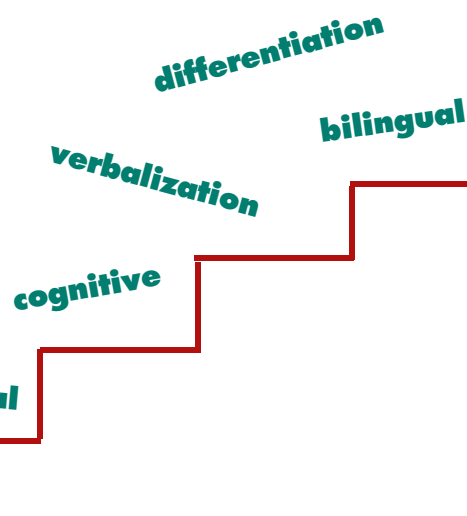


Language Differences or Learning Difficulties

The Work of the Multidisciplinary Team

Spencer J. Salend • AltaGracia Salinas



Maria moved to the United States from Mexico and was placed in Ms. Shannon's fourth-grade class where she sat quietly at her desk and kept to herself. Whenever directions were given, she seemed lost and later had difficulty completing tasks and participating in class discussions. During teacher-directed activities, Maria often either looked around to see what her classmates were doing and then mimicked them, or played with materials at her desk.

Ms. Shannon was concerned about Maria's lack of progress in developing English proficiency and her inability to pay attention and complete her work. Ms. Shannon thought Maria might have a learning disability and referred her to the multidisciplinary team to determine if she needed special education. The team organized the assessment process for Maria by considering the following questions:

- Who can assist the team in making decisions about Maria's educational program?
- What factors should the team consider in determining Maria's educational strengths and needs?

- What strategies should the team employ to assess Maria's educational strengths and needs?
- Should the team recommend a special education placement for Maria?

Educators often refer students like Maria for placement in special education (Ortiz, 1997). As Ortiz indicated, students learning a second language and students with learning disabilities often exhibit similar difficulties with learning, attention, social skills, and behavioral and emotional balance. As a result, multidisciplinary teams are increasingly working with educators like Ms. Shannon to conduct meaningful assessments and determine appropriate educational programs for a growing number of students whose primary language is not English.

Recommendations for Multidisciplinary Teams

Using the experiences of Maria and her teachers, this article provides recommendations for helping multidisciplinary teams accurately and fairly assess second-language learners and differentiate language differences from learning difficulties. The article includes six recommendations, as follows:

- Diversify the composition of the multidisciplinary teams and offer training.

- Compare student performance in both the native and secondary languages.
- Consider the processes and factors associated with second-language acquisition.
- Employ alternatives to traditional standardized testing.
- Identify diverse life experiences that may affect learning.
- Analyze the data and develop an appropriate educational plan.

These recommendations also can assist multidisciplinary teams in developing educational programs for second-language learners and in complying with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which states that students should not be identified as having a disability if their eligibility and school related difficulties are based on their proficiency in English, or their lack of opportunity to receive instruction in reading or mathematics.

Diversify the Composition of the Multidisciplinary Teams and Offer Training

IDEA requires that a multidisciplinary team of professionals and family members, with the student when appropriate, make important decisions concerning the education of students referred for special education. Initially, the team determines if students are in need of

and eligible for special education services. When teachers refer second-language learners to the multidisciplinary team, the team frequently faces many challenges, such as differentiating linguistic and cultural differences from learning difficulties, and developing an appropriate educational program that addresses students' linguistic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds.

The composition and training of the multidisciplinary team are critical factors in determining the educational needs of second-language learners (Ochoa, Robles-Pina, Garcia, & Breunig 1999). Therefore, the team should include family and community members, as well as professionals who are fluent in the student's native language, understand the student and the family's culture, and can help collect and interpret the data in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways. The inclusion of these people allows the team to learn about the family's and the student's cultural perspective and experiential and linguistic background, and to assist in the determination of the origins of the student's learning difficulties. Team members can help determine whether students' learning difficulties can be explained by sociocultural perspectives, experiential factors, and sociolinguistic variables.

