on disproportionality and further exploration in this area is needed.

In the literature concerning representational data of special education, studies have looked at national, state, and district-wide level data; It has been documented in groups such as students of color, example African American numbers compared to White numbers in special education (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010). Researchers of disproportionality have focused on students of color, but literature focused directly on English language learners (ELLs) is limited (Barrio, 2017). “Federal databases (e.g., Office of Civil Rights and the Office of Special

Education Programs) only recently began collecting data on identification and placement by language status even though reporting by racial category has long been in place” (Sullivan, 2011, p. 319).

### **Statement of the Problem**

After the Brown decision, early court cases such as *PARC v Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* in 1972 as well as its parallel court case of *Mills v Board of Education of the District of Colombia* the same year, provided the framework to what is now Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Reauthorized in 2004, IDEA continues to provide the six major principles that focus on the rights and responsibilities of public schools to children receiving services including: free appropriate public education (FAPE), appropriate evaluation, individualized education plan (IEP), least restrictive environment (LRE), parental participation, and procedural safeguards (Turnbull, 2005). In regard to disproportionality, IDEA mandated equity and has not changed since 2004. A systematic review of the literature by Cruz and Rodl (2018), provided an overview of studies that have examined the issue of disproportionality at the national, state, municipality, and school-level. Out of 26 studies, 61.54% of studies focused on national data, 19.23% focused on state data, 11.54% focused on district data, 7.69% focused on municipality data, and 0% focused on school data (p. 4). With an increased population of English language learners (ELLs) in the total population, the concern of appropriate placement of ELLs in special education has been at the forefront of discussions in the education field. Though there is a need for data analysis for the disproportionality rates nationwide, statewide, and districtwide, “studies of student-level data are relatively rare within the disproportionality literature” (Sullivan & Bal, 2013, p. 477). When it comes to the ELLs, data reported for this population is difficult to obtain, as data collected may not be specific to their language (Barrio, 2017). Nevertheless,

campus-level data is crucial because IDEA holds the schools responsible for providing a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine representational patterns of English language learners (ELL) receiving special education services at elementary, middle, and high school campuses in two school districts in South Texas. For the purpose of this study, the districts will be referred to as District A and District B.

### **Research Questions**

This quantitative research study will address the following questions:

- 1.) What are the representational patterns of English language learners receiving special education services at elementary, middle school, and high school campuses in District A?
- 2.) What are the representational patterns of English language learners receiving special education services at elementary, middle school, and high school campuses in District B?

### **Significance of the Study**

Since Texas is the second largest state in terms of the English language learners (ELLs) population, this research will provide critical information and expand the literature of representational patterns of English language learners (ELLs) in special education. Additionally, this study will emphasize the importance and need of child find, appropriate placement of students with special needs, and the responsibility of supervision and monitoring of IDEA mandates, specifically for the ELLs population represented in special education in the state of Texas.

Recently, the United States Department of Education found Texas had violated federal law by capping the number of students with disabilities who could receive special education services

to 8.5% of student population and punishing those school districts who were non-compliant with the cap, denying school districts to properly place students in appropriate placement for all students. Specifically, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation (OSER) indicated that the areas of concern included: Child Find, Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), and supervising and monitoring Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) mandates. Evidently, there is a clear fluctuation of representational patterns of students who were placed in special education and those that could have possibly been denied the opportunity of placement because of the cap that was put into effect.

### **Definition of Terms**

The terms and definitions used in this research are as follows:

*Disproportionate representation:* Refers to the identification of “students of certain ethnicities appear in special education programs or disability categories in greater percentages than they occur in the general population of students” (Maydosz, 2014, p. 82).

Disproportionate representation can be represented in either overrepresentation or underrepresentation.

*English Language Learners:* “a student whose primary language is other than English and whose English language skills are such that the student has difficulty performing ordinary classwork in English” (Texas Education Code § 29.052).

*Free Appropriate Public Education:* “ special education and related services that (a) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; (2) meet the standards of the State educational agency; (c) include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the State involved; and

(d)are provided in conformity with the individualized education program required under section 1414 (d) of IDEA” (IDEA, 34 Code of Federal Regulations § 300.17).

*Student with a Disability*: a child evaluated in accordance with §§ 300.304 through 300.11 as having an intellectual disability, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as “emotional disturbance”), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, an other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services (IDEA, 34 CFR § 300.8).

### **Limitations**

The author acknowledges that there are some limitations when it comes to this particular study. One of the first limitations encountered is that although there have been studies conducted for disproportionality representation in special education, there is limited literature that has covered disproportionality representation of specifically English language learners (ELLs) in special education. Second, the author will depend on the data provided by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) including total school population, total English language learner’s population, total special education population, and total English language learner’s population in special education for all elementary, middle, and high school campuses in both District A and District B. It is assumed that the data provided by TEA is accurate. Finally, although the represented data is for special education, the data does not represent percentages for each disability category individually.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter provides a review of the literature that relates to the representational patterns of English language learners receiving special education services in elementary, middle, and high school campuses in two school districts in the state of Texas. The first section of this overview of the literature will focus on the representation of students of color in special education. The second section will focus on the literature concerning English language learners receiving services in special education programs. The third section will focus on literature concerning representational patterns of minority students in the state of Texas.

#### **Disproportionality**

Disproportionality has been defined by scholars as an overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a particular group (gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, geographic, etc.) in a special education program compared to the overall student population (Artiles, 2011; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Dunn, 1968; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Fifty years ago, Dunn's (1968) seminal article introduced us to the problem of overrepresentation of African American students being served in special education under the category of mental retardation. Throughout the years, abundant studies have identified disproportionate representation of students of color receiving special education services (Artiles, & Trent, 1994; Bal, Sullivan, & Harper, 2014; Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011; Voulgarides & Thorius, 2017). Sullivan & Artiles (2011) indicated that "The literature reveals fairly consistent national patterns – relative to White students, African American students are overrepresented as MR [mental retardation] and ED [emotional disabilities], and Native American students are overrepresented as LD [learning disabilities], while Latino and Asian

America/ Pacific Islander students are proportionately or underrepresented in high-incidence categories” (p. 1527).

