Reimagining Quality Education for Latina/o ELs at the Crossroads of Disability and Second Language Acquisition within a Response to Intervention Framework

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In this brief report, we shed light on how educators can reimagine quality education for Latina/o English learners at the crossroads of language acquisition and disability. We begin by providing an overview of the landscape of Latina/o learners at risk and placed in special education; we then provide a description of the Response to Intervention framework and essential considerations for designing language and literacy programming at the universal Tier I as well as Tier II and III levels for Latina/o ELs within various types of instructional programs (biliteracy, transitional bilingual, and English-only). Research suggests that this critical mass of learners has unique instructional needs that must be addressed by providing them with optimal language supports across instructional programs.
Keywords: bilingual education, English as a second language, English learner, Latino students, literacy, multilingual learner, Response to Intervention, special education

Over the last decade, the Latina/o school age population has increased by 39% (Fry & Lopez, 2012). The Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA, 2008) reports that among all students identified as English learners (ELs), Spanish remains the predominant language spoken, with nearly 80% of ELs identifying Spanish as the primary home language other than English. Moreover, in some schools or districts, this number can exceed 80%. In 2012–2013, New York State public schools enrolled a total of 2,684,000 students. Of this total, 411,509, or 14%, were identified as having a disability; 213,933, or 7.3%, were identified as ELs; and of the ELs, 40,665, or 19%, were identified as having a disability. Aggregated data on all students ages four to 12 in New York State indicate that ELs are more likely to be classified as having disabilities. Since 2010, this trend continues to be on the rise (New York State Education Department, 2013). For example, in 2010–2011, just over 18% of ELs were classified as having disabilities, compared to just under 14% of all students. In 2011–2012 and 2012–2013, roughly 19% of ELs were so classified, as opposed to 14% of all students.

Given the high number of Latina/o students represented within the EL population, it is important to consider the trajectories and experiences of the Latina/o EL population in general to better understand how educators can best meet the needs of such

learners. The following highlights the experiences of many ELs relative to special education:

- In a study of 11 urban districts in California, the more language supports (bilingual education being the most supportive) provided prior to fifth grade the lower the risk that an EL would be placed in special education from sixth through twelfth grades (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005);
- ELs who were in English Immersion (English-only) programs prior to fifth grade were almost three times as likely to be placed in special education, compared to ELs who had been in bilingual programs by the time they reached twelfth grade (Artiles et al, 2005);
- ELs with limited proficiency in both their first language (L1) and second language (L2) were the most vulnerable (most likely) subset of ELs to be placed in special education (Artiles, Klingner, Sullivan, & Fierros, 2010);
- ELs with disabilities are more likely to be placed in the most restrictive and segregated programs (de Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006);
- Once placed in special education, ELs are less likely to receive supplemental language supports and are more likely to receive instruction only in English (Zehler, Fleischman, Hopstock, Pendzick, & Stephenson, 2003); and
- Schools with the highest percentages of ELs are more likely to place such students with novice teachers or teachers without bilingual education or English as a second language (ESL) certification (Kushner, 2008; Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, & Saunders Flippin, 2004). Moreover, with regard to New York specifically, the most recent report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (USDOE, 2011) reported that Latinos with disabilities were almost twice as likely to be placed in more restrictive environments (i.e., under 40% of the day in general education classrooms) in New York State than Latinos across the special education population in the United States.

The purpose of this report is to present considerations for optimal language supports for ELs across instructional contexts. In our view, the issues of disproportionality and degree of restrictiveness can best be addressed through the infusion of research-based language supports designed for the Latina/o population. Given the implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) in U.S. public schools, we position our recommendations within an RTI framework, where we see great potential for Latina/o ELs to be appropriately served. What follows are descriptions of considerations for optimal language supports intended for multi-tiered instruction, as well as specific recommendations for designing Tier II and Tier III literacy interventions.

Response to Intervention for Latina/o ELs

Response to Intervention (RTI) is an instructional framework recommended by federal law that has as its main goal to increase students' opportunity to learn by providing

multi-tiered instructional interventions for students who continue to have difficulty learning within the structure of evidence-based, universal classroom instruction (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). If a student shows signs of difficulty mastering skills, he or she is provided with strategic, multi-tiered instruction that increases in intensity, frequency, and duration as student need dictates (e.g., Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006b). These supports continue to the level at which a student is able to show adequate progress and skill development or to the point at which progress monitoring over time (at least 30 weeks of systematic, evidence-based intensive interventions—Vaughn, Cirino, Linan-Thompson, Mathes, Carlson, & Cardenas-Hagan et al., 2006) may demonstrate the need for prereferral to special education processes.

Given this disproportionality of Latina/o ELs in special education and the clear, evidence-based connection between program implementation and type of language supports provided L1 and/or L2 that mediate disproportionality, it is critical for educators to embed culturally and linguistically responsive supports to the greatest extent possible within an RTI framework. The question then becomes: Are the majority of interventions currently being implemented appropriate and effective for *Latina/o ELs, or ELs in general* (Artiles & Kozleski, 2010)? The many research-based literacy interventions promoted in schools for RTI were, in fact, developed for and researched with monolingual native speaking English students who struggle with reading, but these interventions have not been proven effective for Latina/o ELs (García & Ortiz, 2008; Klingner et al., 2006). Without evidence of this effectiveness, Latina/o ELs face the risk of receiving literacy instruction and intervention that is not intended to address biliteracy or the development of literacy in a second language and/or may be identified as having inherent skill deficits in English (Klingner, Hoover, & Baca, 2008; Orosco & Klingner, 2010).