The composition of multidisciplinary teams for second-language learners should include educators who are trained in assessing second-language learners and designing educational programs to meet their varied needs. Such membership may include English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, bilingual educators, and migrant educators. Whereas ESL teachers offer instruction in English to help students build on their existing English language skills, bilingual educators teach students in both their native language and in English. Because bilingual educators are fluent in the family's native language, they can be instrumental in involving family and community members in the team process and in assessing students' skills in their native language. In the case of migrant students like Maria, the team also can benefit from the input of migrant educators, who provide individ-

ualized instruction to migrant students and serve as a liaison between the family, the school and the community (Salend, 2001).

For example, the multidisciplinary team assembled for Maria was expanded to include Ms. Garcia, a bilingual migrant educator who worked with Maria and her family in their home and had training and experience with the second language acquisition process, as well as in working with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Ms. Garcia worked with other members of the team to gather information about Maria's school, home-life and experiential background, to interact with and collect information from Maria, her mother, and other family members, to assess Maria's skills in Spanish, and to identify strategies to support Maria's learning.

The multidisciplinary team can foster the success of the process by working as a collaborative and interactive team (Chase Thomas, Correa, & Morsink, 2001; Salend, 2001). The collaborative and interactive nature of the team can be enhanced by agreeing upon goals, learning about each other's beliefs, experiences and expertise, understanding and coordinating each other's roles, being sensitive to cross-cultural perspectives and communication styles, establishing equal status relationships, and addressing differences directly and immediately. Successful teams adopt a problem solv-

Multidisciplinary teams work with educators to conduct meaningful assessments and determine appropriate educational programs for a growing number of students whose primary language is not English.

ing approach and employ effective interpersonal and communication skills so that all team members feel comfortable identifying issues to be considered by the team, collecting and sharing information, seeking clarification from others, participating in discussions, and making decisions via consensus.

Teams can enhance the effectiveness of the process for second-language learners by offering training to team members. Teams should provide this training to all school personnel, and it can help the team members be aware of the effect of sociocultural perspectives, experiential backgrounds, and linguistic variables on students' behavior and school performance. Team members also will benefit from training in employing culturally responsive instructional, behavior management and mental health interventions, understanding the second language acquisition process and the problems associated with the assessment of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and selecting and adapting assessment instruments (Salend, Dorney, & Mazo, 1997).

Teams often face mismatches between members of the team and second-language learners in terms of their different cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Gay, 2002).

- What is my definition of diversity?
- What are my perceptions of students from different racial and ethnic groups? With language or dialects different from mine?
- What are the sources of these perceptions?
- How do I respond to my students based on these perceptions?
- What kinds of information, skills, and resources do I need to acquire to effectively teach from a multicultural perspective?
- In what ways do I collaborate with other educators, family members and community groups to address the needs of all my students? (p. 4).

Thus, team members may find it helpful to engage in activities to examine their own cultural perspectives and consider how their cultural beliefs affect their expectations, beliefs, and behaviors and may differ from those held by students and their families (Cartledge, Kea, & Ida, 2000; Hyun & Fowler, 1995; Obiakor, 1999). Montgomery (2001) offered a self-assessment tool that team members can use to reflect upon their understanding of diversity. The tool includes the following questions:

Compare Student Performance in Both the Native and Secondary Languages

After multidisciplinary team members meet, they need to make a plan for assessment. The assessment plan for second-language learners should collect data to compare student performance in both the native and secondary languages. Team members can collect data relating to students' performance in both languages through the use of informal and standardized tests, language samples, observations, questionnaires, and interviews. These methods can be employed to examine students' language proficiency, language dominance, language preference, and code switching. Language proficiency relates to the degree of skill in speaking the language(s) and includes receptive and expressive language skills. Although proficiency in one language does not necessarily mean lack of proficiency in another language, language dominance refers to the language in which the student is most fluent and implies a com-

parison of the student's abilities in two or more languages. Language preference identifies the language in which the student prefers to communicate, which can vary depending on the setting. Code switching relates to using words, phrases, expressions and sentences from one language while speaking another language.