### **Disproportionality: Then and Now**

Disproportionality has been studied for over 50 years, but researchers have continued to report mixed results. Researchers have replicated studies or further analyzed data and continue to address the disproportionate representation of subgroups (i.e., students of color, English language learners) in special education programs throughout the United States. This section of the review of literature will provide a historical overview of the research on disproportionality specific to students of color in both their overrepresentation and underrepresentation in special education.

In 1968, the United States Department of Education began to collect data of students by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR). Subsequently, Dunn (1968) analyzed the data and identified disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. This study was timely in that it coincided with the civil rights movement and represented the educational trend (i.e., unequal placement) of an African American in the late 1960's. Dunn's article was critical in exposing the problem of disproportionality that existed in special education at that time. Moreover, court cases specific to students with disabilities began to surface to demand equal opportunity for all students (i.e., *PARC v Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972) and *Mills v Board of Education* (1972)). Subsequently, in 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was passed into law, providing a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students with disabilities.

Twenty- six years after Dunn's publication, Artiles and Trent (1994) concluded that disproportionality continued to be a problem, even after the call for reform. Moreover, Artiles,

Harry, Reschley, and Chinn (2002) identified that disproportionality continued to exist for students of color in the national, state, and district level, and that variables such as socioeconomic issues, referrals, assessments, and cultural discontinuity contributed to the placement of students of color in special education. Artiles and Bal (2008) addressed major problems with disproportionality and reported that research in the field has focused on dilemmas that contribute to placement in special education and not entirely on the disproportionate placement of students. Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, and Ortiz (2010) analyzed and critiqued researchers' (i.e., Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Komenski, et al., 2001; MacMilla & Reschly, 1998) findings on disproportionate representation and justifications for variables that are argued to justify student's placement in special education and concluded that analysis of education on culture within the schools could provide answers. Artiles, Dorn, and Bal (2016) contributed to the study of disproportionality by detailing the problem of disproportionate representation of students with disabilities in the education system, before protection of the law, during protection of the law, and alongside special education and the student population receiving the services up until the year 2016. Through the contributions scholars throughout the years, it is apparent that disproportionality continues to be a problem in special education. Another major contribution of scholars to the study of disproportionality are social factors that impact whether students are identified for special education or not.

Social factors have been identified and are thought to contribute to students' placement in special education. In various studies, researchers have indicated that educators may not share the same background, nor do they have the funds to provide a culturally appropriate curriculum for their students (Bal, et al., 2014; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Hibel, et al, 2010). The National Research Council [Donovan and Cross, 2002] reported on minority students and stated that African

American students were more likely than their White peers to receive special education services under intellectual disabilities, and that students who were from a racial minority were more at risk of being in poverty, which correlated with receiving special education services. Dever and colleagues (2016) indicated that cultural mismatch between the educator and the student could affect their placement or non-placement in special education. Voulgarides, Fergus, and King Thorius (2017) further discussed these factors as such: “The disproportionality research on practice-based factors maintains two theoretical arguments: (a) a cultural mismatch between middle class, White teachers and school administrators with low-income and/or racial and ethnic minority student populations and (b) gaps in the development and implementation of interventions and other referral systems, which cause disproportionate outcomes” (p. 64).

Similarly, Cruz and Rodl (2018) conducted a systematic review of the literature on disproportionality in special education and analyzed twenty-six articles that indicated various variables that contributed to students’ placement in special education. They discovered that race was a key factor of disproportionality in special education in all studies and included Black, Latino, Asian, and American Indian/Alaskan students. “Studies consistently found that Black students were overrepresented in categories such as ED [emotional disturbance] and ID [intellectual disability], and Asian students were underrepresented in all disability categories when compared with White counterparts” (Cruz & Rodl, 2018, p. 9).

Researchers have contributed 50 years of literature and data that has identified the problem of disproportionate representation of minority students placed in special education programs throughout the United States. Studies have focused on minority groups representation, gender, socioeconomic status, cultural mismatch, resources, and school/district resources. Data

has resulted in both the overrepresentation and the underrepresentation of the groups studied in national-, state-, and district-level data.

### **Disproportionate Representation of English Language Learners**

English language learners (ELLs) are students who are learning English as a second language and have a first language other than English. ELLs present a unique background that makes identifying an ELL student for special education services even more difficult because of their language barrier (DeMatthews, Edwards, & Nelson, 2014). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2016), 9.4% of the national student population were identified as ELLs. The main first language ELLs speak in the United States is Spanish (Soto, 2015). “Hispanic ELL students, and Hispanic students made up over three-quarters (77.8 percent) of ELL student enrollment” (NCES, 2017, p. 4). The National Education Association (NEA, 2007) reported that often, Hispanic and ELL students are grouped together in disproportionate subgroups, that it is difficult to assess the groups individually. This section of the review of literature will provide an overview of the research on disproportionality specific to ELL students in both overrepresentation and underrepresentation in special education.

Although the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) has been collecting data since 1968 through the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), the data does not report on English language learners receiving special education services. By law, it is not required to report on the number of English language learners in special education, but this does not keep ELLs from being underrepresented or overrepresented in special education programs. Ovando and Collier (1985) reported that ELLs were underrepresented in special education because of inaccurate placement. Artiles and Trent (1994) focused their research on Latinos where OCR data indicated that their limited English proficiency was a variable that affected students’ placement in special education.

Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, and Higareda (2005) studied English language learners' placement in special education services in eleven school districts in the state of California during the 1998-1999 school year. They presented their findings with composition indices, risk indices, and odd ratios and concluded that ELLs were underrepresented at the district level, underrepresented at the elementary level, overrepresented at the secondary level, and overrepresented in high incidence disabilities. Moreover, ELL students were more often placed in high-incidence disabilities such as learning disability (Artiles, et al., 2005). In a subsequent study, Artiles and Bal (2008), stated that English language learners are overrepresented in school districts with larger groups of ELLs.

