

Supporting Multilingual Learners with Academic Difficulties in the General Education Classroom: Strategies to Mitigate the Overclassification of Multilingual Learners in Special Education

by

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Abstract

Multilingual learners with perceived learning difficulties are being classified in special education with learning disabilities at an alarmingly higher rate than their monolingual peers. General education teachers lack the necessary knowledge to accurately identify whether a child should be assessed for a learning disability, or if the difficulties they display are due to second language acquisition. Multilingual learners require customized response to intervention, and culturally responsive instruction combined with scaffolds and strategies to foster their success in the general education setting. The professional development in this capstone attempts to mitigate the over classification of multilingual learners by providing teachers with background knowledge on second language acquisition and how to implement supports and strategies in the classroom geared to multilingual learners.

Keywords: Multilingual learners, special education, learning difficulties, differentiation, scaffolds

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I have been a special education teacher for the past five years and in that time, many students have been referred for special education services by parents and teachers. The process for identifying and evaluating a student for an individualized education plan is not well known by teachers in the general education setting in my experience. Add to that when a student does qualify for an individualized education plan (IEP) the general education teachers may not have the experience or knowledge to support students with an IEP. I have witnessed teachers struggle to implement the modifications and support for students that are monolingual learners in the classroom. My experience as a special education teacher and through the coursework completion in the TESOL program has raised the question of how teachers support multilingual learners that also have an IEP. According to García and Tyler (2010) the difficulty lies in the spectrum of needs that multilingual learners who have a learning disability possess coupled with teachers lack experience in providing special education supports, and English language learner (ELL) supports thus making learning to be ineffective at best.

General education teachers often have no prior experience with multilingual learners and if a school does not have an English as a New Language (ENL) teacher within the building to support the teacher and student the necessary services and supports for multilingual learners do not happen. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023) reports that since the fall of 2010 the percent of ELLs in public schools in the USA increased by half a million students from 9.2% to 10.3 in 2020. According to Sussman (2023) in 2018-2019 ELL students receiving special education services made up 11.3%. Which was a disproportionate number when considering that ELLs made up only less than 10% of the student population in the USA. The increase in multilingual learners within the school system and the lack of qualified ENL teachers

led me to research how teachers can support multilingual students with learning disabilities in the elementary setting.

Significance of the Problem

Multilingual learners are a growing population in schools and the number of multilingual learners that have a learning disability has continued to increase. The need for teachers who are equipped to support students that are multilingual and have a learning disability is one that affects schools on a local, state, and national level. According to the NCES (2021) approximately 2.69 % of elementary school teachers are certified to teach ENL. This is a significant problem due to the number of English language learners that are currently in school. The need for qualified teachers is apparent when students are not receiving the support they need within the classroom, when modifications, accommodations and language supports are not implemented students fall further behind. The lack of student achievement is not the only problem when multilingual learners with disabilities are not supported in the classroom, there is also the legal implications that schools face for not providing students with the mandated supports and modifications that are found not only in a student's IEP but also what is required of the teachers legally based on federal rules and regulations. According to Klingner et al. (2006) it is noted that students who have a learning disability and are English language learners do not receive the necessary supports and are only taught in English. The Every Student Succeeds Act passed in 2015 by President Obama is the most recent federal Act that was passed that requires all students to have an equitable education and holds schools and teachers accountable in providing that for multilingual learners as well as students that have a learning disability.

The linguistic implications that occur when multilingual learners with learning disabilities are not provided with proper support within the classroom include the students

inability to acquire their native language as well as English. As noted by More et al. (2014) when teachers understand language acquisition and how to apply that knowledge in the classroom, they are able to identify if students have a breach in the development of their native language that may impede their English language acquisition. It is important for teachers to understand how language is acquired in order to plan appropriate instruction in the classroom.

For multilingual students, the assessment process is one that can be difficult and unfair. Often assessments are not developed with multilingual learners in mind, thus the questions and answers have the potential to have cultural bias. Assessments also are administered in English, for students that do not have enough English proficiency to take a test in English this has a negative impact on a student's true measure of their abilities. Huang et al. (2011) argue that assessing multilingual learners that have a learning disability using typical assessments do not produce valid or accurate data in part because these assessments are based on English speaking culture. These types of assessments not only put students at a disadvantage because they may not be as proficient in the English language, but they also put students at a disadvantage because they also may not be culturally aware of what is being referenced in the assessments. Again, impacting the ability for an accurate representation of what the student may or may not know.

Purpose

In order to provide students with an equitable and effective education teachers need to understand how students acquire language as well as how they learn. General education teachers need to use a multitude of strategies and modifications within the classroom to support multilingual learners with learning difficulties. This capstone thesis aims to answer the question of how educators support multilingual learners with learning difficulties in the classroom. A three parts professional development (PD) at the beginning of the school year will be held to provide

teachers with background knowledge about second language acquisition and how to support multilingual learners with learning difficulties in the general ed setting. On day one of the PD teachers will get an overview of second language acquisition and how students are identified as English language learners. The second day of the PD will provide teachers an overview of the response to intervention (RTI) process and how to implement effective RTI for multilingual learners. The final day of the PD will review effective scaffolds and differentiation teachers can implement in the classroom along with how to adapt assessments. At the conclusion of the PD teachers will understand second language acquisition; be able to identify the different levels of English proficiency ELLs may have; and identify and implement strategies for multilingual learners. This PD will assist in mitigating the overclassification of multilingual learners in special education.

Summary

Multilingual learners who have been labeled as a student with a disability often find themselves in classrooms that are not equipped to support them as a whole learner. The teachers charged with providing their education lack the experience and knowledge to support their multilingual needs and or their special education needs as well as making sure that the curriculum and instruction that is provided pushes them as learners to their full potential so that they can be on the same playing field as their monolingual peers. The PD that will be administered at the beginning of the school year will assist with mitigating this problem. Teachers will be able to identify strategies and supports that can be used within the classroom to help support multilingual learners that have been identified as a student with a learning disability.

The following is a description of what readers will find in the chapters in this capstone. In chapter two readers will find the literature review on how teachers use strategies that support

multilingual learners with learning disabilities. In chapter three readers will find the description of the professional development training as well as the tools that will be used during the PD. In chapter four readers will find the conclusion, followed by references and appendices with PD materials and tools.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Multilingual Learners in the U.S.