Through observations, informal assessment, and interviews with Maria and her family members, the multidisciplinary team found out that Maria was proficient in Spanish but lacked proficiency in English. It was observed that when Maria spoke Spanish, she was expressive, used the correct tense and age-appropriate vocabulary, and understood all the communications directed to her. Whereas Maria used Spanish to initiate and maintain interactions with others in an organized and coherent manner, her English was characterized by the use of gestures and short, basic sentences to communicate. In addition, observations and interviews revealed that Maria preferred to speak Spanish in all settings, and that Spanish was the dominant language spoken at home, since Maria's mother did not speak English.

Consider the Processes and Factors Associated with Second Language Acquisition

The assessment process for second-language learners like Maria should recognize that learning a second language is a long-term, complex, and dynamic process that involves different types of language skills and various stages of development (Collier, 1995). Therefore, when assessing second-language learners, the multidisciplinary team needs to consider the factors that affect second-language acquisition and understand the stages students go through in learning a second language.

Because proficiency in a second language involves the acquisition of two distinct types of language skills, the team needs to assess students' basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive/academic language proficien-

cy. The former, the interpersonal skills are the social language skills that guide the development of social relationships (e.g., "Good morning. How are you?"). Even though they are relatively repetitive, occur within a specific and clearly defined context, and are not cognitively demanding, research indicates that they typically take up to 2 years to develop in a second language (Cummins, 1984).

Cognitive proficiency, on the other hand, refers to the language skills that relate to literacy, cognitive development, and academic development in the classroom. It includes understanding such complex academic terms as photosynthesis, onomatopoeia, and least common denominator. Because this proficiency does not have an easily understood context, and tends to be cognitively demanding, it often takes up to 7 years for children to develop and use these language skills. Since cognitive skills developed in one's first language foster the development of cognitive proficiency in one's second language, we must gather information on students' proficiency and educational training in their native language.

An analysis of Maria's English language skills indicated that she was starting to develop a mastery of interpersonal language skills and struggling in terms of her cognitive language proficiency. For example, Ms. Shannon reported that when Maria was given directions to perform a classroom activity in English, she had difficulty completing it. However, when the directions were explained in Spanish, she was able to complete the task.

In learning a second language, students also go through developmental stages (see Figure 1) that team members should consider when evaluating students' learning (Maldonado-Colon, 1995). Initially, second-language learners' understanding of the new language is usually greater than their production. Many second-language learners go through a silent period in which they process what they hear but refrain from verbalizing. This is often misinterpreted as indicating a lack of cognitive abilities, disinterest in school, or shyness. Once

Collect data relating to students' performance in both languages through the use of informal and standardized tests, language samples, observations, questionnaires, and interviews.

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students are ready to speak their new language, their verbalizations gradually increase in terms of their semantic and syntactic complexity.

Observations of Maria in her class indicated that she was focusing on understanding via mimicking others and using visual and context clues, and that she communicated via pointing, physical gestures and the occasional use of one to three-word phrases. Therefore, the multidisciplinary team felt that she was functioning at the preproduction and early production stages of learning English.

The team should also be aware of other factors that may affect students and their developmental progress in maintaining their native language and learning their new language such as age, educational background, and language exposure. Students who have been educated in their native language often progress faster in learning a new language than those who have not had a formal education (Thomas & Collier, 1997). In addition, students may attempt to apply the rules of their first language to their second language, which can affect their pronunciation, syntax, and spelling (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2001). And as some students learn a second language, they may experience language loss in their native language. Similarly, children who simultaneously learn two languages from birth may initially experience some temporary language delays in achieving developmental language milestones and some language mixing. These tend to disappear over time (Fierro-Cobas & Chan, 2001).