Similarly, Sullivan (2011) reported the disproportionate representation of English language learners (ELLs) in special education in several districts in a southwestern state for an eight-year period (1999-2006). The longitudinal study included data that included the year 2000 English-Only legislated. This study utilized relative risk ratios to determine the representation of ELLs in special education and concluded that at the state-level, ELL students were overrepresented in special education for high incidence disabilities. However, the author was not able to identify the problem until the data was disaggregated at the region level rather than the state as a whole (Sullivan, 2011). In other words, disproportionality was more easily identified with disaggregated data. "Researchers have often conceptualized disproportionality along racial lines, with important policy implications (e.g., federal requirements for state monitoring); however, issues of ELLs are typically absent from these conversations" (Sullivan, 2011, p. 326). In a subsequent study, Sullivan and Bal (2013) conducted a multilevel analysis on variables that were great risk indicators for special education placemen including gender, race, socioeconomic status, and number of suspensions. They used student-level variables and reported risk indices

for each indicator to determine the risk of special education placement for each of the variables. The authors concluded that “school districts tend to focus on race because of IDEA requirements, but policy makers, administrators, and educators should also be cognizant to broader disparities in identification outcomes” (Sullivan & Bal, 2013, p. 491).

According to DeMathews, Edwards, and Nelson (2014), “all students have the right to special education and language acquisition programs free of cost if they are found eligible under the requirements put forth in federal mandates” (p. 28). One must not deny a student special education services, but they must also not deny general education placement. In their study, they analyzed information on state education agencies, school districts, and schools along the US-Mexico border. With the amount of ELL students in US-Mexico border schools, they highlighted issues such as policy and how it does not provide a well-structured manner of working with disproportionality. In their analysis, they determined that “no state currently collects data that identifies ELLs in special education as a specific subgroup, which makes examining issues associated with ELL-special education disproportionality challenges, complex, and time-consuming for state administrators” (p. 30). The authors concluded that “A more in-depth study that includes state education agency policies, school district policies, and an investigation into school level expertise and awareness of policies could enhance our understanding of how policies influence school action, how policies can modify school-level behaviors, and the best practices of states, districts, and schools where the disproportionate representation of ELLs in special education is limited” (DeMathews et al., p. 34).

Similarly, Garcia (2015) stated that ELLs are overrepresented as much as any minority students in special education programs. “Being bilingual or an ELL increases a student’s chance of being labeled as a student who should receive special education services” (Garcia, 2015, p. 4).

In his research, he asserted that being placed in special education can either positively or negatively affect a student if they are labeled with a disability. Furthermore, Garcia analyzed the court case *Larry P. v Riles* as it relates to bias examination that ELL students can face when being tested for possible placement in special education.

Dever, Raines, Dowdy, and Hostutler (2016), found that with the increase of ELL students in U.S. schools, appropriate placement of students is vital. Their study analyzed a group of students at national level who were receiving services in special education program and concluded, that demographics such as gender, race, and socioeconomics were indicators for student's placement in special education. However, Dever and colleagues pointed out that there was limited amount of information that was reported on the status of ELL students because there are no legal requirements for districts to report data on language. With reports of ELL students presented from other researchers (Artiles & Bal, 2008; Sullivan, 2011), the researchers concluded that ELL students are often overrepresented in the identification process and placement in special education in comparison to their White peers. Moreover, Dever and colleagues (2016) stated that "Acknowledging the problems associated with disproportionality, reauthorizations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) have instituted policies that require schools to collect and report data on disproportionality in special education. Unfortunately, such policies have done little to remedy the problem to date, necessitating additional scholarship focused on potential contributing factors and solutions" (p. 59).

Barrio (2017) focused her research on policy for rural schools pertaining to the disproportionate representation of English language learners in secondary schools. It was determined that after elementary school, the ELL population increased in special education, and in particular the category of learning disabilities because of the lack of available programs that

can help the students with the appropriate resources for their language differences at the secondary level. The suggested solution to this problem was to change the policy of the pre-referral process for students to be identified for special education. Furthermore, Barrio (2017) stated, “although many overall factors can contribute to the disproportionate representation of ELL students in categories such as learning disabilities around the country, every school district and their administrators (i.e., superintendents, principals, directors of special education) should focus on the individual factors that are relevant to their issue” (p. 66).

Voulgarides, Fergus, and King Thorius (2017) reviewed literature on disproportionality and found that disproportionality was not mentioned in the law until 1997, twenty-nine years after Dunn’s seminal article on disproportionality. Although it was mentioned in the law, limited detail was provided on how to identify “significant disproportionality” and only race and ethnicity were specified. In their review of literature, they state that English language learners are disproportionately represented in later school years, yet states are not required data to be collected.

Counts, Katsiyannis, and Whitford (2018) examined the overrepresentation and underrepresentation of English language learners in special education. Throughout the overview, they found patterns of variables that assisted with the eligibility of a student to be placed and serviced under special education including culture and language, in which they concluded a bias determination of placing a student in a special education program. “The numerous cultures and languages included under the EL [English learners] category can make it challenging to determine whether individual cultural and linguistic differences contribute to a particular group’s underrepresentation or overrepresentation” (Counts, et al., 2018, p. 4). With the concern of the language component, the authors suggested that practice in this field needs improvement and that

the educators need a better understanding on how to address this particular problem. The authors concluded that “there is a need to reform and provide better training in practices regarding the assessment and identification of students with disabilities for preservice and inservice educators, in addition to effective multitiered interventions, specialized instructional strategies, language acquisition, and culturally responsive practices” (Counts et al., 2018, p. 13).

Part B of IDEA mandates practices to promote equity for students in special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The lack of data focusing on ELL students in special education impedes the collection of data that is needed by the researchers to report and focus on ELL students in special education (Artiles et al., 2005; Sullivan, 2011). Placing an ELL student in special education because of their ELL status, limited resources, and nothing more can only limit their learning and their success in the school (Artiles and Bal, 2008).