Multilingual learners are a growing population of students in the United States. This rapid growth has left many students unable to receive adequate and equitable education. This is due to the fact that there are not enough teachers available in the country to provide the necessary support and strategies that multilingual learners need (Cramer & Ryan, 2023). Multilingual learners are also labeled as a student with a disability, which is also a rapidly growing population in the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Education (April, 2022) the number of ELL students dually classified under IDEA Part B was 11.78% in the 2020-2021 school year which is an increase from 2012 when ELL students made up 9.07% of students served under IDEA Part B. Researchers argue that due to the lack of qualified and certified Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) teachers, ELLs often do not receive the necessary supports to not only build their native language but also their English as well as teacher competence to know how students acquire language to be successful in the classroom (Swanson et al., 2020; Thorius & Sullivan, 2013). For this reason, general education teachers may believe that ELLs may have a learning disability and would require special education services.

Multilingual Learners in the General Ed. Classroom

The general education setting for multilingual learners can be a difficult one if there is not a certified TESOL teacher within their school to help support them. While elementary general

education teachers have a wide range of knowledge, Ortiz and Robertson (2018) point out that teacher preparation programs do not provide coursework that includes research and practice in working with multilingual learners. As a result, students are not able to adequately participate in the classroom for a multitude of reasons. This is especially true for students who are emergent English language learners in elementary school. There are many factors that play a role in limited classroom participation. Students may have come from another country and had no schooling if they are starting in kindergarten. They also could have interrupted schooling. The cultural aspects and expectations of schooling in the United States are vastly different than those of other countries. Therefore, the pressure placed upon students to conform and quickly grasp how to learn in school can place students into what is known as the silent period of language acquisition. Ovando and Combs (2018) indicate that young multilingual learners can remain in a silent period for several months while immersed in second language acquisition in school. During this period students are quiet in the classroom, they may not answer questions or engage in conversations with peers or adults. They can be labeled as shy or not wanting to participate in discussions or lessons, the idea of a learning disability may be brought up by teachers, which is not always the case. Students are observing the social interactions of peers and the interactions between peers and teachers during lessons. They are processing what language looks and sounds like in their new surroundings. Being in a new country where you do not speak the language and are expected to assimilate while simultaneously learning content is difficult for anyone, especially a child. This can cause fear and a hesitation to interact with peers and engage in lessons.

Multilingual students in the general education setting that are not receiving support from a certified TESOL teacher also have trouble accessing curriculum and assessments. Linan-Thompson et al. (2018) assert the importance of culturally responsive curriculum and

assessments in order to support students that may have difficulty in the classroom. This type of instruction brings the students culture to the forefront of the classroom and affirms their identities and abilities academically, socially, culturally, and linguistically while providing them opportunities to build use their schema to support their language acquisition as well as their academic success. In addition, Linan-Thompson et al. contend that culturally responsive instructional practices provides students with access to the classroom content, when students are able to gain access to the curriculum, they are able to flourish in the classroom. Cultural responsiveness not only extends to content and curriculum, but also to assessments.

According to Linan-Thompson et al., the assessments that are presented to students have an unconscious bias attached to them. They are typically based on American scenarios and for students that are not familiar with these concepts the assessments can be unreliable and not valid. When a multilingual learner has a limited English proficiency and a limited knowledge base of culturally relevant themes that are seen in assessments, the likelihood that a student will do well decreases significantly, therefore negatively impacting a student's sense of pride and motivation and their willingness to participate in the classroom. These factors compounded with teachers not knowing how to instruct multilingual students can lead to a multilingual learner not progressing as quickly as their monolingual peers. Along with a referral initiated by the classroom teacher for a special education evaluation.

Classification of Multilingual Learners in Special Education

One of the main factors taken into consideration when teachers request a special education evaluation is a student's lack of academic progress. This stall in progress has to be seen over time and data is presented indicating what interventions have to be used to support the student in order to justify an evaluation. The concerns must be brought to an interdisciplinary

team that will look at the evidence provided and decide if a child requires an evaluation or if they require more targeted interventions within the classroom. If it is decided that an evaluation must be completed the student undergoes a series of tests to determine their cognitive function, speech and language abilities, their academic abilities, and social history as well as classroom observations. These tests are completed by school psychologists, speech, and language therapists. And special education teachers. Researchers have noted the importance of knowing how second languages are acquired as well as testing students in both English and the students native language (Becker & Deris, 2019; Liasidou, 2013; Ortiz et al., 2011). Cole (2014) also states that a variety of formal and informal assessments need to be utilized in order to properly identify if a student truly has a learning disability in the general education classroom. Likewise, it is of the utmost importance that individuals assessing multilingual learners for a possible disability have prior knowledge of language acquisition and the students native language. Since this prior knowledge significantly decreases the probability that a student will be inadvertently classified as a student with a disability because the assessors and team are able to discern whether a student truly has a learning disability, or their lack of success is due to limited English proficiency. If a student truly has a learning disability the deficit will be present in testing that is done in the native language as well as in English.

Swanson et al. (2020) completed a study of 394 students in grades first through third who were labeled as ELL or emerging bilinguals. These students came from two large urban districts in the southwestern United States. The primary home language was Spanish, and the students participated in dual language instruction. The researchers sought to discover if observable variables emerged in ELL students in regard to their reading and math skills. Secondly, Swanson et al. sought to identify the cognitive processes that correlated with ELL performance at risk for

achievement difficulties. The students were given a variety of tests in both English and Spanish that were administered by bilingual graduate students and researchers. The tests looked at students abilities in receptive and expressive vocabulary, reading comprehension and word recognition, their ability to calculate and solve math word problems. Researchers also looked at students fluid intelligence and attention as well as their phonological storage, their ability to use short term memory and their executive processing and working memory. The study concluded that a latent classification of students with learning difficulties and disabilities could be identified in the sample of ELL children. The study found that based on the students performances on the tests administered about ten percent of the sample would be considered for special education services and that forty percent could be misdiagnosed. While this data shows the possibility of misdiagnosis, the numbers are still high, and it is indicative of the over identification of multilingual learners across the United States. Swanson et al. looked at students in dual language programs and the possibility of special education placement and misdiagnosis within that context, while this is an important demographic to look at it did not cover the most vulnerable multilingual learner population. For instance, the students who are not in dual language or bilingual programs but that are in general education classrooms across the United States. Based on this data one could ascertain that the percentage for students not in dual language or bilingual programs would inevitably be at risk of being mislabeled at the same rate if not higher.

