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RESEARCH REVIEW

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WHAT WORKS FOR MULTILINGUAL STUDENTS? RESEARCH SYNTHESIS OFFERS CLUES

Ensuring multilingual students are supported in accessing academic content is critical to those students achieving grade-level standards. But it can be challenging to determine which evidence-based strategies to employ amidst the pressure of maintaining the pace of lessons and curriculum. Research syntheses are an efficient way to understand what we know so far.

A recent synthesis of research studies about professional learning that supports teachers in addressing the literacy needs of multilingual students with evidence-based instruction and intervention offers guidance and practical strategies as a helpful starting point.

► THE STUDY

Shelton, A., Hogan, E., Chow, J., & Wexler, J. (2023). A synthesis of professional development targeting literacy instruction and intervention for English learners. *Review of Educational Research*, 93(1), 37-72.

► METHODOLOGY

This synthesis aimed to determine effective strategies to address achievement differences between students who are native English speakers and students who are English learners, often referred to as multilingual students. It is based on a systematic review of studies of professional learning focused on literacy instruction and interventions for multilingual students published between 2000 and 2020. To be included, studies needed to provide a clear description of the professional learning design and duration, explanations of the literacy instructional and intervention activities, and qualitative or quantitative results related to changes in teachers' instructional knowledge, perceptions, beliefs, or practices. Student outcome data were not required but were included in some of the studies. Nineteen studies met the criteria for analysis.

Studies were coded for professional learning provider characteristics, research methodology, the nature and methods of the professional learning, and teacher and student outcomes. The authors noted a large amount of variability in school contexts and research methods. Among the subset of studies that reported student outcomes, there was also a wide range of student characteristics and demographics and a range of classroom settings in which those students were taught (e.g., traditional English language arts classrooms, English immersion settings).

The professional learning was assessed against five characteristics of effective professional learning proposed by Desimone's (2009) review of research: a focus on content, active learning, coherence (with other professional learning, educators' knowledge and beliefs, and school, district, and state policies), sufficient duration (20-plus hours), and collective participation in an interactive learning community.

It was also measured against Ortiz and Robertson's (2018) essential competencies for language and literacy instruction for multilingual learners: understanding of language, language acquisition, bilingualism and biliteracy, ability to create learning environments that value students' linguistic and cultural assets, knowledge of policies and structures that might restrict students' education, and knowledge and skills related to essential elements of instruction for multilingual learners.

The instructional strategies described in the studies were measured against Baker et al.'s (2014) recommendations for effective academic and literacy instruction for multilingual learners: intensive instruction on academic vocabulary words over multiple days in varying activities; incorporating oral and written language instruction in English in content instruction; regular, structured opportunities to develop written language skills; and small-group intervention for students

demonstrating difficulty in literacy and English language.

► FINDINGS

Ten studies included professional learning that fully aligned with Desimone’s characteristics of effective professional learning. Among all studies, the most frequently aligned characteristics were active learning and content focus. Coherence was difficult to identify or was not described in many studies.

All but one study reported positive changes in teacher knowledge and practice and high fidelity of implementation. These positive changes included teachers being observed using more linguistic and visual scaffolding, incorporating more literacy into instruction in other content areas, and demonstrating increased knowledge about teaching academic vocabulary and making connections between English and Spanish.

Two studies that did not include coaching or individualized professional learning support found that teachers gained knowledge about second-language acquisition and connecting cultural backgrounds to instruction but “were not able to enact this knowledge in instruction.”

The researchers acknowledge that some of the teacher outcomes were self-reported but nonetheless argue that their findings support earlier research that effective professional learning experiences “extend over time, provide active learning opportunities, are content-focused and coherent, and include collective participation.”

Eleven of the 12 studies that included student measures yielded positive outcomes on reading-related measures, and where the data were disaggregated, professional learning helped reduce the gap between native English speakers and multilingual learners.

Although the synthesis found generally positive outcomes for teachers and students, these results were focused on literacy instruction overall and did “not typically attempt to address teachers’ implementation of interventions specific to the needs of ELs facing literacy difficulties.” The researchers note that the gap in knowledge about intervention for struggling students may be because none of the studies took place in settings where a multitiered system of support (MTSS) might have assessed teacher and student needs in ways that would have focused the professional learning differently.

► IMPLICATIONS

A research synthesis of this nature is helpful because it provides a sense of the broad landscape of research in the topic area while also describing individual studies that practitioners might delve into based on their context or instructional challenge. Particularly helpful is the comparison of studies against existing frameworks of effective characteristics because this builds a common language about and metrics for effectiveness. Learning Forward believes the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) can be used in this way, and we are working to build capacity for doing so.

This study speaks directly to several standards:

- **Equity Practices** calls for educators to recognize and honor student assets through instruction. This review highlights evidence-based strategies that recognize the ways in which multilingual learners enhance the classroom environment and bring a unique perspective on language and literacy.
- **Equity Drivers** asks educators and other stakeholders to

examine the structures and norms that maintain inequities in opportunities to learn. The review does so by recognizing that traditional approaches to literacy instruction can treat multilingual students as “less than” native English speakers.

- **Evidence** calls for educators to integrate research at all stages of designing, implementing, and assessing professional learning and consider multiple research methods and approaches. The review focuses on determining practical applications from studies that represent a range of methodologies and contexts, and the researchers call on practitioners to use these and other results to guide decision-making.

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