### **Representation of English Language Learners in Texas**

According to the Texas Education Agency (2016) during the 2015-2016 school year, 18.5% of the state population were identified as English language learners. Also, 60% student population in the state of Texas were eligible for free or reduced-price meals (60.1%) in the school year 2013-2014 (TEA, 2016). Furthermore, in the school year 2015-2016, Hispanics accounted for more than half of the student population, 52.5 %, in Texas public schools (TEA, 2016).

Studies of English language learners have often focused on how to provide an education that includes them in the school’s curriculum. In the state of Texas, a student can be taught in English as a second language instruction (ESL) or in bilingual education programs. Bilingual education programs in Texas include: Transitional Bilingual/Early Exit; Transitional

Bilingual/Late Exit; Dual Language Immersion/Two-Way; and Dual Language Immersion/One-Way. ESL educational programs include: Content-based ESL and Pull-out ESL.

A study conducted by Shepherd, Linn, and Brown (2005) highlighted the uniqueness that an English language learner can have in a border town in Texas and the difficulty of placing an ELL student in a setting with appropriate services. When a student is not making adequate progress, the educator may struggle to find an appropriate setting for their student and may refer them to be assessed for special education services. “Often the teachers faced with this situation turn to special education for assistance because they are unsure of how to adapt the conventional English language curriculum to meet the student’s needs” (p. 107). The authors stated that even during assessment process, the student may also face a lack of standard Spanish that may be a part of their determination of having a disability because of their own unique language abilities from their surrounding environments (Shepherd, Linn, & Brown, 2005). They concluded, “Until the development of such instruments, school districts must rely on the prereferral procedures, assessment tools currently available and honest and open interpretation of assessment results” (p. 114).

Contreras (2006) analyzed representational patterns of English language learners receiving services in the state of Texas. A total of 110 school districts in South Texas, including Region I, Region II, and Region XX utilizing data from the Texas Education Agency and reported composition indices, risk indices, and relative risk ratios specifically for ELLs in these three regions that were more likely to receive special education services when compared to their non-ELL classmates. ELLs in these three regions were more likely to receive special education services when compared to their non-ELL classmates. Specifically, her results included: for Region I, overrepresentation of ELLs in special education in 36 school districts and

underrepresentation in 2 school districts; for Region II, overrepresentation in 33 school districts, 5 underrepresentation, and 2 with no disproportionate representation; for Region XX, 26 districts overrepresentation, 6 underrepresentation, and 9 with no disproportionate representation (Contreras, 2006). The author concluded that overrepresentation in the school districts supports other authors' findings in other states such as Artiles and colleagues in the state of California.

Linn (2011) conducted a study that examined the disproportionate representation of English language learners in special education programs in the state of Texas. Utilizing relative risk ratios, the author concluded that when state data was disaggregated to the region level, disproportionate representation of ELLs in special education was reported. The author concluded that the "underrepresentation of English language learners in special education programs merits attention because it may mean that there are ELLs who have a disability and are not receiving appropriate services" (p. 38). Subsequently, Linn and Hemmer (2011), conducted a longitudinal study that examined the representation of ELLs in special education programs in school districts Texas for a 7-years period. They concluded that throughout the time-period overviewed, overrepresentation risk ratios decreased each year as well as the ELLs placement in special education which was of concern.

### **Summary of Review of Literature**

Artiles, Dorn, and Bal (2016) discovered that out of 336 studies funded by the Institute of Educational Science since the year 2004, have reported culturally linguistic individuals (CLD) on 39 projects. Moreover, from these 29 projects, only 10 studies have included English language learners. With the change in demographics including increase of English language learners throughout the United States, public schools have very diverse student populations (United States Department of Education, 2016). The disproportionate representation of students

of color, including ELLs in special education indicates an issue that must be addressed (Artiles, et al., 2005; Sullivan, 2011). The limited data that is available with the information needed to identify disproportionate representation for ELLs often masks the problem in national-level, state-level, and even the district-level (Linn, 2011; Sullivan, 2011). Due to the high number of students identified as English language learners in special education in the state of Texas, a study with campus-level data can provide a better overview of issue of identifying ELLs for appropriate educational services whether these services are language support and instruction or special education services.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This chapter provides the methodology utilized in this study to answer the following research questions:

- 3.) What are the representational patterns of English language learners receiving special education services at elementary, middle, and high school campuses in District A?
- 4.) What are the representational patterns of English language learners receiving special education services at elementary, middle, and high school campuses in District B?

#### **Research Design**

This qualitative study utilized descriptive statistics. “Descriptive analysis . . . identify and describe trends and variations in populations” (Loeb et al., 2017). In this study, relative risk ratios were used to describe the representational patterns of English language learners (ELLs) in special education programs in elementary, middle, and high school campuses in both District A and District B. The data used for this research included the following four numbers for each campus: total student enrollment, total ELL students, total students receiving special education services, and total ELL students receiving special education services.

#### **Population**

The population for this study were students that were enrolled in elementary, middle, and high school campuses in either District A or District B. A total of 67,897 students were enrolled in the school year 2016-2017 in District A and District B combined (TEA, 2017). Both school districts are located in the same city in Texas, boarder to Mexico. The population of the city is 95.5% Hispanic (U.S. Census, 2016).

According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), in the school year 2016-2017, District A, the total population by ethnicity included 99.04% Hispanic students and less than 1% for all other races including: White, Asian, Two or more Races, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Other or Pacific Islander. In the school year 2016-2017, the total population by ethnicity in District B included 98.81% Hispanic students and less than 1% for all other races including: White, Asian, Two or more Races, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Other or Pacific Islander. (TEA, 2017). Both District A and District B populations are predominantly Hispanic. Table 3.1 provides population characteristics for both District A and District B in regard to their population:

Table 3.1. District A and District B: Student Population

District	Enrollment	ELL	Bilingual	Total ESL	Sp. Ed.
District A	24,237	58.22	38.68	19.46	7.79
District B	43,660	37.99	30.47	11.53	8.25

*Note.* All number are in percentage. *ELL* means total English language learners. *Bilingual* means students enrolled in bilingual programs. *ESL* means English as a Second Language and total number of students enrolled in ESL programs. *Sp. Ed.* means special education and total number of student enrolled in special education.

