

National Trends in Special Education and Academic Outcomes for English Learners With Disabilities

The Journal of Special Education
2023, Vol. 57(2) 106–117
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DOI: 10.1177/00224669221147272
journalofspecialeducation.sagepub.com



North Cooc, EdD¹

Abstract

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires annual data collection to monitor the provision of special education services, yet federal reports rarely disaggregate trends for English learners (ELs). In merging all available annual data files required under IDEA from 2006 to 2020, the present study provides the first large-scale examination of trends in the school experiences and outcomes of ELs with disabilities. Results show that while EL overrepresentation in special education is limited, the population has increased by more than 50%, with growth rates substantially higher by disability type (autism spectrum disorder and developmental delay) and geographic region (U.S. Midwest and Northeast). Analyses of school outcomes show consistently lower rates of suspension, general education inclusion, and high school graduation for ELs with disabilities relative to non-ELs with disabilities. Test score trends from the National Assessment for Education Progress reveal stagnation for ELs with disabilities and a consistent gap relative to non-ELs with disabilities. The study has implications for how schools prepare for changing student demographics in special education and improve student outcomes.

Keywords

English learners, special education, suspension, inclusion, graduation, test scores

English learners (ELs) in the United States continue to represent a growing student population in schools. In the last two decades, the total number of ELs has increased 35% nationally and now constitutes more than 10% of all public-school students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). Given that wide academic achievement gaps between ELs and non-ELs persist (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2017), a central issue for educators is how to best support the English development and learning of ELs. For 15% of all ELs, part of their learning involves special education services (NCES, 2022), a challenging issue as disproportionality research has found evidence of both EL overrepresentation and underrepresentation among students with disabilities (Samson & Lesaux, 2009; Umansky et al., 2017). With research focusing on disproportionality and concerns about bias, however, much less attention has been given to the school experiences and outcomes of students *after* their identification for special education (Cooc, 2022), particularly for ELs (Kangas, 2018).

As part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the U.S. Department of Education collects data and submits annual reports to Congress on the nation's provision of special education services. The IDEA data collections, based on reporting from each state, provide the largest and most comprehensive summary of who receives special

education in the nation, including measures of instructional contexts and outcomes across student groups. Yet, in discussions of disproportionality and student outcomes, the annual reports rarely disaggregate by EL status (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Not only are the data collections underutilized but an accurate assessment of the nation's current progress in providing special education and ensuring educational equity for ELs with disabilities is mostly missing. If the goal is to measure progress, broadly defined, more attention is also needed on changes over time in the experiences and outcomes of ELs with disabilities. Addressing these issues is important due to both demographic changes in schools and federal mandates that protect the civil rights of this student population (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

The purpose of this study is to provide the first large-scale analysis of trends in special education services, placements, and academic outcomes for ELs with disabilities.

¹The University of Texas at Austin, USA

Corresponding Author:

North Cooc, College of Education, The University of Texas at Austin, I University Station, Stop 5300, Austin, TX 78712, USA.
E-mail: ncooc@austin.utexas.edu

Using all available IDEA annual data collections from 2006 to 2020, I examined disparities between ELs and non-ELs with disabilities in the following areas: child count (identification), educational environment (i.e., inclusion), discipline (i.e., suspension), and exiting (i.e., graduation). I also supplement the study with National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) data during the same period to assess trends in the academic achievement of ELs with disabilities. In leveraging extensive data sources across multiple domains for more than a decade, the analyses provide the most current and comprehensive assessment of progress for ELs with disabilities, including whether any disparities in school experiences and outcomes have improved over time. The study extends discussions of disproportionality in special education for minoritized student groups by addressing inequity in school experiences and academic outcomes among ELs.

Throughout this article, I use “EL” as an institutional term but acknowledge the designation is limited. The emphasis on English learning over the linguistic and multilingual skills of students is problematic but captures current language policies in K–12 schools. Other terms that reflect a more asset-based view of students, such as multilingual learner or emergent bilinguals, have been adopted by researchers. I use “EL” in this paper to be consistent with the classification in the datasets and current language ideologies that focus on English learning among students who are multilingual or bilingual.

Context

Researchers have examined whether ELs are disproportionately identified for special education services. These studies are often guided by different data sources, including student-level records from districts (Umansky et al., 2017), nationally representative samples of students (Hibel & Jasper, 2012; Samson & Lesaux, 2009), or aggregate counts at the district or state level (Artiles et al., 2005; Sullivan, 2011). How ELs are identified in the data (e.g., time varying or time invariant) and the choice for comparison (e.g., White peers or non-ELs) also vary in studies (Artiles et al., 2005; Sullivan, 2011; Umansky et al., 2017). Measurement of time is another factor as studies may examine patterns by grade level (Artiles et al., 2005), merge cross-sectional data across years (Sullivan, 2011), or analyze longitudinal records of the same students (Umansky et al., 2017). The choice of data and methods has tradeoffs but, not surprisingly, the results differ: longitudinal records tend to show EL underrepresentation in special education, while aggregate data reveal overrepresentation.

National count data collected at the federal level for IDEA also have limitations but remain underutilized for examining the education of ELs with disabilities. Primarily, discussions and analyses of disproportionality

in special education at the national level rarely include this population (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). An understanding of EL and non-EL representation in special education across multiple years at the national level would be helpful for monitoring the extent of disproportionality. Also relevant is how these trends may vary by disability type as previous research has focused mainly on specific learning disability (e.g., Hibel & Jasper, 2012) or overall totals (Artiles et al., 2005). A related issue is that the reporting of special education disparities rarely considers patterns in growth. For example, the proportional change in the number of ELs with disabilities compared with non-ELs with disabilities over time can be informative for how schools prepare for shifting demographics. This omission in special education research is surprising as EL research tends to emphasize the growing population. The degree to which change in the population of ELs with disabilities reflects patterns in the overall EL population is unclear but highlights the importance of examining school referral practices, especially if the former is increasing at a higher rate.

More recent research has focused on inequities in school placement for students with disabilities. The least restrictive environment mandate of IDEA requires schools to ensure that students with disabilities are taught in the same classroom as peers without disabilities to the extent possible. Yet, studies show that students of color with disabilities tend to have lower rates of inclusion in the general education classroom (Cooc, 2022; Grindal et al., 2019). General education placement for ELs with disabilities overall is less explored but some existing research at the state level indicates they are less likely to be placed in restrictive settings compared with White students (Sullivan, 2011). More recent research is needed on whether these trends still hold, especially since language supports in the general education setting may be affected by special education services (Cioè-Peña, 2021; Kangas, 2018).

