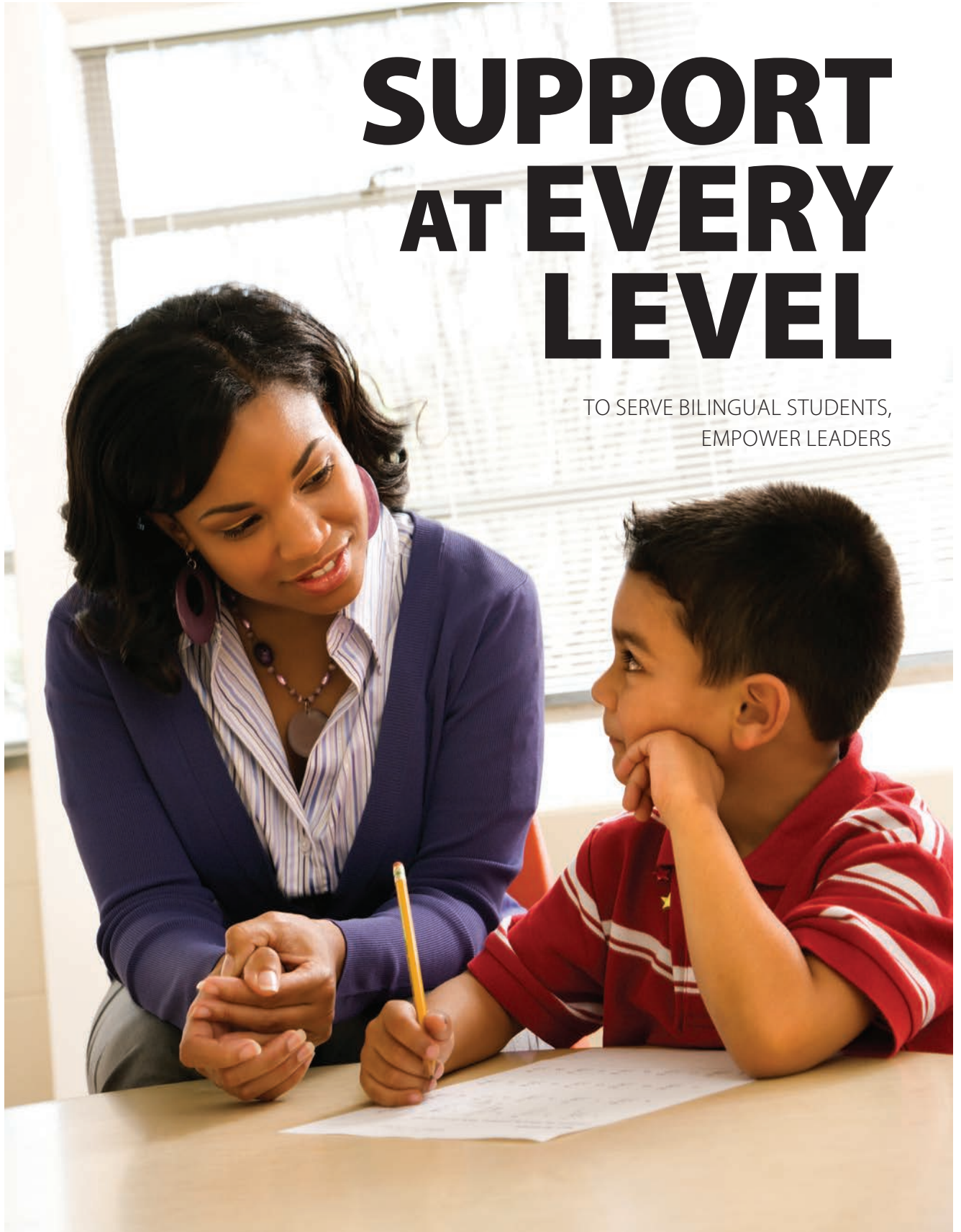


SUPPORT AT EVERY LEVEL

TO SERVE BILINGUAL STUDENTS,
EMPOWER LEADERS



BY HILDA MALDONADO, IMELDA L. NAVA, AND MARCO A. NAVA

More than half of the world's population is bilingual (Grosjean, 2010). In many countries, bilingualism is embedded within culture and identity (Callahan & Gandara, 2014) and is valued because it facilitates communication among diverse people, presents increased market-based opportunities, and improves the brain's executive functioning capacities (Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012).

In the U.S., however, minority multilingual K-12 students' linguistic, social, cultural, and academic assets are often not valued in many communities and institutions, including traditional school settings. Yet for immigrants and those learning English, denying or devaluing the native tongue can have negative impacts on academic outcomes, health, and behavior (Wilson, Ek, & Douglas, 2014).