Figure 1. Stages of Second-Language Learning

- 1. Preproduction or Silent period.** Students focus on processing and comprehending what they hear but avoid verbal responses. They often rely on modeling, visual stimuli, context clues, key words and use listening strategies to understand meaning, and often communicate through pointing and physical gestures. They may benefit from classroom activities that allow them to respond by imitating, drawing, pointing, and matching.
- 2. Telegraphic or Early Production period.** Students begin to use two- or three-word sentences, and show limited comprehension. They have a receptive vocabulary level of approximately 1,000 words and an expressive level that typically includes approximately 100 words. They may benefit from classroom activities that employ language they can understand, require them to name and group objects, and call for responses to simple questions.
- 3. Interlanguage and Intermediate Fluency period.** Students speak in longer phrases and start to use complete sentences. They often mix basic phrases and sentences in both languages. They may benefit from classroom activities that encourage them to experiment with language and develop and expand their vocabulary.
- 4. Extension and Expansion period.** Students expand on their basic sentences and extend their language abilities to employ synonyms and synonymous expressions. They are developing good comprehension skills, employing more complex sentence structures, and making fewer errors when speaking. They may benefit from classroom literacy activities and instruction in vocabulary and grammar.
- 5. Enrichment period.** Students are taught learning strategies to assist them in making the transition to the new language.
- 6. Independent Learning period.** Students begin to work on activities at various levels of difficulty with heterogeneous groups.

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Employ Alternatives to Traditional Standardized Testing

As mandated by the latest reauthorization of IDEA, rather than relying solely on potentially biased, standardized tests, the multidisciplinary team should employ a variety of student-centered, alternative assessment procedures to assess the educational needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds accurately. Such assessment alternatives include performance-based and portfolio assessment, curriculum-based measurements, instructional rubrics, dynamic assessment, student journals and learning logs, and self-evaluation techniques (Salend, 2001). These assessment alternatives can provide the Multidisciplinary Team with more complete profiles of students

like Maria including their academic strengths and needs, learning styles and the impact of the school environment on their learning.

In the case of Maria, the multidisciplinary team worked with Maria and Ms. Shannon to create a portfolio that showed that Maria's decoding and reading comprehension skills in Spanish were age appropriate. It also revealed that she reads phonetically, engages in self-correction, and uses context and semantic cues. These results were also confirmed by Maria's performance on a standardized Spanish reading test.

Identify Diverse Life Experiences That May Affect Learning

Many second-language learners have diverse life experiences that can have a significant effect on their learning. These experiences may include being separated from family members for extended periods of time (Abrams, Ferguson, & Laud, 2001). Identifying these experiences can help the team determine if students' learning difficulties are related to the existence of a disability or other experiential factors. Therefore, the team can use the guidelines in Figure 2 to collect information to determine if a student's difficulties in learning result from language, cultural, and experiential factors, acculturation, psychological and family traumas, economic hardships, racism, or lack of exposure to effective instruction.

Ms. Garcia was able to obtain information about Maria by speaking with Maria and her mother. Ms. Garcia reported that Maria had not had an easy life. She lived in a rural village in Mexico and sporadically attended a school that had limited resources. Maria traveled to the United States with her mother and her three siblings a year ago to join her father and two older brothers who had been working in the United States. Two other siblings remained in Mexico with the hope of joining the family when enough money could be saved to bring them to the United States. However, within 6 months of living in the United States, Maria's parents separated; and her father returned to Mexico. Maria reported that she misses her life

in Mexico and her siblings who are still living there.

Upon arriving in the United States, Maria's mother found a job working as a migrant farmworker. Because she doesn't speak English, did not attend school, and works long hours to make ends meet, Maria's mother finds it difficult to help Maria with her schoolwork and relies on Maria to help take care of the younger children, and to cook and clean. Maria's mother also said that although her children watch cartoons in English, the interactions in the home are in Spanish. Interactions with the family also revealed that the family has few links to and interactions with the community, and that their lifestyle parallels the traditions of Mexico.

This information was helpful to the multidisciplinary team in providing information regarding Maria's learning abilities. First, it revealed that Maria's learning ability may be related to the fact that she has not regularly attended school and that the school she attended in Mexico is very different from her current school. Second, Maria's mother relies on her to help around the house; and Maria has quickly learned to perform these roles, which shows that she learns by active participation and is viewed by her mother as responsible and independent. Third, Maria has had limited exposure to English, which affects her progress in learning English and performing in school.