Although inclusion is typically framed in terms of time in the general education classroom, the larger issue for students with disabilities is missed opportunities to learn. This is especially concerning for students with disabilities who also tend to experience higher rates of school suspension (Ryberg et al., 2021). Research on school discipline for ELs overall is scarce (Burke, 2015; Losen et al., 2015) but one theory is that challenges with school adjustment, including difficulties with learning English, may contribute to behavioral challenges (Patel et al., 2017). The one study that examined ELs with disabilities found in 2015–16 little evidence of disparities in suspension between ELs and non-ELs at the national level (Whitford et al., 2019). However, given the consequences of suspension on learning and its correlations without other adverse outcomes (Duxbury & Haynie, 2020), a focus on ELs with disabilities is warranted.

Beyond special education services and placement, research on the academic outcomes of ELs with disabilities is also limited. Annual IDEA data reports include exit data on high school graduation and drop rates for all students with disabilities but not ELs. Using data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2, Trainor et al. (2016) found similar rates of high school graduation between ELs and non-ELs with disabilities. Graduation rates are important, particularly for postsecondary education and employment, but may not fully capture academic achievement and learning, especially if diploma requirements change. Research shows ELs with disabilities are likely to struggle academically because of barriers to accessing dual services (Kangas, 2018) or placement into lower academic courses (Kangas & Cook, 2020). Unfortunately, although IDEA collects information on graduation, no study has pooled together information on how ELs with disabilities have performed on academic assessments and examined whether there has been progress. Greater national accountability for the learning of ELs with disabilities will require monitoring high school graduation and academic achievement.

Conceptual Framework

The present study is grounded in understanding the outcomes for ELs with disabilities over time. Yet, the lack of attention in this area within IDEA reporting is also informative given that the data exists. This oversight, according to intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), is not surprising as the multiplicative effects of different identities, particularly minority statuses, are often ignored. Indeed, national reports may disaggregate data for ELs relative to non-ELs, or students with disabilities relative to peers without disabilities, but not both simultaneously. Intersectionality, however, suggests the learning challenges of English learning and a disability are likely compounding. Thus, one hypothesis is much lower academic outcomes for ELs with disabilities relative to non-ELs with disabilities or peers without disabilities, especially when considering that EL and disability status are each correlated with other dimensions of marginalization (e.g., household income, race, and immigration) that compound as well (Cioè-Peña, 2021; Yu, 2013).

Intersectionality is also useful for understanding policies and practices that may further exacerbate the effects of marginalization. More specifically, policies aimed at supporting one marginalized group may inadvertently harm another group. Kangas (2018) documents this effect for ELs with disabilities by showing how educators tend to weigh special education and EL laws differently when providing services. In upholding special education law, educators may overlook language services for ELs with disabilities. The prioritizing of disability over language is a manifestation of intersectionality where multiple identities are treated differently in practice, albeit strongly influenced by school accountability

pressures. Such beliefs and practices, however, would likely contribute to differences in educational environments for ELs and non-ELs with disabilities and widen gaps in academic achievement.

The present study uses intersectionality to guide an analysis of national trends in special education services and outcomes for ELs with disabilities currently missing in IDEA reports. Using multiple data sources across more than 15 years, I ask the following research questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the trends in special education services for ELs and non-ELs?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What are the trends in school inclusion in terms of general education placement and suspension for ELs and non-ELs with disabilities?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What are the trends in high school graduation and academic test scores for ELs and non-ELs with disabilities?

Method

Data Sources

Section 618 of IDEA requires states to submit annual information on children with disabilities who receive special education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The present study uses four data collections that include questions about ELs beginning in 2006: child count for special education, educational environment (i.e., inclusion), discipline (i.e., suspension), and exiting (i.e., graduation). Within each dataset are records indicating the number of EL ($n = 538,238$ to $790,769$) or non-EL students with disabilities ($n = 5,536,987$ to $5,920,634$) for the respective outcome each year. Merging all annual datasets available from 2006 to 2020 for each outcome measure (60 total datasets) provides an opportunity to examine trends in the academic experiences of ELs with disabilities relative to non-ELs with disabilities. Except for graduation records, however, the IDEA datasets do not contain information on academic outcomes. Instead, I supplement the IDEA datasets with information from NAEP. Records are available from 2004 to 2020 from the NAEP Data Explorer website in reading and math. I merged these records for ELs and non-ELs with disabilities.

Measures

Independent variables

Language status. Each data file includes a variable for ELs and non-ELs with disabilities. I use this as the main independent variable for the study.

Disability type. The IDEA data collections disaggregate measures by the 13 disability categories. However, only the

count data for special education services overall disaggregate by disability category and EL status together and only beginning in 2013. I compare ELs and non-ELs receiving services for the nine largest disabilities in these years.

Service outcomes

Special education service. IDEA child count files report the number of children receiving services. I report risk ratios to assess disparities in special education services. Risk examines the proportion of ELs who are in special education, and risk ratio measures risk of special education for ELs relative to the risk for non-ELs. To calculate risk, I merged in the total number of EL and non-EL students using annual student population data from NCES. For example, the risk for ELs in special education is equal to the number of ELs in special education (ages 6–21 years from IDEA data collection) divided by the total number of ELs in schools (from NCES). I do the same when calculating the risk for non-ELs. Risk ratios near 1.0 would suggest no disparity; greater or less than 1.0 would suggest underrepresentation and overrepresentation of ELs in special education, respectively. As states vary in the threshold set for risk ratios, I focus more on trends over time in both directions rather than a definitive cutoff for significant disproportionality. To be clear, all risk ratios are unadjusted due in part to the available data and to monitor descriptive trends for ELs in special education across the country. Although not a measure of disproportionality, I also compare the proportional change in the number of EL and non-ELs with disabilities since 2006 to understand growth rates for both population and, more importantly, to assess potential trends for the future.

General education setting. The environment data collection asks states to indicate the total number of students who are inside the regular classroom 80% or more of the school day. I compare the proportion of ELs and non-ELs with disabilities who are in these classrooms.