An acculturation process that focuses exclusively on English as the means to access mainstream society, to the exclusion of valuing the native tongue, can distance K-12 students from their families and culture (Wilson,

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Ek, & Douglas, 2014) and is related to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Arbona et al., 2010; Oppedal & Idsoe, 2012).

These research findings have important implications for how schools serve emergent bilingual students. We use the term “emergent bilinguals” because it acknowledges the language that students already know and is more asset-focused than other terms (Garcia, 2009).

For emergent bilingual students to thrive, schools need a culture of valuing bilingualism, supported by strong and committed leaders. As the Leadership standard of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning states, “Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness

and results for all students requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning” (Learning Forward, 2011).

From 2015 to 2017, we convened a professional learning community of 14 emergent bilingual leaders from around the U.S. We defined emergent bilingual leaders as leaders at all levels who support multilanguage development, including district and university leaders. Our goals were to facilitate an opportunity for peer support and collect qualitative data on the successes and challenges in creating school communities that value emergent bilinguals.

Previous research has suggested that professional learning communities can provide the space to have deep, sustained conversations about teaching and learning in light of language development for emergent bilinguals (Brooks, Adams, & Morita-Mullaney, 2010).

The qualitative study addressed these questions: How might schools and districts leverage multiple languages as assets rather than deficits? What is the role of leadership, and how is it

sustained when ensuring that multiple languages are supported as assets?

COMMON THEMES EMERGE

The leaders were part of a network originally convened by the Council of Great City Schools, a coalition of urban public school systems, through its annual conferences. They formed part of a network specifically dedicated to convening and sharing supports, strategies, and information on programs to support bilingual, immigrant, and refugee students in large urban school districts.

Included in the group were nine public school representatives (executive directors, district specialists, administrators, teachers leaders), three university professors, and two district/county office leaders. The emergent bilingual leaders met four times between 2015 and 2017 and, due to the large geographic distance, collaborated via conference calls and email.

Data for this study include coded data from charts generated from topics discussed at a summer convening, a survey protocol, and individual interviews of the emergent bilingual leaders who attended the summer convening.

Emergent bilingual leaders volunteered for the interviews through an electronic survey. If they wished to be interviewed, they were called within a two-week span in December 2017. The data shared here is from the online survey process and individual interviews. Four individual interviews helped clarify emergent bilingual leaders’ challenges and successes as well as what sustains them in this challenging yet critically important work.

Throughout the convening, participants’ unwavering commitment to the emergent bilingual students, families, and communities they served was clear. Their conviction is driven from a strong sense of moral purpose shaped through

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their experiences as emergent bilingual students themselves or through their work on behalf of emergent bilingual students and their families.

Three specific themes emerged that are valuable for other school leaders who serve emergent bilingual students:

1. Lack of acknowledgement and access;
2. The need for leadership, allies, and mentoring; and
3. The need for social and emotional supports for emergent bilingual students.

Lack of acknowledgement and access

Students enter school with a great deal of cultural capital and multiple language assets. Schools and districts need to value home languages, have asset-based systems that build capacity together, consider student heritage and background, and appreciate the community.

One emergent bilingual leader said, “My own experience as an English learner person allows me to understand the struggles and hopes of English learner students. I know they come to our school system with many assets and that these assets can be used as levers to support them in learning English. Having this understanding allows me to make decisions about our English learner programs and supports that must be provided to our students.”

Yet the emergent bilingual leaders noted that, in the settings where they work, students’ primary language, culture, and family experience are

often not valued as assets. Rather, these qualities are viewed as deficits, and students are often treated as if they had special needs, limiting their academic success.

Furthermore, as emergent bilingual leaders, study participants indicated that district leaders devalued their work. They experienced a sense of isolation and, in some cases, experienced retribution in the form of job demotions or reassignments. The retribution was often due to advocating for emergent bilingual policy and supports.

Another emergent bilingual leader said, “We spent time sharing our leadership stories, and, during that experience, I realized that as professionals working to improve the learning conditions for English learners and representing that cause, we are experiencing similar rejection, marginalization, and labeling. We are not alone, and we have to unite to change the narrative about English learners and how the work for them is viewed by the mainstream. We also have to help and protect each other so that we are not silenced in our quest to be the voices for this population.”

These revelations often were followed by appreciation for a space where they could candidly share their struggles and support each other — which also highlights the need for education leaders to support emergent bilingual learners at various levels.

Leadership, allies, and mentoring

The group cited the critical role that leaders perform in establishing positive school environments for emergent bilinguals and all students. The many roles that they serve include:

- Facilitating high-quality professional learning;
- Supporting teachers on emergent bilingual instruction;
- Engaging families in an

- authentic manner; and
- Influencing policy at the district, state, and national levels.

To do this work effectively, participants need to find allies and form alliances. They noted the importance of the professional learning community's shared space for dialogue and support and expressed a desire to continue meeting as a group.