Multilingual Learners in Special Education

For ELLs, the lack of academic progress is often related to the student's limited English proficiency and not an actual learning disability. As a result, general education teachers with no prior experience or education related to language development or special education will assume that an ELL requires special education services, thus increasing the amount of ELL students in

special education (Fernandez & Inserra, 2018). The lack of teachers that have a knowledge base of language acquisition and special education to support multilingual learners continues to exacerbate the problem of over classification along with the incorrect classification of students, especially in the Spanish speaking community as that is the fastest growing ELL population in the United States (Becker & Deris, 2019).

While the push for special education classification of multilingual learners often is done with the hope of supporting a student when a general education teacher does not have the knowledge on how to do so this can be detrimental to the student. According to Sullivan (2011) multilingual learners are often labeled as speech language impaired or learning disabled and are placed in the most restrictive environments for special education services. The programs that multilingual learners are put in tend to isolate those students more and do not provide the necessary opportunities for language acquisition or target the actual needs of the student. Sullivan argues that multilingual learners need to have exposure to intentional activities that not only support their academic language but also their social language. This is done when teachers plan lessons and opportunities for students to interact with one another in small group activities and hands on lessons that engage the student. Sullivan contends that the models used for special education services are the push in and pull out method. When students are pulled out of the classroom for services the goals that are worked on are not necessarily language based goals. By extension, these models do not provide the student with an opportunity to actively participate in language based activities within the curriculum.

According to More et al. (2016) another barrier that impedes a multilingual student's success in school is the number of special education teachers that have training in second language acquisition is minimal. While special education teachers have studied to work with

students with learning difficulties the coursework does not include English language learners. The strategies and pedagogy that is taught to special education teachers focuses on learning disabilities, and not second language acquisition. Thus, making the special education placement ineffective for multilingual students. The necessary support and strategies will not be available for the students, further widening the gap of opportunity and access to an appropriate education.

Academic regression is not the only aspect that is affected when students are improperly labeled as a student with a disability and recommended for special education services. There are social emotional implications that should be considered as well. According to the NCES (2022) multilingual students that are labeled as a student with a disability are at a greater risk of dropping out of school than their peers. In the 2019-2020 school year 14.57% of English language learners with disabilities dropped out versus the 12.68% of non-EL students with disabilities. This data on dropout rates can be attributed to the fact that many students are not getting individualized instruction that supports the student as an active participant in their own education. Ultimately, students need to feel validated, heard, supported, and empowered in school. According to Wright (2015) a teacher is effective when they value the skills and strengths a student possess in their native language and also uses that knowledge to provide instruction that allows for students to use what they know. This can only be done when students have educators who acknowledge their differences as assets to the classroom and embrace what students bring to the class while incorporating lessons that are engaging and tailored to the students specific content and language needs. A teachers ability to build relationships with their student can make or break a student's academic success. Linan-Thompson et al. (2018) stress the importance of understanding that language is more than just a way for people to communicate but also part of a student's identity that cannot be ignored. Ultimately this requires teachers to be

self-aware of their own beliefs in second language acquisition and bilingualism. Ortiz et al. (2020) assert that teachers should be reflective in their world views and how that affects their teaching as this can alter how teachers provide instruction to multilingual students. This is not the case for many students because as previously stated there is a tremendous need for teachers who are dually certified in TESOL and special education.

Supporting Multilingual Learners with Learning Difficulties

According to the NCES (2022) special education, and English as a second language/bilingual education were two of the top three teaching positions that had the highest vacancies within the United States. Teaching position vacancies in special education were 7% while English as a second Language/ Bilingual education position were at 6%. As a result, there is a tremendous need for bilingual special education teachers and certified TESOL teachers to support students in the general education and special education settings. Even though there are teacher shortages there are tools and strategies that schools and teachers can implement into their classrooms now that will provide multilingual learners with learning difficulties access to the curriculum as well as an equitable education. These tools and strategies will inevitably decrease the amount of over classifications into special education if implemented on a national and local level.

On a broader level, changing what is needed for teacher certifications to incorporate more coursework that represents the population of students that are in schools is a significant way to support all multilingual learners. Researchers argue that teacher preparation programs are required to provide all teacher candidates with coursework and experiences of working with multilingual students not only those working toward TESOL certification (More et al., 2016; Ortiz & Robertson, 2018). The growing population of multilingual learners supports this claim

and the need for all teachers to be equipped with the pedagogy to teach multilingual learners. On a local and district level providing teachers with professional development despite not having a certified TESOL teacher on staff is imperative. Furthermore, incorporating culturally responsive teaching into all classrooms and building relationships with students and families is another way to support multilingual learners, along with the use of high quality response to intervention (RTI) tailored to multilingual learners to support accurate referrals for special education evaluations can also support multilingual learners with suspected learning difficulties.

On a larger long term scale there is the need for universities and certification programs to offer coursework in second language acquisition for all teachers. As aforementioned the population of the United States is ever changing and multilingual learners are increasing, as a result all teachers need to be responsible for the diverse learners within their classrooms. Ortiz and Robertson (2018) compiled a list of competencies that are needed for teachers working with multilingual learners. These competencies consider language and language assessment, culture, educational contexts literacy foundations and assessments, as well as collaboration between educators. They assert that teacher education programs should look at the competencies needed by students in their programs so that they are aligned with what is required of teachers to support multilingual learners. After doing this teacher preparation programs would be able to change their programs so that their coursework would be reflective of all students that are in the education system. It is not solely the responsibility of the special education teacher or the TESOL teacher to work with students who are multilingual with learning difficulties, and having teacher preparation programs that consider the diverse learning community that is served in schools will help to mitigate the problem.

District and Local Changes

Researchers in several studies have noted that the chief complaint of general and special education teachers that have no prior experience working with multilingual learners is the feeling of unpreparedness they experience working with multilingual learners and the lack of training and professional development (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Liasidou, 2013; Ortiz & Robertson, 2018; Thorius & Sullivan, 2013). This is an aspect that is easily mitigated with professional developments geared for working with multilingual learners. Providing teachers with targeted professional development will not only aide in teachers feeling empowered and building their repertoire on tools and strategies to support multilingual learners but also shows teachers that all students are important, and they are responsible for instructing them. The focus of any professional development should be a brief overview of how language is developed and how second languages are acquired. Followed by how to incorporate strategies and techniques in the classroom for multilingual learners. Professional developments consistently provided in districts that are targeted toward multilingual learners over time can change how they are supported in classrooms thus changing the current data of dropout rates as well as classification of learning disabilities.