Discipline. States report the number of students with disabilities who experienced (a) on-campus suspension or (b) off-campus suspension or expulsion. Each category is disaggregated by discipline length: 10 days or less versus more than 10 days. I simplified the measures into the proportion of EL and non-EL students with disabilities who experience *any* on-campus suspensions and the proportion who experience *any* off-campus suspension and expulsion.

School outcomes

Graduation and dropout. The exit data collection documents the total number of students with disabilities who graduated with a regular high school diploma. Following the annual IDEA report guidelines, I calculated the proportion of EL and non-EL students ages 14 through 21 exiting

IDEA and school who graduated with a regular high school diploma. I do the same for the proportion of students who drop out of school.

Academic test scores. I used publicly available math and reading test scores from NAEP long-term trend and main versions. The long-term trend assessment is typically measured every 4 years in the same content areas to examine progress over time of students ages 9, 13, and 18 years. In contrast, the main assessment is collected every 2 years with a focus on measuring skills in the most recent curricula (see NAEP website for math and reading content areas) of students in Grades 4, 8 and 12. To ensure participation, students with disabilities have been included with accommodations as needed since 2004. Exclusion rates for students with disabilities range from 2% to 4% from 2000 to 2019 (NCES, n.d.). Although NAEP disaggregates students with disabilities and ELs separately, the sample size is smaller for ELs with disabilities. This means estimates of their academic achievement may be unstable or unavailable in a given data collection, which is especially the case for Grade 12 and age 18. For these reasons, I excluded both groups and pooled together all other available NAEP data beginning in 2004.

Analysis

I use primarily descriptive statistics and data visualization to explore cross-sectional trends for ELs and non-ELs with disabilities over the last two decades. Given that the IDEA data collections are population counts, as opposed to a random sample, any difference reported is at the population level (all NAEP differences, which involved sampling, are statistically significant at $p > .001$). For every available data collection, I first plotted each outcome measure over time at the national level. For the child count data, I further disaggregated trends by disability type to explore two sources of changes in the population of ELs with disabilities. With the exception of the risk ratios and NAEP scores, all outcome measures are reported in proportions or share of the population, such as the proportion of ELs and non-ELs with disabilities who graduate with a regular high school diploma, to account for differences in their respective group sizes. I focus first on overall services, followed by school placements, and academic outcomes.

Results

Service Outcomes

I begin with a display of EL representation among students with disabilities across the country in Figure 1. In 2006, among students with disabilities in each state, ELs are most concentrated in the southwest and west and the least in the

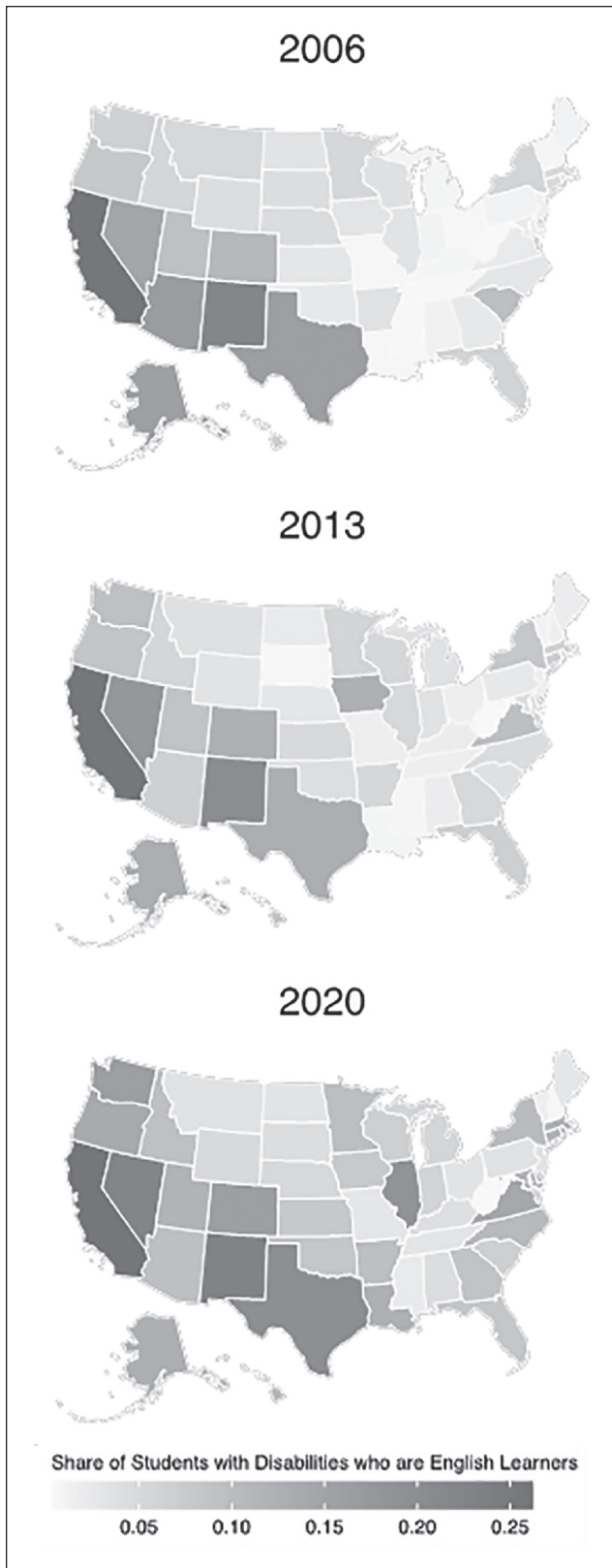


Figure 1. Geographic Trends in English Learners among Students with Disabilities, 2006 to 2020.