*Source:* Texas Education Agency, 2016-2017 Student Program Reports

During the 2016-2017 school year, as illustrated in Table 3.1, 58.22 % of the student population are identified as an ELL in District A, and 37.99% of the student population are identified as an ELL in District B. Furthermore, In District A, 7.79% of the total population receive special education services, and 8.25% of the total population receive special education services in District B. Additionally, students in both school districts are served in both bilingual programs and ESL programs (TEA, 2017).

### Data Sources

The data sources that was utilized for this study includes *The Publication Education*

*Information Management System (PEIMS) Standard Reports 2016-2017* (Texas Education Agency, 2017). From this source, student reports utilized included *Student Enrollment Reports*, *Special Education Reports* and *ELL Students by Language and Grade*. From these reports, the following information was obtained for each campus in District A and District B: *Total Enrollment*, *Total ELL Students*, *Total Students Receiving Special Education Services*, and *Total ELL Students Receiving Special Education Services*. The numbers obtained provided an overview of the school districts overall population.

### **Data Collection**

During data collection, the researcher followed the listed steps:

1. A total of 30 campuses (elementary, middle, and high school campuses) were identified for District A, but only a total of 27 were used for the study. 3 campuses were eliminated because they did not represent traditional schools (i.e., discipline alternative school and/or early college high school).
2. A total of 45 campuses (elementary, middle, and high school campuses) were identified for District B, but only a total of 40 were used for the study. 5 campuses were eliminated because they did not represent traditional schools (i.e., discipline alternative school).
3. Data was collected from the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) from the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The four numbers needed for analysis: total student enrollment, total ELL students, total students receiving special education services, and total ELL students receiving special education services, were obtained from their report titled *Student Program and Special Populations Reports*. The report included information for the 2016-2017 school year for each campus by

selecting *Selected Districtwide Campus Totals* and specifying which district by its name. This was done for District A and District B.

### **Data Entry**

In order to calculate the relative risk ratio for each campus in District A and District B, composition and risk indices were first calculated. Using an Excel spreadsheet, the researcher entered data on already ready formulas to first calculate the composition indices. This number provided the percentage of English language learners in special education. Next, the data was used to calculate the risk indices which provided the percentage of English language learners who are in special education compared to all English language learners. The last step was to obtain the risk of being in special education if students were labeled as English language learners compared to those students who were non-English language learners. The following are the formulas used to obtain the relative risk ratio for English language learners in special education:

- Composition index = 
$$\frac{\text{Number of Students in Group X in Special Education}}{\text{Total Number of Students in Special Education}} \times 100$$
- Risk Index = 
$$\frac{\text{Number of Students in Group X in Special Education}}{\text{Total Enrollment of Students in Group X}} \times 100$$
- Relative Risk Ratio = 
$$\frac{\text{Risk of Group X in Special Education}}{\text{Risk of All Other Groups in Special Education}}$$

*Source:* Gibb, A.C., & Skiba, R. (2008). Center for Evaluation and Education Policy: *Using Data to Address Equity Issues in Special Education*. Center for Evaluation & Education Policy.

For the purpose of this investigation, the formulas were substituted with the following information with the numerical values of each campus:

- Composition index = 
$$\frac{\text{Number of English language learners in Special Education}}{\text{Total Number of Students in Special Education}} \times 100$$
- Risk Index = 
$$\frac{\text{Number of English language learners in Special Education}}{\text{Total Number of English language learners}} \times 100$$
- Relative Risk Ratio = 
$$\frac{\text{Risk ratio of English language learners}}{\text{Risk ratio of non- English language learners}}$$

The data obtained for relative risk ratio were placed in tables and answer the research questions of this investigation.

### **Data Analysis**

1) To respond to the first research question:

What are the representational patterns of English language learners receiving special education services at elementary, middle, and high school campuses in District A?

The relative risk ratio obtained for each elementary, middle, and high school campus indicated to what extent being labeled as an English Language learner in District A determined the risk for a student's placement in special education.

2) To respond to the second research question:

What are the representational patterns of English language learners receiving special education services at elementary, middle, and high school campuses in District B?

The relative risk ratio obtained for each elementary, middle, and high school campus indicated to what extent being labeled as an English Language learner in District A determined the risk for a student's placement in special education.

### **Summary**

Data including: total student enrollment, total ELL students, total students receiving special education services, and total ELL students receiving special education services was obtained from the Texas Education Agency from their Public Education Information Management System reports for the 2016-2017 school year for District A and District B. Using composition and risk indices, relative risk ratios were calculated for ELLs in special education for 20 elementary campuses and 7 secondary campuses in District A. Likewise, for District B,

relative risk ratios were calculated only for 34 out of the 40 campuses due to masking of data, 23 elementary campuses and 11 secondary campuses.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of this study. The relative risk ratios are presented to illustrate the representational patterns of English language learners receiving special education services in elementary, middle, and high school campuses of two school districts in Texas, District A and District B.

#### **Relative Risk Ratios**

Voulgarides, Fergus, and King Thorius (2017) indicated that relative risk ratios “identifies a specific racial group’s risk of a particular outcome compared with that of all other students” (p. 69). Subsequently, the ratios reported describe the risk an English language learner has of being placed in special education compared to that of all non-English language learners. A relative risk ratio of 1.0 indicates that there is a proportional representation; a relative risk ratio greater than 1.0 indicates overrepresentation; a relative risk ratio less than 1.0 indicates underrepresentation (Boneshefski & Runge, 2014). Although there is no agreed number for significant overrepresentation or significant underrepresentation, researchers have identified and suggested criteria for determining a concern for overrepresentation or underrepresentation (Chinn & Huges, 1987; Coutinho & Oswald, 2004; Parrish, 2002). For the purpose of this study, the suggested criterion of “acceptable range of risk ratios as values between 0.80 and 1.20” will be utilized to identify the proportionate representation of English language learners receiving services in special education for elementary, middle, and high school campuses in District A and District B (as cited by Sullivan, 2011, p. 323). Likewise, risk ratios less than 0.80 will describe underrepresentation and risk ratios 1.20 and above will describe overrepresentation. The

following two sections include the relative risk ratios of elementary, middle, and high school campuses in District A and District B to answer research question one and two.