Strategies and Resources to Support Multilingual Students with Difficulties

Multicultural and multilingual students require a variety of support in order to improve academic outcomes since this population is at risk of mislabeling and dropping out as previously stated. Strategies can be implemented in the general education setting as well as the special education setting to support multilingual students with learning difficulties.

Familiarizing Teachers with Response to Intervention Systems

The way in which response to intervention (RTI) is provided for multilingual students with learning difficulties is different than their monolingual peers with learning difficulties. Researchers assert that with targeted linguistically and culturally responsive RTI achievement for multilingual learners is possible (Liasidou, 2013; Ortiz et al., 2020; Thorius & Sullivan, 2013). The tiered system for RTI consist of school wide intervention plans, universal screening to assess present levels of performance using the data to guide instruction and finally continuous progress monitoring (Ortiz et al., 2020). Following the process for RTI can provide teachers with consistent data to track how students are doing in the classroom and guide the process for possible referral for special education services. A referral to special education should be done only after all tiers of RTI have been exhausted and data shows that students are not making progress in both their native language as well as English.

However, the tiered system generally does not consider the needs of linguistically diverse students. Thorius and Sullivan (2013) point out that schools and teachers should have plans in place that consider what is necessary to support multilingual students. Teachers must ensure that multilingual learners have access to curriculum that is diverse and rigorous, the use of books that have stories that reflect culturally diverse students as well as in multiple languages. Books and curriculum that are high quality and culturally responsive are the base for the start of implementing school based high quality instruction as well as intervention plans. Thorius and Sullivan suggest that if students are not making gains with high quality instruction within the classroom, targeted interventions should occur. This is done with small groups within the general education classroom with students of similar literacy capabilities with a focus on literacy and

language development, this level 2 tier of support followed by intensive interventions if students are not making gains.

Advocating for Diversified Assessments

Culturally and linguistically diverse assessments are also needed in order to aid in the RTI process. Huang et al. (2011) claims that for students that have limited English proficiency an assessment administered in English will not provide an accurate representation of a child's capabilities. Assessments cannot be English assessments translated into the students language as these assessments have the potential to not be culturally relevant as well as they can change the test question completely. Huang et al. assert that assessments should be in the students native language and culturally relevant for students so that they are able to use their schema to aid in their ability to take the assessments. This allows for an accurate representation of a student's abilities in order for teachers to assess if more interventions is required. In addition, Huang et al. emphasize that a variety of assessments are needed to get a comprehensive view of student abilities. Teachers should perform formal and informal assessments in a variety of contexts. While these researchers state that assessments should be conducted on a student's literacy and language ability in both languages, Ortiz et al. (2011) also note that teachers need to consider that a student may be fluent speaking in their native language but may not have the capability to read or write in their native language or English. Further emphasizing the importance of getting to know students language and literacy abilities by assessing in many formats and contexts.

Learning from a Master Teacher

Orosco and O'Connor (2014) conducted a case study that looked at a southwestern U.S elementary school. The student population was 91% Latino all of which were labeled as ELL. Researchers looked at how a bilingual special education teacher used culturally responsive

instruction to support students with reading disabilities. Of the 35 students that were in the sample, 20 had classifications of learning disability and the rest were at risk of being labeled as a student with a learning disability. Instruction was provided in a separate room with four to five students in a group for thirty minutes each day. Researchers sought to answer four questions, first what did the teachers instruction look like; second how much of her teaching focused on the cultural and linguistic needs of the students; how did the teachers beliefs about students and teaching effect student success; and finally, how did access to professional development facilitate effective instruction. The study found that providing direct explicit instruction that supports native language and English development is important. It was also found that when teachers understand students' cultural backgrounds, they are better able to provide meaningful learning opportunities that support their reading development. The bilingual special education teacher in this study employed several techniques that can be used in any classroom with multilingual learners with learning difficulties.

The first technique was drawing on students culture and background knowledge to choose passages and books that were relevant to them. The bilingual special education teacher chose books for interactive read aloud that had characters and topics that were familiar to the Latino students in the class. García and Tyler (2010), assert that students may isolate themselves even more and feel like an outsider if the curriculum is not relevant to them as individuals. The bilingual special education teacher in the Orosco and O'Connor (2014) study was able to mitigate this by incorporating culturally relevant books within her instruction. A second technique used was think alouds during reading, they were used as a way to model for students the steps necessary to understand what was being read and provide opportunities for consistent checks for understanding. As a result, think alouds provided the teacher with data to support

lesson execution. A third technique the teacher used was allowing students to have discussions in both English and Spanish to facilitate their ability to comprehend what the texts were about while simultaneously building linguistic skills in Spanish and English. The final technique employed by the teacher was parent communication. The teacher recognized that parents are a resource to learn about students' funds of knowledge and play an important role in their student success. As a result, the teacher was able to build a relationship with parents and families that allowed her to get to know her students on a deeper level. Consequently, the bilingual special education teacher was able to use that knowledge to provide culturally responsive interventions that aided in the students reading achievement.

Providing Support to Grasp New Skills

Scaffolding and adapting lessons add another layer of support for multilingual learners with learning disabilities. According to Gibbons (2015) teachers need to not only think about cognitive supports but also language and literacy supports. Cognitive and academic support includes using multimodal methods for instruction. Providing students with several different ways to access content can assist those students that are unable to read or have difficulties with comprehension skills. For example, when giving directions orally, having them written on the board for students. Gibbons states that this small change helps to reach students who are visual and auditory learners and is easily incorporated into all lessons. In addition, this strategy is not only for giving directions but can be used throughout lessons. Gibbons maintains that academic adaptations does not imply changing the lessons or curriculum to make it easier for students. In fact, students should still be required to complete the same activities, but they should be provided with tools to assist them in completing the assignment.