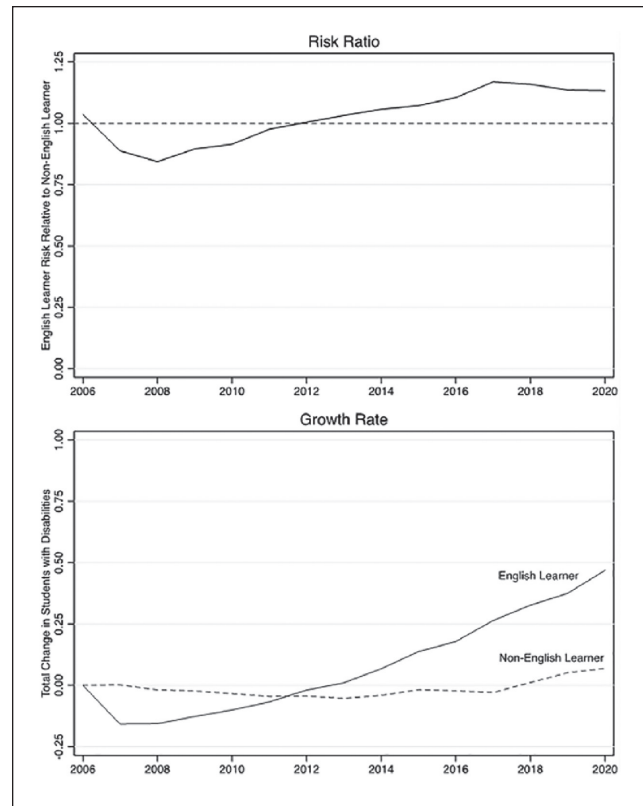


Figure 2. Risk Ratios of Special Education (Top) and Growth Rates for English Learners and Non-English Learners With Disabilities (Bottom).

Appalachia region. By 2020, this pattern remains but ELs among students with disabilities have also increased in the midwest and northeast. Separate analyses confirmed that much of the growth in the total number of ELs with disabilities has occurred within the Midwest (250%) and Northeast (150%). ELs with disabilities in the West and Southwest, though high in total numbers, have remained proportionally the same.

Figure 2 summarizes the disparities in EL representation within special education from 2006 to 2020 at the national level. The top graph presents some evidence of underrepresentation in special education for ELs relative to non-ELs before 2012 and overrepresentation thereafter. However, as states tend to set thresholds of risk ratios above 2.0 for overrepresentation (e.g., California Department of Education, 2020), the results in this study would not reach the cutoff for significant EL disproportionality within special education at the national level. In contrast, the bottom graph displays changes in the total number of ELs and non-ELs with disabilities since 2006. Despite limited evidence of disproportionality in the risk ratios, ELs with disabilities have increased nearly 50%, compared with about 7% for non-ELs with disabilities.

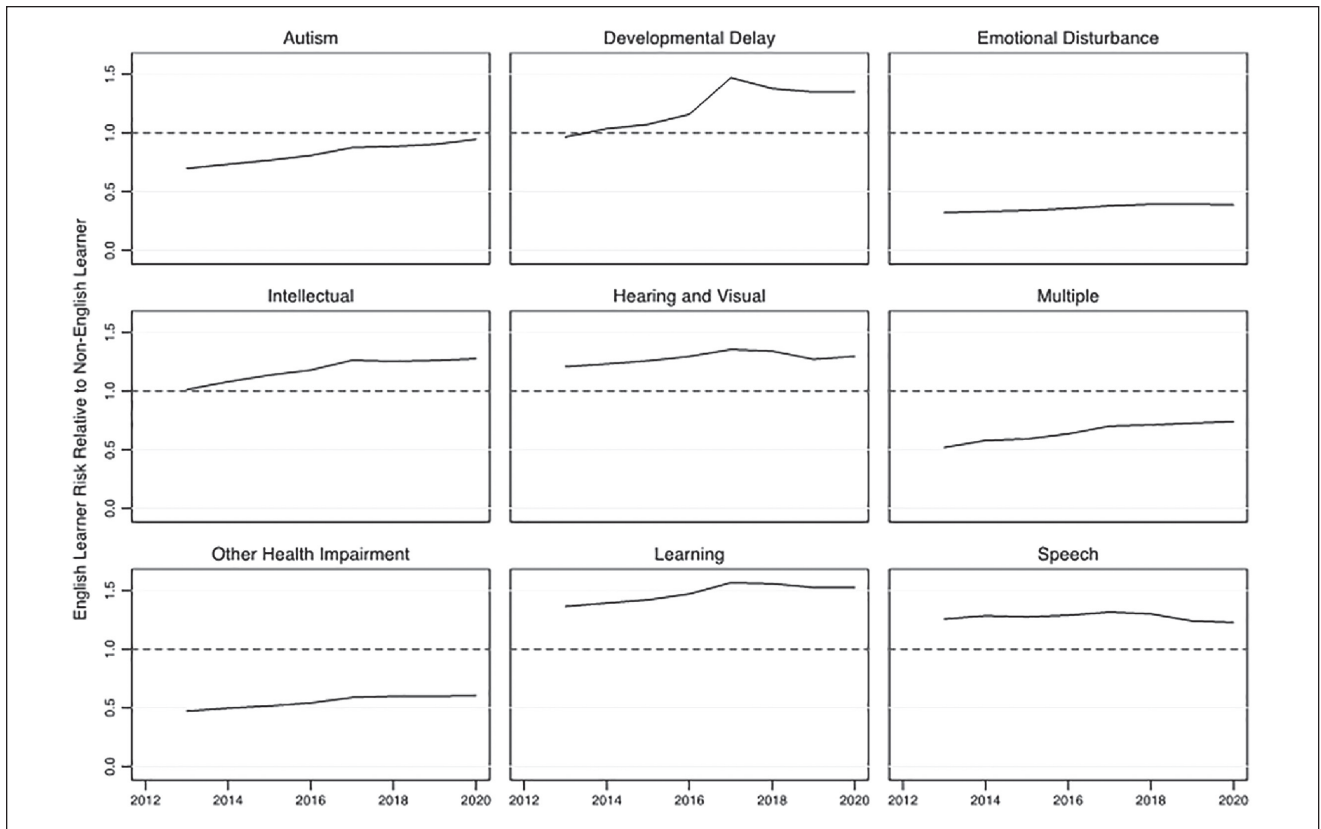


Figure 3. Risk Ratios of Special Education for English Learners Relative to Non-English Learners.

I further disaggregate the risk ratios by disability type in Figure 3. Three main trends emerge. First, risk ratios have steadily increased from 2013 to 2020 for all but one disability (speech language impairment). Second, more than half of the disability categories have risk ratios above 1.0 that indicate some degree of overrepresentation of ELs relative to non-ELs but not significant disproportionality. Third, risk ratios above 1.0 were also detected for low-incidence physical disabilities, such as hearing and visual. Less surprising is the higher risk ratios for learning disability and speech language impairment, two categories where the challenge of disentangling learning difficulties related to English language development and disability is most prominent. ELs are consistently underrepresented relative to non-ELs for other health impairment and emotional disturbance.