### **Research Question One**

What are the representational patterns of English language learners receiving special education services at elementary, middle school, and high school campuses in District A?

For the purpose of this study, each campus was given a letter (*E, M, H*), a number, and the letter A to represent campuses in District A. The letter *E* represents elementary school campuses. The letter *M* represents middle school campuses. The letter *H* represents high school campuses. Charter schools and alternative campuses (e.g., early college high school) that are under District A were excluded from this research. These campuses did not include students for the criterion researched or the data numbers were masked. After these exclusions, 90% of elementary and secondary campuses were included. Table 4.1 presents the relative risk ratios for elementary school campuses in District A and Table 4.2 reports the relative risk ratios for secondary school campuses in District A.

Table 4.1 Relative Risk Ratios of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District A Elementary School Campuses

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
<i>E1A</i>	<i>0.44</i>
<i>E2A</i>	<i>0.49</i>
<i>E3A</i>	<i>0.46</i>
<i>E4A</i>	<i>0.55</i>
<i>E5A</i>	<i>0.48</i>
<i>E6A</i>	<i>0.25</i>
<i>E7A</i>	<i>0.44</i>

Table 4.1 Continued

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
<i>E8A</i>	<i>0.75</i>
<i>E9A</i>	<i>0.59</i>
<i>E10A</i>	<i>0.34</i>
<i>E11A</i>	<i>0.79</i>
<i>E12A</i>	<i>0.54</i>
<i>E13A</i>	<i>0.77</i>
E14A	0.91
<b>E15A</b>	<b>2.28</b>
<i>E16A</i>	<i>0.31</i>
<i>E17A</i>	<i>0.44</i>
<b>E18A</b>	<b>1.61</b>
<i>E19A</i>	<i>0.56</i>
<i>E20A</i>	<i>0.48</i>

*Note.* **Boldface** indicates relative risk ratio  $\geq 1.20$ , overrepresentation. *Italics* represents relative risk ratio  $\leq 0.80$ , underrepresentation.

Table 4.2 Relative Risk Ratios of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District A Secondary School Campuses

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
M1A	1.03
<b>M2A</b>	<b>1.23</b>
<b>M3A</b>	<b>2.07</b>
M4A	1.06
<i>H1A</i>	<i>0.66</i>

Table 4.2 Continued

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
H2A	0.94
<b>H3A</b>	<b>1.46</b>

*Note.* **Boldface** indicates relative risk ratio  $\geq 1.20$ , overrepresentation. *Italics* represents relative risk ratio  $\leq 0.80$ , underrepresentation.

Tables 4.3 and 4.4 reports underrepresentation and overrepresentation of District A respectively. 18 campuses (66.66%) of District A included in this study, reported relative risk ratios under 0.80 indicating underrepresentation of English language learners in special education programs, 17 of which were elementary campuses. Five campuses (18.51%) of District A included in this study, reported relative risk ratios over 1.20 indicating overrepresentation of English language learners in special education programs; three secondary schools and two elementary schools.

Table 4.3 Underrepresentation of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District A Campuses

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
E1A	0.44
E2A	0.49
E3A	0.46
E4A	0.55
E5A	0.48
E6A	0.25
E7A	0.44
E8A	0.75
E9A	0.59

Table 4.3 Continued

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
E10A	0.34
E11A	0.79
E12A	0.54
E13A	0.77
E16A	0.31
E17A	0.44
E19A	0.56
E20A	0.48
H1A	0.66

*Note.* Relative risk ratio under  $\leq 0.80$  = underrepresentation

Table 4.4 Overrepresentation of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District A Campuses

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
E15A	2.28
E18A	1.61
M2A	1.23
M3A	2.07
H3A	1.46

*Note.* Relative risk ratio  $\geq 1.20$  = overrepresentation

### Research Question Two

What are the representational patterns of English language learners receiving special education services at elementary, middle school, and high school campuses in District B?

For the purpose of this study, each campus was given a letter (*E, M, H*), a number, and the letter *B* to represent campuses in District B. The letter *E* represents elementary school campuses. The letter *M* represents middle school campuses. The letter *H* represents high school campuses. A total of 45 campuses were identified in District B, however, five campuses were excluded from this study because the campuses did not include students for the criterion researched. Of the total campuses, only 34 (85%) of the campuses are included on Table 4.5 and Table 4.6 due to masking in the numbers of English language learners in special education at the campus-level.

Table 4.5 Relative Risk Ratios of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District B Elementary School Campuses

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
E1B	0.97
<b>E2B</b>	<b>1.47</b>
E3B	0.93
<i>E4B</i>	<i>0.73</i>
<b>E6B</b>	<b>1.58</b>
<b>E8B</b>	<b>1.55</b>
E9B	1.11
E10B	0.95
E11B	1.07
<b>E12B</b>	<b>1.23</b>
<b>E13B</b>	<b>1.30</b>
E14B	0.91
<i>E15B</i>	<i>0.65</i>

Table 4.5 Continued

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
E17B	0.82
<i>E18B</i>	<i>0.71</i>
E19B	1.03
E20B	1.14
<i>E21B</i>	<i>0.50</i>
<i>E22B</i>	<i>0.61</i>
<b>E23B</b>	<b>1.70</b>
E24B	0.96
<i>E26B</i>	<i>0.55</i>
E27B	1.18

*Note.* **Boldface** indicates relative risk ratio  $\geq 1.20$ , overrepresentation. *Italics* represents relative risk ratio  $< 0.80$ , underrepresentation.