García and Tyler (2010) indicate teachers should be providing graphic organizers during instruction for students to help organize their work and thoughts. Graphic organizers can further be adapted to provide different levels of support for students that have different learning difficulties as well as English proficiency levels. For students that require more language and cognitive support the level of adaptation could be extensive for a student who is an entering English proficiency as opposed to an expanding proficiency level that would not require as extensive adaptations. Graphic organizers are easily adaptable and can be used across all content areas. García and Tyler (2010) state that teaching students how to self-monitor, study skills and coping strategies assist with supporting academic success. Explicitly teaching students these skills allows them to use them independently later on so that they can be successful in the classroom. These strategies are not only beneficial to multilingual learners with learning difficulties but to all students who may be struggling.

Providing Support in Different Content Areas

While supporting students literacy and language development teachers can use several strategies for multilingual learners with learning difficulties. Students learning a second language need to have access to comprehensible input. Krashen (1985) states that language must be presented in a way that students are able to understand and make meaning. Therefore, García and Tyler (2010) suggest that teachers need to provide students with different ways to access and acquire language, this can be done by explicitly teaching vocabulary for each content area and reviewing meanings of words prior to being used within a lesson. Incorporating opportunities for students to hear and use language with peers and within the classroom in a variety of ways is necessary. For example, Gibbons (2015) turn and talks, small group work and one on one meetings with the teacher are ways to provide practice with input and output in the L1 and L2.

Gibbons also contends that students should be grouped in heterogeneous groups. The mixture of English proficiencies will not only allow for students to interact with those who speak the same native language but also allows students to be around more English proficient students to help them build their language.

García and Tyler (2010) studied how an eighth grade U.S. history teacher supported multilingual learners with learning difficulties in the general education setting. The students in this class had several languages spoken and eight of the students within this class had a learning disability. García and Tyler studied the supports the U.S history teacher put in place, collaborations with other teachers and the effects on student success. The authors noted that students were successful within the general education setting due to the variety of scaffolds and modifications that the teacher put in place. It was also noted that the relationships the teacher formed with students played an integral role in their ability to do well. The last component that researchers noted aided in the teachers and students success, was the collaborating that the history teacher did with other professionals in the school. The teacher was able to identify possible areas of struggle for students because she took the time to get to know each student and understood that she was not an expert in second language acquisition as well as special education. Thus, requiring her to go to those experts in the school so that her students could do well in the class.

From the studies presented in this section it is evident that trust and a willingness to work with others is necessary when working with multilingual learners who have learning difficulties. The team approach is in the best interest of the child. While finding time to collaborate with others is noted as a concern for many teachers, it is an aspect of teaching that needs to be prioritized. Collaborating with others can provide tools and techniques to be used across

classrooms allowing for a more cohesive learning experience for students. This also provides students with multiple opportunities to see strategies and techniques used in different contexts. When this happens, students are able to build their skills and work towards using them independently. Collaboration also sends the message to students and families that their child is important, and all teachers will do whatever it takes to support them.

Conclusion

The student population of multilingual learners that have learning difficulties is one that schools are finding more of within the United States. Leaving teachers asking the question how to support multilingual learners with learning difficulties. The data from NCES (2022) shows that there is a teacher shortage for certified TESOL teachers with a rate of 6% of vacancies across the U.S, the second highest teacher shortage reported across disciplines. As a result of this growing population and the lack of educators that have the expertise to work with multilingual students there is a disproportionate number of multilingual students that have been classified as a student with a learning disability. Thus, having a negative impact on multilingual learners success that reaches far beyond the classroom.

Although there is a teacher shortage, everyone is a teacher of multilingual learners with learning difficulties therefore, there are strategies and techniques that can be implemented within the classroom to support students. Culturally responsive teaching and a basic understanding of how second languages are acquired allows teachers to start the process of providing students with an equitable education. Building relationships with parents, students provides a solid foundation for student success. A teachers ability to foster trust and respect with parents and students can make or break the team approach that is necessary for student success. Trust and respect are not only necessary to build with students and families but also with the TESOL

teachers and special education teachers that can provide insight in supporting students in the general education setting.

Implementing effective and culturally relevant responses to intervention as well as having a variety of assessments will significantly assist in decreasing the classification of multilingual students as having learning disabilities. The tiered intervention system targeting student needs based on what they know is essential in supporting multilingual learners with learning difficulties. It is also important to have lessons and curriculum that is familiar to students, when students are able to use their background knowledge in the classroom, they are more successful. Assessments are an integral part of understanding student learning. Assessments are necessary in both a formal and informal setting as they provide different contexts for student learning. Assessments should also be within the students home language as well as English. When students are provided assessments in both languages it gives the teacher a more accurate representation of what the student is capable of accomplishing. The data that is collected from RTI and assessments provides teachers with the knowledge to support multilingual students within the classroom and not assume that there is a need for an evaluation.

Classroom interventions and support targeted for multilingual learners are easily implemented when teachers are provided professional developments and trainings from master teachers. While the ideal situation for all students is to have a certified TESOL teacher in every classroom that is often not the case, thus the need for master teachers to lead professional developments for general education teachers. Consistent implementation of scaffolds that address the cognitive and language needs of multilingual learners not only provides students with the necessary supports to be successful in the classroom but also teaches students how to implement what they have learned and apply the same strategies and techniques independently.

In conclusion, the shortage of certified TESOL teachers should not be the reason that multilingual students with learning difficulties are not fully supported within the education system by all teachers. The strategies and techniques outlined above provide a framework of how this can be done. In the following chapter I will present a professional development to inform educators on ways to address the issue of how teachers can support multilingual students with learning difficulties.

Chapter 3: Professional Development

The following section outlines the professional development (PD) that will be presented to teachers to support multilingual learners that have learning difficulties. The professional development will be presented over a three day series. Materials for day one can be found in appendix A, materials for day two can be found in appendix B and materials for day three can be found in appendix C. At the conclusion of the three day PD teachers will be able to; describe the different levels of English proficiency in New York State; identify the response to intervention process and when to make a referral for an evaluation for special education services; identify strategies and supports that can be implemented within the classroom.

Day One

At the beginning of day one after the introduction and reading of agenda outlining what to expect and the goal for the day. By the completion of the first day of PD teachers will be able to describe the process of second language acquisition; identify and describe the levels of language proficiency for multilingual learners and how a student is labeled as an English language learner in New York State.