Figure 4 displays the proportional change in the total number of ELs and non-ELs by disability type. Across all disabilities, the change since 2013 is higher for ELs than non-ELs. Although the number of students for autism spectrum disorder and developmental delay has increased overall, ELs in those categories have increased more than 150%. In addition, while ELs may be underrepresented in other health impairment and multiple disabilities according to the risk ratios, they have increased by more than 50% in each

category. ELs in specific learning disability and speech language impairment also increased more than non-ELs, but less than other disabilities. The results confirm that although ELs are most prevalent in these two areas, their recent growth is high in low-incidence disabilities.

I next focus on missed instructional time due to potential disparities in general educational placement and discipline in Figure 5. General education placement rates have been consistently lower for ELs with disabilities (top graph), even as overall rates have increased for all students. In 2020, about 66% of non-ELs with disabilities were in general education classrooms, compared with about 62% of ELs with disabilities. In contrast, any in-school suspension (middle graph) tends to be consistently lower for ELs than non-ELs with disabilities, but the gap is less than 2 percentage points. The same pattern is evident for any out-of-school suspension or expulsion (bottom graph). The overall decline in suspension in the last decade for all students with disabilities corroborates trends in studies of the overall student population (Ryberg et al., 2021). Although students with disabilities tend to have higher suspension rates, the rates for ELs with disabilities are similar to students without disabilities (Ryberg et al., 2021). Overall, gaps in general education placement and in discipline tend to be small.

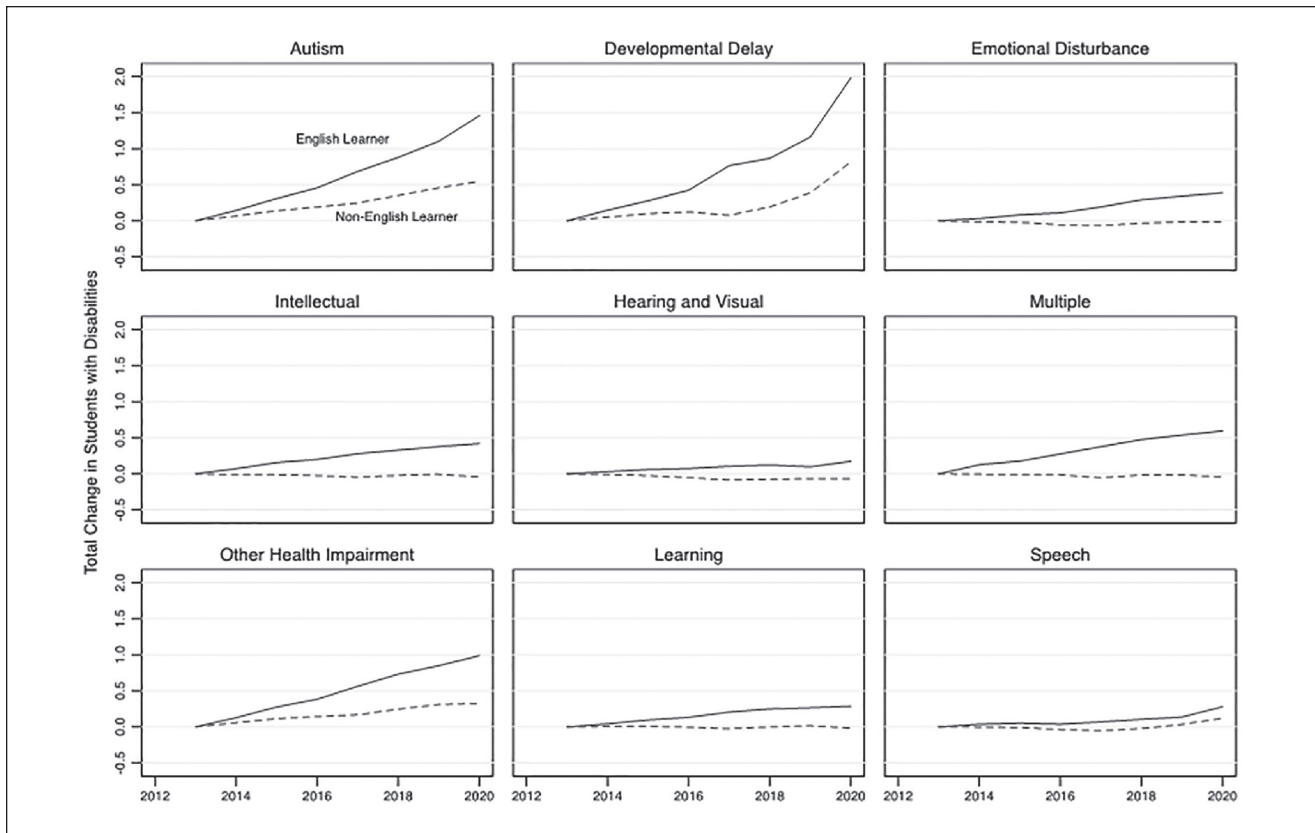


Figure 4. Growth Rates Among English Learners and Non-English Learners With Disabilities.

School Outcomes

The final figures focus on academic school outcomes. Figure 6 shows that the share of ELs and non-ELs with disabilities who obtain regular high school diplomas have increased since 2006 (top graph). Although ELs with disabilities tend to have lower rates of diplomas than non-ELs with disabilities, the gap began closing in 2014. In 2019, about 70% of ELs with disabilities exited with a regular high school diploma, compared with about 76% of non-ELs with disabilities. Dropout rates have been declining overall (bottom graph) and are only slightly higher for ELs with disabilities. The academic disparities between both groups are more evident when examining NAEP long-term trends in Figure 7. The results show consistently lower scores for ELs with disabilities than their counterpart, a gap that has widened over time in math and reading for 9-year-olds. In 2020, the gap between ELs and non-ELs with disabilities in math was about 0.65 standard deviations. As a comparison, the gap between ELs and non-ELs *without* disabilities is about 0.63 standard deviations. These trends are similar when examining math scores at age 13. Reading scores at age 13 tend to be lower than math but the gap between ELs and non-ELs with disabilities also show little evidence of closing. Last, Figure 8 displays NAEP main results. Recall

that NAEP main updates test items to reflect current curricula and standards, while the NAEP long-term assesses students in the same content area each time to better measure progress. The results in Figure 8 continue to show ELs with disabilities scoring lower than non-ELs with disabilities. However, the gaps are closing somewhat, partly from improvement among ELs with disabilities and slight declines among non-ELs with disabilities.