Table 4.6 Relative Risk Ratios of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District B Secondary School Campuses

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
<b>M1B</b>	<b>1.85</b>
<b>M2B</b>	<b>2.78</b>
<b>M3B</b>	<b>5.77</b>
<b>M4B</b>	<b>1.54</b>
<b>M5B</b>	<b>1.48</b>
<b>M6B</b>	<b>3.74</b>
<b>M7B</b>	<b>2.30</b>
<b>M9B</b>	<b>3.32</b>

Table 4.6 Continued

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
<b>H2B</b>	<b>1.61</b>
<b>H3B</b>	<b>1.82</b>
<b>H4B</b>	<b>1.43</b>

*Note.* **Boldface** indicates relative risk ratio  $\geq 1.20$ , overrepresentation.

Tables 4.7 and 4.8 reports underrepresentation and overrepresentation of District B respectively. Of the campuses in District B included in this study, 17.64% of all campuses reported a relative risk ratio under 0.80 indicating underrepresentation of English language learners. Also, 50% of all campuses included in District B reported relative risk ratios over 1.20 indicating overrepresentation of English language learners in special education programs. Additionally, 100% of all secondary schools included in this study for District B reported overrepresentation of English language learners in their special education programs.

Table 4.7 Underrepresentation of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District B Campuses

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
E4B	0.73
E15B	0.65
E18B	0.71
E21B	0.50
E22B	0.61
E26B	0.55

*Note.* Relative risk ratio  $\leq 0.80$  = underrepresentation

Table 4.8 Overrepresentation of English Language Learners in Special Education Programs in District B Campuses

Campus	Relative Risk Ratio
E2B	1.47
E6B	1.58
E8B	1.55
E12B	1.23
E13B	1.30
E23B	1.70
M1B	1.85
M2B	2.78
M3B	5.77
M4B	1.54
M5B	1.48
M6B	3.74
M7B	2.30
M9B	3.32
H2B	1.61
H3B	1.82
H4B	1.43

*Note.* Relative risk ratio  $\geq 1.20$  = overrepresentation

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter discusses the findings of the study. Also included in this chapter are conclusions, implications for practice, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

#### **Discussion of Findings**

This study was conducted to answer the following research questions: 1) What are the representational patterns of English language learners receiving special education services at elementary, middle, and high school campuses in District A? 2) What are the representational patterns of English language learners receiving special education services at elementary, middle, and high school campuses in District B? To answer each question, this study utilized relative risk ratios to report the representation of English language learners receiving special education services in elementary and secondary campuses in both school districts. Thus, in order to report the relative risk ratio for each campus in both school districts, the composition and risk indices had to first be calculated. The numbers utilized for calculations for each individual campus included: total student enrollment, total ELL students, total students receiving special education services, and total ELLs receiving special education services.

#### *Research Question One: Representational Patterns of English Language Learners in District A*

Data analysis conducted for research question one revealed that English language learners are disproportionately represented in special education in elementary and secondary campuses in District A. The following findings in regard to the representational patterns of

English language learners in elementary and secondary campuses in District A are documented as such:

- 66.66% of all campuses had a relative risk ratio  $< 0.80$  revealing underrepresentation (see Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3).
- 1 out of 10 (or 14.28%) secondary campuses revealed underrepresentation (see Tables 4.2 and 4.3).
- 17 out of 20 (or 85%) elementary schools revealed underrepresentation (see Tables 4.1 and 4.3).
- 18.51% of all campuses had a relative risk ratio  $> 1.20$  revealing overrepresentation (see Table 4.1, 4.2, and 4.4).
- 3 out of 7 (or 42.85%) secondary campuses revealed overrepresentation (see Tables 4.2 and 4.4).
- 2 out of 20 (or 10%) elementary campuses revealed overrepresentation (see Tables 4.1 and 4.4).

*Research Question One: Representational Patterns of English Language Learners  
in District B*

Data analysis conducted for research question two revealed that English language learners are disproportionately represented in special education in elementary and secondary campuses in District B. The following findings in regard to the representational patterns of English language learners in elementary and secondary campuses in District B are documented as such:

- 17.64% of all campuses had a relative risk ratio  $< 0.80$  revealing underrepresentation (see Tables 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7).

- 0% of secondary campuses revealed underrepresentation (see Tables 4.6 and 4.7).
- 6 out of 23 (or 26.08%) elementary schools revealed underrepresentation (see Table 4.5 and 4.7).
- 50 % of all campuses had a relative risk ratio  $>1.20$  revealing overrepresentation (see Table 4.5,4.6, and 4.8).
- 100% of secondary campuses revealed overrepresentation (see Table 4.6 and 4.8).
- 6 out of 23 (or 26.08%) elementary campuses revealed overrepresentation (see Table 4.5 and 4.8).

Studies utilizing national-level data have revealed that English language learners are overrepresented in school districts with smaller ELL population and underrepresented in districts with greater ELL populations (Artiles, et al., 2016). The present study concurs with these findings as District A has more campuses with risk ratios under 0.80 and is also the district with the larger ELL population (59.63%) in comparison with District B who has more campuses with risk ratios over 1.20 and has a smaller ELL population (39.44%). Moreover, the results of this study also indicate overrepresentation and underrepresentation in the campuses in both school districts and therefore, national-level data does not accurately represent the representational patterns of English language learners receiving special education services.

Studies utilizing state-level data have revealed that English language learners are overrepresented (Linn, 2011; Sullivan, 2011). Although data from the present study resulted in overrepresentation of English language learners in special education, the data also reported underrepresentation. The present study contradicts state-level findings as District A reported 66% of their campuses underrepresented English language learners in special education programs, more so in elementary campuses. This study reports that even though these two school

districts are within the same city, District A had an underrepresentation of English language learners in special education and District B had an overrepresentation of English language learners.

Studies utilizing district-level data have revealed the overrepresentation of English language learners in special education (Artiles, et al., 2005; Linn, 2011; Sullivan, 2011). The study report for District B concurred with the findings with 50% of all campuses had a risk ratio over 1.20, with 100% of all secondary-campus, however elementary campuses reported that they had an equal amount of overrepresentation and underrepresentation of English language learners. Compared to District B, District A reported the opposite with a higher underrepresentation of English language learners in special education. Additionally, this study confirmed that data varied from campus to campus within the same school district for each district individually. These results concur with Artiles and colleagues (2005) conclusion that ELLs are underrepresented at the district level, underrepresented at the elementary level, and overrepresented at the secondary level. Thus, data reported utilizing national, state, and district-level data may not accurately illustrate the representational patterns of English language learners receiving special education services in public schools in the United States.