A do now will begin the PD. There will be a series of prompts on a sheet of paper describing multilingual learners and the language acquisition process. Teachers will be given five

minutes to read the prompts and decide if they agree or disagree. The prompts will assess their current knowledge on language acquisition and English language learners within the classroom. Once teachers have answered the four prompts they will share with their partner and discuss why they chose their answers, after which there will be a whole group discussion reviewing the four prompts. The do now is geared to get teachers thinking about language acquisition and English language learners within their classrooms. Following the share out of the do know the PD will continue with an overview of second language acquisition. Highlighting the different stages that a person goes through while learning a second language. After the overview of language acquisition, a review of how a student is labeled as an English language learner will be presented with a handout of information based on New York State guidelines for identifying English language learners.

The next portion of the PD will include an overview of the levels of English proficiency that a student can be labeled as. After teachers have been given the different levels, they will be given three scenarios describing children at three different language levels and based on what they have learned they will be required to decide with a partner if the student is considered, entering, emerging, transitioning, expanding, or commanding. There will be a time to share out with the whole group after 10 minutes of work time.

To conclude this portion of the PD teachers will go back to their do know from the beginning and review the prompts again and decide if they would change any of their answers based on what they learned. There will be a whole group share out. Teachers will be asked to write one thing that they learned from the PD as an exit ticket.

The handouts created for this portion of the PD are meant to provide teachers with background knowledge of how second languages are acquired as well as how students are

labeled as English language learners. As mentioned in chapter two the population of students labeled as English language learners is rapidly increasing and the number of certified Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages is not sufficient to meet the needs of these learners (NCES, 2022; Cramer & Ryan, 2023). For this reason, general education teachers need to know what it means to be a multilingual student and how they may present within the classroom. The do now at the beginning of the PD activates teachers prior knowledge and provides the presenter with baseline data for how much teachers know about multilingual learners. The handouts for language acquisition and New York State regulations for multilingual learners is a resource for teachers to have so that they can refer to it throughout the year. Allowing teachers to go back and review their do now at the end of the PD provides an opportunity to use what they have learned in a real life situation.

Day Two

An ice breaker will be presented to teachers as an opener on the second day of the PD. After the icebreaker, the agenda will be reviewed along with the goal for the PD. At the end of the PD teachers will be able to identify the response to intervention (RTI) process and how to implement it into the classroom effectively for multilingual learners before considering a referral for special education services. Teachers will be given a vignette of a student that has been labeled as a multilingual learner. They will be given five minutes to read over the vignette and will answer a series of questions based on what they learned in the previous PD and their knowledge of referring students for special education services. The questions they will need to answer will gather information on whether they believe the child should be referred for special education services and why. After a brief whole group discussion on how teachers answered the presenter will review the RTI process. Teachers will be provided with an outline of the different tiers for

RTI and what the teacher needs to document at each step of the process. At the end of the presentation teachers will once again review the vignette of the student provided at the beginning of the PD and decide if adjustments need to be made to how they responded. Teachers must provide an explanation for their thinking. There will be a whole group share out at the end of the presentation as well as what the process should be for the student. An exit ticket will be provided for teachers to identify the process of RTI.

Response to intervention is a strategy that can be used within the class to target student needs and provide support for students who may be struggling in class. While RTI is effective when implemented consistently, the framework does not consider multilingual learners and second language acquisition (Thorius & Sullivan, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to tailor the RTI process to multilingual learners to include linguistically and culturally responsive instruction (Liasidou, 2013; Ortiz et al., 2020; Thorius & Sullivan, 2013). When this is done it allows teachers to support multilingual learners effectively. Providing teachers with a framework of effective RTI is necessary for them to understand how to implement it. The review of a possible student at the beginning of the PD gives teachers a real life example to put into practice what they learned previously and what they may know. Having teachers go back and review their answers at the end allows them to synthesize what they learned.

Day Three

The third day of the PD will provide teachers with strategies and techniques that can be used with multilingual learners in the classroom. At the end of the presentation teachers will be able to identify strategies and scaffolds to implement in the class and how to modify and use a variety of assessments. The PD will begin with an introduction, review of the agenda and a review of the first two presentations. Teachers will be given a do now and 10 minutes to read a

vignette of a multilingual learner that requires support in the class. They will be asked to identify strategies and techniques that they could implement using what they know and have learned about culturally responsive RTI as a think, pair, share. After a whole group share out the presentation will move into reviewing the strategies and scaffolds that can be implemented within the classroom. Teachers will be provided with a one pager that outlines the different strategies and techniques that can be used with multilingual learners. After reviewing the strategies and scaffolds that can be implemented in the class, the presentation will look at how assessments can be modified to support multilingual students. Teachers will be provided with a sample exam that will be modified together. After the sample is completed as a whole group teachers will be able to modify one on their own. At the conclusion of the PD teachers will again review the vignette that was provided at the beginning and add scaffolds and strategies to support the student in class.

Multilingual learners with learning difficulties require specialized strategies and scaffolds that will not only support their content acquisition but their language acquisition as well (Gibbons, 2015). Scaffolds and strategies implemented throughout a lesson and assessments provide multilingual learners with multiple ways to access the content and build their language, promoting comprehensible input for students (Krashen, 1985). There is an increase in a student's success when they are able to understand the content and language when given multiple ways to access it and provided with scaffolds and supports. The activities provided in this PD permit teachers to build their knowledge base as well as put into practice what was reviewed during the session.

Conclusion

The professional development will provide teachers with a foundation in second language acquisition and multilingual learners. At the conclusion of the PD teachers will be able to describe second language acquisition, identify the process to classify English language learners and identify tools and strategies that can be implemented in the classroom to support multilingual learners with learning difficulties. In the subsequent chapter readers will find the conclusion, implications for teaching and learning along with recommendations for further study.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Introduction

The student demographic has changed considerably over the years. The number of multilingual learners has increased in our schools from 9.2 % in the fall of 2010 to 10.3 % in the fall of 2020 (NCES, 2023). This number will continue to increase in the years to come as more individuals who speak more than one language continue moving to the United States. While the number of multilingual learners is increasing there is also a national teacher shortage. According to the NCES (2022) in October 2022, 45% of public schools had multiple teacher vacancies. Many of those vacancies were found in special education and ESOL as those departments occupied the top two positions of teacher vacancies.