As one participant said, "We must create allies in the work and not be afraid to bring up the reality of the issues that impact English learners in policy, investments, programs, and equity. Shifting the narrative from a challenge to an assets-based conversation around English learners is the way we need to shape the work moving forward."

Another participant said, "I realized that institutions could do more if we — the leaders of this work — advocate stronger and used our power to point out the inequities. Having allies across the country who are doing the same thing gave me courage and pride in pushing harder."

Brooks, Adams, and Morita-Mullaney (2010) suggest that professional learning communities can provide the space to have deep, sustained conversations about teaching and learning in light of language development for emergent bilinguals. The findings from our study support this recommendation.

In fact, study participants offered to cover their own travel costs if it meant continuing collaboration, supporting each other's work, sharing best practices, and taking up collective action to achieve equitable outcomes for emergent bilinguals.

Two participants experienced in working with emergent bilinguals viewed their participation in the group as mentors for the younger leaders in the group. This further solidifies the importance of continuing this

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dialogue and collaboration as people with historical and diverse institutional perspective share their learning with others.

Need for social and emotional support

Emergent bilingual leaders have observed the trauma that emergent bilingual students suffer on a regular basis. The need for the intentional incorporation of social and emotional learning strategies to support emergent bilinguals was a recurring theme.

"There are many English learners in our school at present who are experiencing hardships like those I heard about from my dear friends and made me realize how critical it is to support students emotionally and socially in school," one participant said. "The experiences of students can greatly affect their schooling, and thus I am thinking of the importance of emphasizing multilayered support for students."

There is an even greater need for social and emotional support strategies now. We have identified refugee and newcomer students who have been held in detention centers for long periods, students who are here without parents, and students who have experienced or seen violence firsthand.

These students can exhibit behaviors in the classroom that appear to be disconnected, uninterested, or at times unaware of adult authority. Leaders in these situations need to recognize the students' behaviors as outcomes of lived experiences and not as disrespectful,

defiant, or demonstrating a lack of interest in school. So before we can build on their language and cultural assets, we must first address their social emotional state.

The intersection of trauma and leadership needs to be explored further to understand how these aspects might inform the culturally and emotionally responsive conditions needed to support emerging bilinguals.

Building multilevel leadership

The findings from these qualitative interviews suggest that there is a need for leadership at all levels to develop a shared vision and spur action toward the support of emergent bilinguals in schools.

District leaders can shape districtwide vision for emergent bilingual instruction, but individual schools must have some autonomy and assume responsibility to ensure a higher sense of ownership. Existing research on school leadership underscores this need.

For example, the successes of implementing or maintaining bilingual programs in the face of opposition show a shift from hierarchical leadership structures to collaborative ones (Ascenzi-Moreno, Hesson, & Menken, 2016). While hierarchical structures might be endemic to institutional structures, how leaders engage in accessing voice and recognizing expertise from diverse stakeholders can reflect a collaborative approach.

In supporting emergent bilinguals, Elfers and Stritikus (2014) identified five areas of intersection between district and school leaders:

- Instruction without fragmentation;
- A blend of district and school-led leadership initiatives;
- Communicating purpose;
- Differentiating support between elementary and secondary settings; and

- Using data to improve instruction.

Investigating four districts and 12 schools, they found that support from the district came in the form of vision, districtwide professional learning, and flexibility to attend to the varying needs of different schools and communities as it pertained to supporting emergent bilinguals. The flexibility in support was best leveraged when school leaders were informed about bilingualism (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014). This was a first step in shifting how schools and districts support emergent bilinguals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Professional learning recommendations include:

- Identify the purpose of the learning and the knowledge and skills leaders who serve these student populations need;
- Provide spaces and places for emergent bilingual leaders to collaborate with those leading initiatives to ensure the inclusion of emergent bilingual student needs;
- Include emergent bilingual leaders in senior leadership roles;
- Garner support from all district leaders to build capacity on ways to advocate for students' assets instead of deficits; and
- Ensure all leaders have fundamental knowledge about the role of language and culture in teaching and learning.

BILINGUALISM AS AN ASSET

As demographic shifts continue in the U.S., the need for multilingual informed supportive leaders grows. Education leaders must be emergent bilingual leaders if this work is to move forward in meaningful, scalable, and transformative ways. Leaders at all levels need support to do this work.

Leaders must be willing to understand bilingualism and see it as an asset, engage in research-based strategies, engage families, and use collaborative strategies to better understand how to leverage and learn from the assets of emergent bilinguals.

In our study, collective conversations among emergent bilingual leaders led to personal affirmation and dialogue about strategies and approaches to better work with emergent bilinguals. Finding opportunities to share practices and strategies to navigate the challenges that emerge in various contexts is a place to start.

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