Discussion

This study pooled together annual data from multiple sources over a 15-year period to examine trends in special education services and outcomes for ELs with disabilities. I make several contributions to the literature. First, I analyzed disproportionality in special education representation and growth rates for all ELs with disabilities and by disability type. Second, I assessed disparities in school placement for ELs and non-ELs with disabilities in terms of suspension and general education classroom participation. Third, I investigated trends in high school graduation and standardized math and reading test scores for both student populations.

Studies of EL disproportionality in special education show that results may depend on the grade level and how EL is defined (Hibel & Jasper, 2012; Samson & Lesaux,

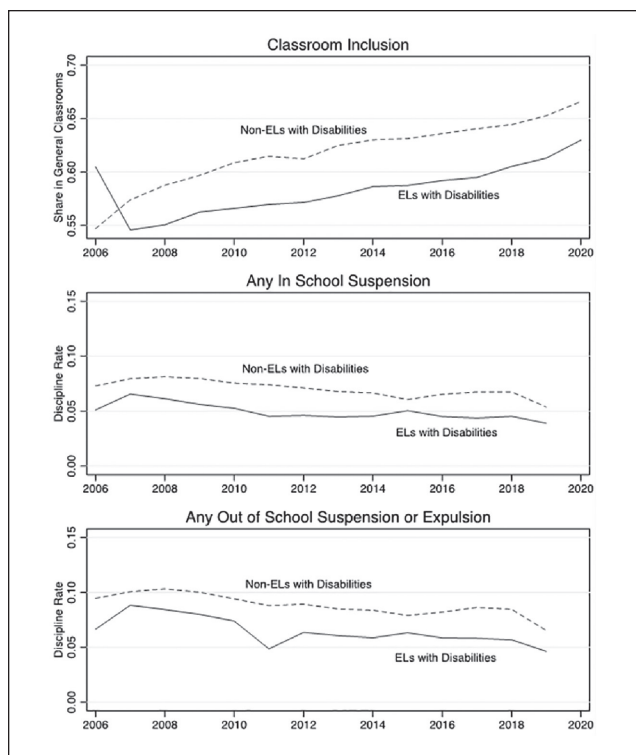


Figure 5. General Education Inclusion (Top) and School Discipline Rates for English Learners and Non-English Learners With Disabilities by in School (Middle) and Out of School Suspension (Bottom).
 Note. EL = English learner.

2009; Umansky et al., 2017). Although data limitations in the present study only allowed for aggregate trends across grade level for current ELs, the results show that the risk of special education for ELs has been increasing relative to non-ELs since 2012. The pattern is similar in research at the state level (Sullivan, 2011). The evidence of overrepresentation increasing, though limited depending on the cut-off used, is an area of concern for existing identification procedures. These patterns are magnified when disaggregated by disability type. The higher rates for ELs in specific learning disability, speech language impairment, intellectual disability, and developmental delay were consistent with prior research (Sullivan, 2011; Umansky et al., 2017), but the surprise was EL overrepresentation in the hearing and visual disability category. This new finding may be related to the challenges of learning English and potentially American Sign Language at the same time for ELs (Cannon & Guardino, 2012).

Analysis of growth rates provides a different picture of the future. Not only has the number of ELs with disabilities increased at a rate seven times that of non-ELs with disabilities since 2006 but this growth has occurred primarily in regions (Midwest and Northeast) without large EL populations in the past. Similarly, the greatest growth by

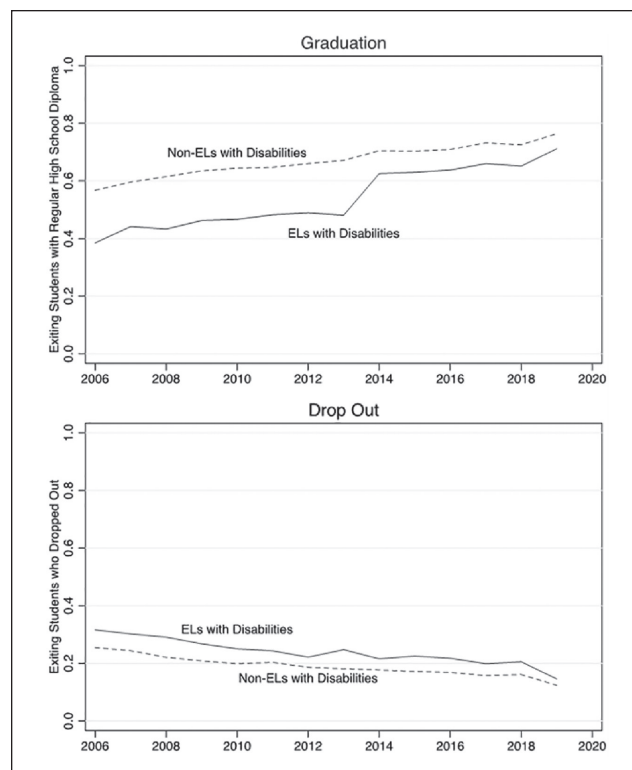


Figure 6. Graduation (Top) and Dropout (Bottom) Rates for English Learners and Non-English Learners With Disabilities.
 Note. EL = English learner.

disability type for ELs is not in specific learning disability or speech language impairment but developmental delay, autism spectrum disorder, and other health impairment. The growth in the number of ELs with disabilities in schools is perhaps not surprising given that the total number of ELs has also increased during that time by about 14% (NCES, 2021). However, this explanation is incomplete as the number of ELs with disabilities increased nearly 50%. These trends together would suggest that procedures within schools are more likely to identify ELs for special education than before. Although it is unclear whether the increase is due to unequal learning opportunities or greater learning challenges among ELs that lead to special education, the results underscore the need to monitor and assess current practices that identify ELs for special education. More attention is also needed for disabilities that have been increasing among ELs even though they may still comprise a smaller share of all cases, such as autism spectrum disorder and developmental delay.