An increase in multilingual learners combined with an insufficient number of teachers available to teach said learners has compounded the problem that many multilingual learners are facing in education. They are not receiving effective and appropriate education from a certified ESOL teacher, as general education teachers generally do not have prior knowledge on second language acquisition and how to best support multilingual learners, due to teacher education programs not providing coursework in those areas. For this reason, many teachers are unaware of

how to best support multilingual learners with learning difficulties. As there continues to be a teacher shortage it is imperative that general education teachers have a knowledge base for all learners within the classroom so that they are able to effectively teach everyone. The research completed in this capstone aimed to mitigate the problem facing multilingual learners with learning difficulties and how teachers could support them in the general education setting.

Conclusion

In order to provide multilingual learners with learning difficulties an effective and equitable education there are several components that must be met. The first component is understanding second language acquisition. When teachers have knowledge of how language is acquired, they are able to identify the true linguistic and cognitive needs of a student.

Background knowledge of language acquisition also mitigates the assumption that a student may have a learning disability because the child appears to be fluent in a second language if they are able to communicate more with social language but have difficulty with academic language and concepts (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013). Teachers are able to discern the differences between language acquisition and possible learning disabilities when they have prior knowledge of second language acquisition.

Implementation of culturally responsive RTI is a second component that will assist teachers in supporting multilingual students with learning difficulties. Gibbons (2015) asserts that high quality scaffolded instruction starts within the classroom with the use of culturally relevant books and curriculum along with the use of a student's home language to support new language acquisition as well as home language development. Gibbons contends that students should be held to high standards while being provided support in the classroom to be successful. If students do not appear to be making progress, then more targeted interventions should be

provided, and special education evaluations can be considered after all tiers of intervention have been exhausted. Scaffolding instruction with linguistic and cognitive supports that can be phased out fosters student independence and autonomy.

A team approach is necessary when working with multilingual learners with learning difficulties. The knowledge base of special educators and TESOL teachers combined with parent involvement and the general education teacher allows for the students greatest success. Ortiz et al. (2011) assert that problem solving teams should include families and those who understand what multilingual learners require in the classroom. Teams that do not include all facets of a child's education will not be effective. Parents are especially important as they know the child best and can fill in gaps that the school may not know. Ortiz et al. also contends that if students are receiving any other support outside of the class those members should also be included in the team. When a team approach is used the child benefits, the right support is given and is successful in school.

The professional development that has been incorporated into this capstone helps to mitigate the lack of education available for general education teachers who work with multilingual learners with learning difficulties. The three part PD provides teachers with an introduction into second language acquisition as well as how students are labeled as an English language learner, how to implement effective RTI into the classroom with culturally responsive teaching and what scaffolds and supports can be used so that students are not inadvertently recommended for a special education evaluation. Ortiz and Robertson (2018) stressed the importance of teacher education in the form of professional developments. Therefore, this PD provides teachers with resources and tools that they can use within the classroom,

Implications for Student Learning

Students that are exposed to culturally responsive curriculum are more likely to be engaged and participate in school. Linan-Thompson et al. (2018) assert that in order for learning to occur for students they must build a connection between their culture and school. García and Tyler (2010) state that culturally responsive teaching finds ways to incorporate content that connects to students lives and resources that use students native language. When students are exposed to culturally responsive curriculum, they are able to build that relationship between home and school thus making school more enjoyable and accessible. According to the NCES (2022) multilingual students that are labeled as a student with a disability are at a greater risk of dropping out of school than their peers. However, the number of multilingual learners that are classified as a student with a learning disability will decrease as students will be able to access the curriculum that is tailored to their abilities both linguistically and cognitively. Students have a better school experience and are motivated to do well when they feel supported and can see themselves in the curriculum.

Implications for Teaching

High quality teacher preparation programs and continuing education in the form of professional developments that address the needs multilingual learners will allow for teachers to become well versed in providing an equitable education for multilingual students. Ortiz and Robertson (2018) state that effective teachers implement supports and strategies that not only support multilingual learners but also monolingual learners as well as implement strategies for students with learning difficulties. Ortiz and Robertson also assert that effective teachers not only provide supports to build students English acquisition but also the home language. Professional developments incorporated into schools equip teachers to implement strategies effectively in the

classroom that not only support multilingual learners but also those that may have learning difficulties.

Recommendations

Teacher preparation programs need to incorporate a variety of coursework that reflects the students that are in today's classrooms. General education and special education teacher candidates should be required to take coursework on language acquisition and teaching multilingual learners. More et al. (2016) assert that implementing coursework to reflect multilingual learners is no easy task but is one that must be done if multilingual students are going to receive appropriate instruction. Further research is needed as to how teacher education programs should be changed to incorporate coursework regarding second language acquisition. Continuous professional development is needed in order to support teachers who work with multilingual learners. Teams of teachers are needed at schools to assist with the evaluation of multilingual learners for possible learning disabilities. Ortiz and Robertson (2018) emphasize the need for teams to collaborate and share the responsibility of working with multilingual learners. The teams should include TESOL teachers as they can provide insight on language acquisition, support, and strategies that could be used during the time that data is being taken as well as special education teachers. This provides a wholistic approach to teaching multilingual learners that allows for success in the classroom.

Final Thoughts

All teachers are teachers of English language learners, it is not only the responsibility of the TESOL teacher to support multilingual learners just as it is not the sole responsibility of the special education teacher to teach students with learning disabilities. Building teacher knowledge by incorporating coursework into preparation programs and continuing education in the form of

professional development courses makes it so that all teachers are teachers of multilingual learners. It is imperative to incorporate culturally responsive curriculum while providing students with the necessary scaffolds and support within the classroom before sending students for special education referrals, as well as using the expertise of teachers that are certified to teach English language learners. The possibilities for multilingual learners become endless when the educators charged with teaching them not only have the necessary tools to do so but use them with fidelity.

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Appendix A**Day 1 Activity 1**

Directions: Read each statement below regarding English language learners (ELLs) and second language acquisition based on what you know. Circle if you agree or disagree after each statement. You will share your thinking with your table after.

1. English language learners will learn English faster if they are in English only classes.

Agree / Disagree

2. Acquiring a second language is similar to acquiring a first language.

Agree / Disagree

3. An ELL who has oral fluency in Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills will show fluency in Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.

Agree / Disagree

4. Teachers should tell parents to stop using their native language at home with their children so they can learn English faster.