Analyze the Data and Develop an Appropriate Educational Plan

After the team has collected the data, team members meet to analyze the data and make decisions about students' educational programs. For second-language learners, the analysis should focus on examining the factors that affect learning and language development, determining if learning and language difficulties occur in both languages, and developing an educational plan to promote learning and language

Code switching relates to using words, phrases, expressions and sentences from one language while speaking another language.

acquisition. Damico (1991) offered questions that can guide the team in examining the data to assess the extent to which students' diverse life experiences and cultural and linguistic backgrounds serve as explanations for the difficulties they may be experiencing in schools. These questions include the following:

- What factors and conditions may explain the student's learning and/or language difficulties (e.g., stressful life events, lack of opportunity to learn, racism, acculturation, and experiential background)?
- To what extent does the student demonstrate the same learning and/or language difficulties in community settings as in school and/or in the primary language?
- To what extent are the student's learning and/or language difficulties due to normal second language acquisition, dialectical differences, or cultural factors?
- Did bias occur prior to, during, and after assessment such as in the reliability, validity, and standardization of the test as well as with the skills and learning styles assessed?
- To what extent were the student's cultural, linguistic, dialectic and experiential backgrounds considered in collecting and analyzing the assessment data (e.g., selection, administration, and interpretation of the test's results, prereferral strategies, learning styles, family involvement)?

These questions also can guide the team in differentiating between two types of second-language learners (Rice & Ortiz, 1994), and planning appropriate educational programs for these students. One type of second-language learner demonstrates some proficiency

Learning a second language is a long-term, complex, and dynamic process that involves different types of language skills and various stages of development.

Figure 2. Life Experience Factors and Questions

Length of Residence in the United States

- How long and for what periods of time has the student resided in the United States?
- What were the conditions and events associated with the student's migration?
- If the student was born in the United States, what has been the student's exposure to English?

Students may have limited or interrupted exposure to English and the U.S. culture, resulting in poor vocabulary and slow naming speed, and affecting their cultural adjustment. Trauma experienced during migration or family separations as a result of migration can be psychological barriers that affect learning. Being born and raised in the United States does not guarantee that students have developed English skills and have had significant exposure to English and the U.S. culture.

School Attendance Patterns

- How long has the student been in school?
- What is the student's attendance pattern? Have there been any disruptions in school?

Students may fail to acquire language skills because of failure to attend school on a regular basis.

School Instructional History

- How many years of schooling did the student complete in the native country?
- What language(s) were used to guide instruction in the native country?
- What types of classrooms has the student attended (bilingual education, English as a second language, general education, speech/language therapy services, special education)?
- What has been the language of instruction in these classes?
- What is the student's level of proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking in the native language?
- What strategies and instructional materials have been successful?
- What were the outcomes of these educational placements?
- What language does the student prefer to use in informal situations with adults? In formal situations with adults?

Students may not have had access to appropriate instruction and curricula, resulting in problems in language acquisition, reading, and mathematics.

Cultural Background

- How does the student's cultural background affect second language acquisition?
- Has the student had sufficient time to adjust to the new culture?
- What is the student's acculturation level?
- What is the student's attitude toward school?

Since culture and language are inextricably linked, lack of progress in learning a second language can be due to cultural and communication differences and/or lack of exposure to the new culture. For example, some cultures rely on the use of body

language in communication as a substitute for verbal communication. Various cultures also have different perspectives on color, time, gender, distance, and space that affect language.

Performance in Comparison to Peers

- Does the student's language skill, learning rate, and learning style differ from those of other students from similar experiential, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds?
- Does the student interact with peers in the primary language and/or English?
- Does the student experience difficulty following directions, understanding language, and expressing thoughts in the primary language? In the second language?

The student's performance can be compared to that of students who have similar traits rather than to that of students whose experiences in learning a second language are very different.

Home Life

- What language(s) or dialect(s) are spoken at home by each of the family members?
- When did the student start to speak?
- Is the student's performance at home different from that of siblings?
- What language(s) or dialect(s) are spoken in the family's community?
- Is a distinction made among the uses of the primary language or dialect and English? If so, how is that distinction made? (For example, the non-English language is used at home, but children speak English when playing with peers.)
- What are the attitudes of the family and the community toward English and bilingual education?
- In what language(s) does the family watch television, listen to the radio, and read newspapers, books, and magazines?
- What is the student's language preference in the home and community?
- To what extent does the family interact with the dominant culture and in what ways?

Important information concerning the student's language proficiency, dominance, and preference can be obtained by soliciting information from family members. Similarly, the student's acquisition of language can be enhanced by involving family members.