### **Conclusions**

With the findings of the study, several conclusions can be drawn from the data reported for District A and District B. Table 5.1 provides information on relative risk ratios that will be utilized for this section in regard to the state of Texas, District A, and District B.

Table 5.1 Relative Risk Ratios of English Language Learners in Special Education: Statewide, District A, and District B in 2016

State/District	Relative Risk Ratios
Texas	0.87

Table 5.1 Continued

State/District	Relative Risk Ratios
District A	0.73
District B	1.31

Note. Data was obtained from Texas Education Agency, 2016 Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System

First, as illustrated in Table 5.1, the state of Texas has a relative risk ratio of 0.87, District A has a risk ratio of 0.73, and District B has a risk ratio of 1.31. Although District A and District B are under the state of Texas, District A reports underrepresentation and District B reports overrepresentation of English language learners receiving services in special education programs. Overall, Texas falls in a proportional relative risk ratio and District A and District B findings do not concur with Texas' relative risk ratio. Moreover, only 14.81% of all campuses in District A and 32.35 % of all campuses in District B reported proportionate representation of English language learners in special education. Although school districts do not have to report on language of students, this study infers that data reported on ELLs is meaningful. "Such analysis is not mandated, but it can provide valuable data to inform consideration of systematic or programmatic capacity to meet the educational needs of CLD students" (Sullivan, 2011, p. 329).

Second, this study found that both District A and District B had a 7.7% of its student population identified as receiving special education services for the school year 2016-2017. These finding are important to this study because a state-wide cap that the state of Texas implemented where only 8.5% of the student population could be identified as special education and each district had to comply. It is concluded with the findings of this study that because of the cap implemented, students in special education may not represent an accurate number of students receiving special education, including English language learners. The cap puts a barrier preventing school districts to accurately identify students who needed special education services

after they reached the percentage as a district. The 7.7% of each district indicates that they are under the cap. It can be inferred that they may keep from identifying students who may need special education services.

Lastly, English language learners in special education received additional services under bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) programs. Although ELL students received this support in the various campuses, the amount of support received in elementary and secondary campuses varied. A higher number of students labeled as English language learners in special education were overrepresented more in secondary campuses, thus it may be concluded that with decreased language support at the secondary level, (i.e., ESL supports vs. bilingual support) increased the number of students might have been identified and placed in special education to compensate for the amount of language support needed by the students.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have implications for the individual campuses, districts, states, and the nation. First, for the individual campuses, since the reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, teachers have the responsibility to provide support for each student and refer students to special education only when all other interventions have given the student an opportunity to learn and their special learning/behavioral needs have not been met. Special education is only for those students who have a documented disability and receive special education services because of that disability. Placement in special education is not justified by an educator's inability to educate students because of the lack of language support. Second, for each school district, it is the responsibility of the local education agency (LEA) to keep track of overrepresentation and underrepresentation of students in special education. If educational needs are not being met for individual campuses, LEAs have the responsibility to

take action and oversee each campus with such concern. Likewise, it is the responsibility of the state to see that each school district complies with federal laws. It is the state's responsibility to know their student population and to provide the services to address any educational concerns for English language learners. At a national level, the realization that it has been 15 years since the last reauthorization of IDEA, and given the growth of ELLs in public schools, the federal government should consider tracking data on English language learners. Not all states gather information for English language learners making research in this area difficult to study and understand ELLs in education.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations to the present study. First, due to masking of data to comply with federal law, the data obtained did not account for 100% all campuses in either school districts. When comparing the data to the state-level or national level, excluding campuses could have affected the interpretation of the results.

Second, although data was disaggregated to the campus-level, this study accounted for only two school districts within the state of Texas. With the information gathered, only two school districts were able to provide a single comparison amongst campuses within the same school district. In addition to this, data was only obtained for one school year.

Third, when gathering data, a parallel between the data did not exist. The Texas Education Agency reported numbers in their Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) for the academic year 2016-2017 but reported numbers for their Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS) reports for calendar years individually, 2016 and 2017. However, TEA made recent changes in their reports that omitted the information for the district

total including English language learners receiving special education services district wide. So, the comparisons were limited to only the 2016 calendar year.

Finally, due to the limited amount of research for English language learners receiving services in special education, it was difficult to compare other studies with this particular study, especially for campus-level. Most of the studies involved the overrepresentation of English-language learners in high incidence disabilities making comparable contrasts difficult to obtain.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Given the fact that students receive their education at an individual campus, there is a need for understanding the representation of English language learners in special education programs at the campus-level. Therefore, several recommendations are made for future research. The most significant of the recommendations is the replication of this study, especially for all campuses for all school districts in the state of Texas. Moreover, disaggregated research to study the representational patterns of ELLs in the different categories of disability per campus would a better understanding of where the problem lies for English language learners at the campus level, which is where instruction occurs.

In addition to the state of Texas, this study should be replicated for all other states where the data is accessible. Moreover, in addition to the replication, a comparison between states and their campus-level findings would increase our understanding of English language learners and their representation in special education throughout the country. Other factors that could contribute to the findings would include data of their services for English language learners and a comparison amongst these services for example whether or not they receive services for language support (i.e., bilingual education, English as a second language (ESL)).

Finally, this study should be replicated with longitudinal data for English language learners receiving special education services at the campus-level. This type of study would help educators, districts, states, and the nation to have a greater understanding of disproportionate representation of English language learners receiving special education services and their needs pertaining to their education at each campus individually.

Constituting one of the largest groups within public schools in the United States, English language learners would benefit from such analysis. Future research in this area education is needed because of the limited amount of research and would allow a greater understanding of characteristics within each campus individually and provide insights towards how they can improve the quality of education for those students who are English language learners and whether or not they need special education services.

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