Agree / Disagree

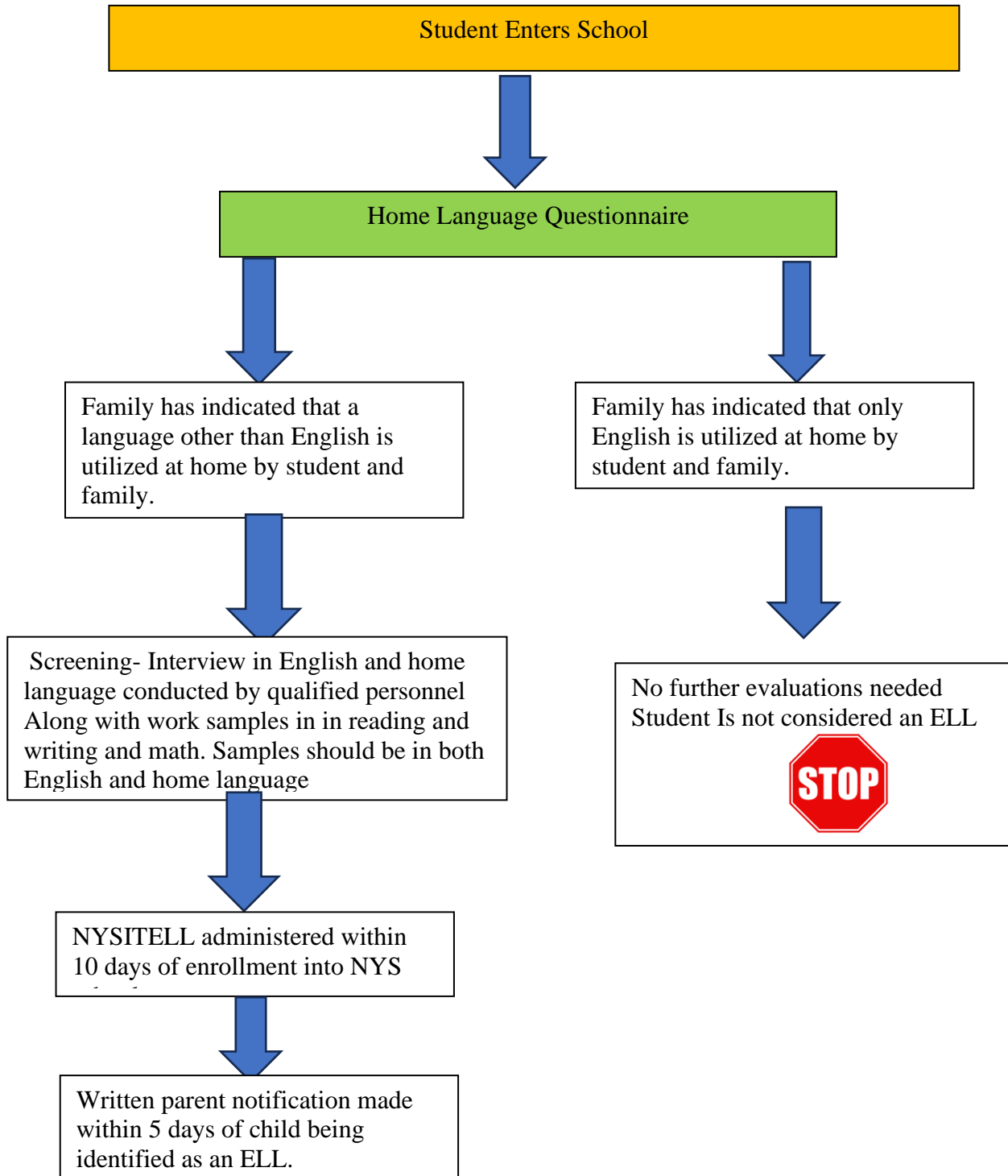
Day 1 Activity 2

6 Stages of Second Language Acquisition
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Stages	
Preproduction	
Early production	
Speech emergence	
Beginning Fluency	
Intermediate fluency	
Advanced fluency	

Day 1 Activity 3

How do we identify a student as an English language learner?



Day 1 Activity 4

English Language Learner Proficiency Levels

Low English Proficiency-----High English

Entering	Emerging	Transitioning	Expanding	Commanding

Day 1 Activity 5

Name _____

Directions: Read the scenarios below and identify the English language proficiency you believe each student is and why. (Entering, emerging, transitioning, expanding, commanding).

Pablo is a second grade student whose family recently immigrated to the U.S. from Guatemala. They have only been here for six months. He does not interact with his peers and when you ask him a question he does not respond. He requires a significant amount of support to understand the language demands within the classroom. Pablo receives 360 minutes of mandated ENL instruction. What level of English proficiency is Pablo?

Mei is a fourth grade student who moved to the U.S with her family in first grade. She was on grade level for reading writing and math in her home country. She has made many friends in school and can hold basic conversations with them in English. She requires moderate support in the classroom with content and to understand the language demands and receives 360 minutes of ENL instruction. What level of English proficiency is Mei?

Yessenia is a sixth grade student whose family moved to the US when she was five. She is able to independently communicate in English with peers and teachers. She is currently on grade level with math reading, and writing. She requires minimal support to understand content and language demands. She receives 180 minutes of ENL instruction What level of English proficiency is Yessenia?

Day 2 Activity 2
RTI Process

Tier 1-

Tier 2-

Tier 3-

Day 2 Activity 3

Name _____

Exit Ticket: Answer the following questions and hand them in at the end of the PD.

Identify the steps needed for effective response to intervention (RTI).

Name two components that should be implemented in RTI for ELLs.

Appendix C
Day 3 Activity 1

Do Now

Directions: Read the description below. Identify 2- 3 strategies you could implement in the classroom that could support this ELL.

Pablo is a second grade student who recently moved to the US from Guatemala. He has taken the NYSITELL and is identified as emerging language proficiency. In Guatemala he was approaching grade level for all subjects and is able to read and write in Spanish. He is able to identify all letters and their sounds but has difficulty decoding grade level texts in English as well as answering w questions about the story. He enjoys science related books and is an excellent artist. How would you help build Pablo's comprehension skills?

Do Now Revisited: Would you do anything different for Pablo after this PD?

Day 3 Activity 2

Strategies in the Classroom

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Day 3 Activity 3

You DO: Below is a sample question for a math exam. How would you modify the question to support Pablo?

Ms. Gonzalez has 45 hacky sacks. Mr. Rivera has 22 hacky sacks. How many more hacky sacks does Ms. Gonzalez have than Mr. Rivera?