The findings on school placement for ELs extend recent studies that show inequities for students of color with disabilities (Cooc, 2022; Grindal et al., 2019). On one hand, results show that instructional time in the general education classroom is lower for ELs with disabilities. That is, the intersecting effects of EL and disability classification on

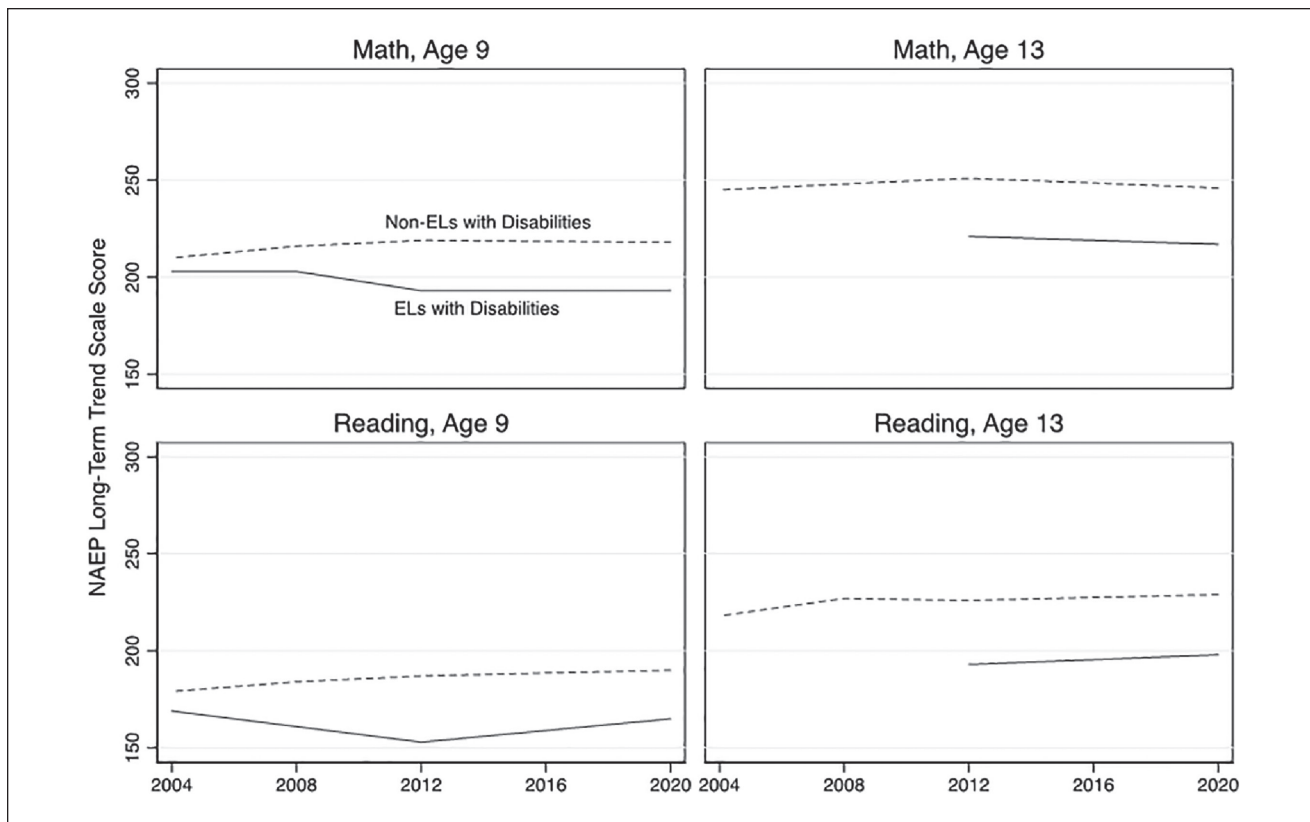


Figure 7. Comparison of NAEP Long-Term Trends.

Note. NAEP = National Assessment of Education Progress; EL = English learner.

placement appear to compound. If removal from the general education classroom is related to receiving more intensive outside supports, potentially for English language learning and disability, then the results may be less concerning. Other research suggests that dual social identities and classifications, despite good intentions, may lead schools to prioritize special education services over language needs (Kangas, 2018). Without dual services, EL with disabilities may be unable to develop English language proficiency, which would further compound learning challenges and may lead to more intensive services outside of the general education classroom. The lower rates of general education placement for ELs with disabilities, however, even for additional supports, may limit the social benefits of interacting and learning with peers without disabilities (Cooc, 2019; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009; Stiefel et al., 2018).

On the other hand, school removal via suspension or expulsion is lower for ELs with disabilities than their non-EL counterparts. As the discipline rates for ELs with disabilities are also comparable to students without disabilities, the results suggest that the intersecting effects of language and disability may be less prominent in this outcome. This is consistent with the much lower rates for emotional disturbance among ELs with disabilities in this study, an area

where suspension is typically the highest. Another possible explanation is that procedures for suspension may operate differently when students are dually identified for EL and special education. Nonetheless, given that instructional time lost due to suspension and discipline is more frequent for students with disabilities overall, this finding is encouraging for ELs.

The final analyses provide a mixed picture of academic achievement for ELs with disabilities. Graduating high school with a regular diploma has improved for all students with disabilities but a small gap persists between ELs and non-ELs. Dropout rates, though declining, are also slightly higher for ELs with disabilities. The pattern in graduation rates for ELs and non-ELs is similar to findings in previous studies using nationally representative samples of students with disabilities (Trainor et al., 2016) but the smaller gap in graduation is surprising given the multiplicative effects of language learning and disability. The increasing high school graduation rates for ELs and non-ELs with disabilities, though encouraging, should be viewed within the context of higher graduation rates overall in the 21st century (Murnane, 2013).