Health and Developmental History

- What health, medical, sensory, and developmental factors have affected the student's learning and language development?

A student's difficulty in learning and acquiring language may be related to various health and developmental variables.

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Figure 3. Differentiating Instruction for Second-Language Learners

- Establish a relaxed learning environment that encourages students to use both languages.
- Label objects in the classroom in several languages.
- Encourage and show students how to use bilingual dictionaries and Pictionaries.
- Use repetition to help students acquire the rhythm, pitch, volume, and tone of the new language.
- Use simple vocabulary and shorter sentences, and limit the use of idiomatic expressions, slang, and pronouns.
- Highlight key words through reiteration, increased volume and slight exaggeration, and writing them on the chalkboard.
- Use gestures, facial expressions, voice changes, pantomimes, demonstrations, rephrasing, visuals, props, manipulatives, and other cues to communicate and convey the meaning of new terms and concepts.
- Preview and teach new vocabulary, phrases, idioms, structures and concepts through use of modeling, and hands-on experiences.
- Supplement oral instruction and descriptions with visuals such as pictures, charts, maps, graphs, and graphic organizers.
- Offer regular summaries of important concepts and check students' understanding frequently.
- Emphasize communication rather than form.
- Correct students indirectly by restating their incorrect comments in correct form.

Sources: Choice of Languages in Instruction: One Language or Two?, by A. Brice and C. Roseberry-MeKibbin, 2001, *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 33(4), pp. 10-16.

The Changing Face of Bilingual Education, by R. Gersten, 1999, *Educational Leadership*, 56(7), pp. 41-45.

Below the Tip of the Iceberg: Teaching Language Minority Students, by V. Fueyo, 1997, *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 30(1), pp. 61-65.

in the native language but experiences difficulties in learning a new language that are consistent with the typical difficulties individuals encounter in learning a second language. Although these kinds of behavior are similar to those shown by students with learning difficulties, these students' educational needs can best be addressed through participation in a bilingual education or an English as a Second Language (ESL) program.

The other type of second-language learner exhibits language, academic, and social behavior in the first and second languages that are significantly below those of peers who have similar linguistic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds (Ortiz, 1997). These students may benefit from a special education program and individualized educational programs (IEPs) that address their own linguistic, cultural, and experiential needs (Garcia & Malkin, 1993; Ortiz, 1997). Both types of second-language learners would benefit from the use of strategies for differentiating instruction presented in Figure 3.

In the case of Maria, the multidisciplinary team determined that she did not have a disability. The assessment data led the team to conclude that Maria had

age-appropriate decoding, reading comprehension, and speaking skills in Spanish and that her difficulties in learning English appeared to be related to the normal process of second-language acquisition and cultural and experiential factors. They also decided that Maria didn't qualify for special education services under the IDEA because her school-related difficulties were based on her lack of proficiency in English and the limited opportunities she has had to receive instruction.

The multidisciplinary team determined that Maria would benefit from the services of a bilingual educator because she needed to strengthen her native language skills to learn academ-

ic content and to provide a better foundation for learning English. They also recommended strategies for establishing home-school partnerships and communications, and encouraged her teachers to use cooperative learning strategies and the strategies in Figure 3. The team also developed a plan to collect data to examine the effectiveness of these intervention strategies on Maria's learning, language development, socialization, and her success in school.

Final Thoughts

The ability to acquire and use language has a great effect on students' learning behavior and educational performance. As a result, many second-language learners like Maria exhibit types of behavior that resemble students with learning difficulties and are referred to the multidisciplinary team. Because the team process may vary across school districts, educators need to consider how the recommendations can be incorporated into their assessment process to differentiate between language differences from learning difficulties, and to provide second-language learners with appropriate educational programs.

Team members will benefit from training in employing culturally responsive instructional, behavior management and mental health interventions.

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Spencer J. Salend (CEC Chapter #615), Professor, Department of Educational Studies, State University of New York at New Paltz.
AltaGracia Salinas, Special Education Teacher, Alexandria City Public Schools, Virginia.

Address correspondence to Spencer J. Salend, Department of Educational Studies, OMB 112, SUNY New Paltz, 75 South Manheim Blvd., New Paltz, NY 12561 (e-mail: salends@new-paltz.edu).

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