In contrast to high school completion, inequality in test scores between ELs and non-ELs with disabilities are

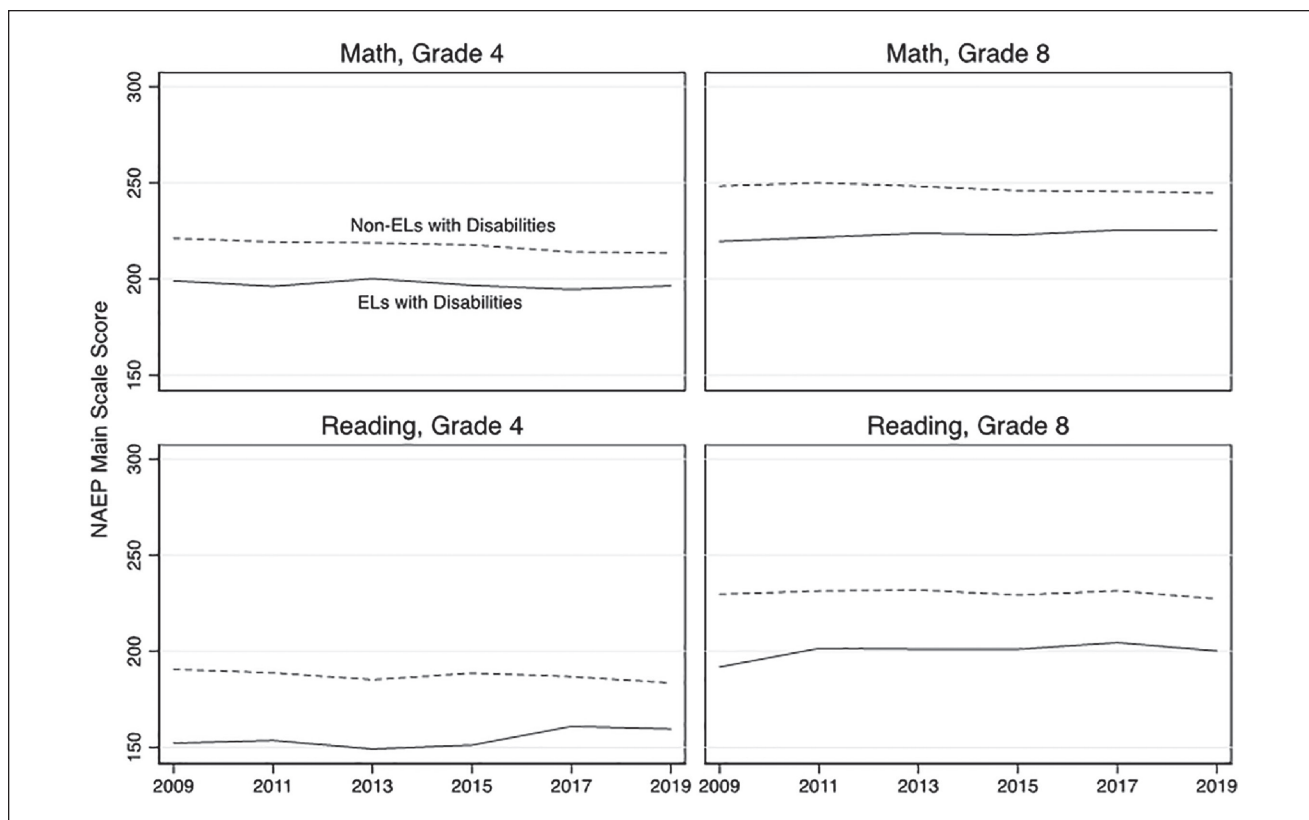


Figure 8. Comparison of NAEP Main Scores.

Note. NAEP = National Assessment of Education Progress; EL = English learner.

clearer. Gaps in NAEP long-term trends have either widened or stagnated over time, a pattern shared by students overall since 2004. NAEP main results, which in contrast account for changes in curricular content in schools, also reveal large disparities but ELs with disabilities show more improvement over time. These results suggest that curricular content may be more aligned with the learning of ELs with disabilities or schools are more adept at teaching these standards for this student population. Although the large test score gaps clearly highlight the role of EL status among students with disabilities, EL status is correlated with other disadvantages, including lower parent income and education level and high-poverty schools, that would affect academic achievement (Trainor et al., 2016). The lower test score trends may also reflect the tracking of ELs with disabilities into lower academic classes (Kangas & Cook, 2020).

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations in this study can guide areas for future research. First, to more fully explore how the intersections of language, disability, and other student identities relate

to each of the outcomes in this study requires individual-level data. Such information can better identify variation in outcomes and which factors (e.g., school versus family) contribute more to each. Second, current IDEA data collections and annual reporting would be improved by not only disaggregating outcomes by EL status but also grade level. Longitudinal data on individual students would be ideal but costly. Grade level data, however, would provide insight into when trends begin to emerge. Third, a related data limitation is the IDEA data collections only disaggregated EL status by disability type for overall services. How suspension, placement, graduation, and test scores may differ by disability type for ELs should be further explored.

The main limitation is though the study identifies consistent trends and disparities for ELs with disabilities over the last 15 years, it is unable to explain *why*. For example, why has the number of ELs in autism spectrum disorder, developmental delay, and other health impairment increased by more than 100%, while the growth rates for high-incidence disabilities have remained steady and smaller? Although all the results should be viewed within the context of broader demographic trends in the country and schools, future research

should weigh other factors. That is, why has the number of ELs with disabilities increased significantly in the midwest and northeast and at a rate much higher than the overall EL population? To what extent have school procedures contributed to identifying more ELs with disabilities? These questions highlight the need for more qualitative research on daily school practices. Research shows that ELs with disabilities are tracked into lower academic courses (Kangas & Cook, 2020) but less clear is whether this also explains the lower rates of general education placement, or the hypothesis that ELs with disabilities may be pulled out for more intensive support. An examination of IEP records or school administrative data may supplement qualitative research on why general education disparities persist for ELs with disabilities. Finally, the NAEP results are discouraging but more research should examine why the main trends show some evidence of improvement while long-term trends show stagnation. How much is the former related to alignment between current content standards in NAEP and instruction for ELs with disabilities?

Conclusion

Demographic changes continue to influence how schools provide equitable education for all students. This accountability is a major component of IDEA law that also mandates annual data collection and reporting on special education services and outcomes for all children. In merging all IDEA data collections and NAEP records since 2006, the present study shows how existing data can be disaggregated to reveal trends for overlooked groups and areas of persistent inequality. The study highlights the educational rights of ELs with disabilities and calls for the inclusion of this student population in special education reporting. In contrast to prior research on disproportionality, the findings show special education among ELs is increasing over time and across geographic regions, a pattern that is more likely due to changes in identification procedures and learning opportunities than overall population growth. The study's extensive scope also shows a complicated picture of academic outcomes for this group. Indeed, disparities in discipline, general education placement, and high school graduation are relatively small between ELs and non-ELs with disabilities, while gaps in standardized test scores are wide and show much less improvement over time. Supporting ELs with disabilities will, thus, require consistent monitoring of different student outcomes and a deeper understanding of how current school practices and contexts may shape their learning.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This research was supported by the National Academy of Education and Spencer Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship.

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