Although RTI was originally developed and legislatively recommended in relation to evidence-based ways to more effectively determine and diagnose learning disabilities (beyond the discrepancy model) (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006a), additional research has demonstrated the potential of this framework to determine appropriate linguistic supports for ELs within a context of evidence-based, EL-centered, effective literacy instruction for ELs in Spanish and English (e.g., Esparza-Brown & Doolittle, 2008; Vaughn, Cirino et al., 2006). Because we recognize the potential of the RTI framework in improving literacy outcomes for Latina/o ELs, this report documents linguistic and cultural considerations that should be made when determining appropriate program elements, instruction, and interventions for Latina/o ELs within a multi-tiered RTI framework. These considerations are drawn from research-based, seminal work in the field, as well as from noted contributions of authors who are regarded as lead scholars in this area. It is not meant to be a comprehensive meta-analysis, but instead an overview of considerations relative to instruction and supports for Latina/o ELs. Specifics of RTI frameworks are also beyond the scope of this report; suggested supplementary readings, however, are noted as appropriate.

Key Considerations for Optimal Language and Literacy Support for Latina/o ELs

Preparing educators to build on the strengths and meet the needs of the highly diverse Latina/o students at the crossroads of disability and language acquisition in K–12 classrooms involves (but is not limited to) three fundamental, essential programmatic and instructional elements within the overarching concept of "opportunity to learn." These elements are cultural responsiveness, linguistic responsiveness, and considerations specific to program models for ELs.

Opportunity to Learn

Opportunity to learn is a foundational principle that includes considerations relative to the types and consistency of instructional opportunities provided to the student; if a child is experiencing difficulties learning, effective practice dictates initial examination of extrinsic (e.g., instructional), rather than intrinsic (e.g., skill deficit)—factors that may be influencing the child's ability to access instruction in order to learn (Klingner, Artiles, & Méndez-Barletta, 2006). With processes for *describing* an EL's difficulties (within critical considerations of instructional practices and programs appropriate for ELs) rather than *diagnosing* a disability (which situates the difficulty squarely and only on the child), educators can move forward to ensure that essential cultural and linguistic supports for ELs are provided and continually monitored for effectiveness (Hamayan, Marler, Sanchez-Lopez, & Damico, 2013).

Cultural responsiveness. Effective educational settings for Latina/o ELs must, at a foundational level, value Latina/o ELs as multilingual and representing diverse backgrounds. Undertaking an analysis of culturally responsive educational contexts, including instructional practices, provides a foundation for describing *school* factors that may be interfering with, or impeding the learning of, Latina/o ELs with and without disabilities. Culturally responsive instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1992) calls for educators to:

- Build strong and reciprocal relationships with students, their families, and communities (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012);
- Connect teaching and learning to students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll & González, 1997), thereby accessing and building on background knowledge in authentic and relevant ways;
- Create environments in which multiple perspectives and ways of learning are valued and supported (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Obiakor & Rotatori, 2014); and
- Engage in a critical examination of the explicit, implicit, and null curricula—i.e., the stated curriculum (explicit learning standards and instructional materials); the informal (implicit) assumptions about schooling and learning that show themselves in teachers' practice, e.g., scheduling more/less time for topics the teacher values; and the (null) values and concepts that are *not* included in the curriculum, such as multigroup ethnic studies or a variety of lenses through which to view past and current events. In so doing, educators can uncover curricular supports, hindrances, or outright marginalization that can either

sustain or subtract from Latina/o ELs' identities as cultural beings (de la Luz Reyes & Halcón, 2001; Hollins, 2008).

Linguistic responsiveness. At the core of instruction for students with disabilities who are ELs is developing language proficiency in both the native language and in English. Learning depends on educators' understanding and ability to tailor instruction to students' levels of proficiency across languages, programs, and services (Hamayan et. al., 2013). A range of such supports also benefits all Latina/o ELs as they gain both Spanish and English language proficiency. The following instructional considerations provide an overview of supports for ELs across instructional contexts and tiers (Gersten, Baker, Shanahan, Linan-Thompson, Collins, & Scarcella, 2007):

- Connections to prior knowledge, experiences, and linguistic understandings;
- Instruction geared toward the student's level of language proficiency;
- Adjustment of vocabulary level and sentence complexity as students begin and progress through their language proficiency development;
- Use of realia, manipulatives, and multisensory activities that provide ELs with visual, auditory, and kinesthetic opportunities for associating language with social and instructional concepts;
- Peer interaction to discuss academic content; and
- Instruction on strategies for accessing informational text structures as well as acquiring academic language and content knowledge (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzales, 2008).

In addition, the larger instructional context needs to be addressed via the following: a school-wide commitment to ongoing professional development, collaboration, and goal setting; and progress monitoring of students' language development, Individualized Education Program (IEP) goal development, and core academic learning (Cheung & Slavin, 2012; García & Dray, 2007).

Considerations specific to program models. There is a variety of program models that involve L1 and/or L2 literacy instruction for ELs to varying degrees and for varying periods of time. The following sections address program-specific considerations for linguistic supports for Latina/o ELs.

Biliteracy program.[1] Professional programming and practice for ELs must be based on understanding that L1 literacy acquisition can provide vital support for English language development (August & Shanahan, 2008). ELs who have received native- and dual-language instruction through transitional, maintenance, and/or two-way immersion programs, beginning in the early years of schooling, have been shown to exceed monolingual English speakers on academic outcome measures (August & Shanahan, 2006; Collier & Thomas, 2004) and on measures of cognitive control and flexibility (Bialystok & Craik, 2010).

Personnel in bilingual programs must have a formal understanding of biliteracy instruction, second language acquisition processes, English language development/ESL methods, and principles and strategies for cross-linguistic development and transfer (de Valenzuela & Niccolai, 2004). Furthermore, for Latina/o ELs with potential and/or identified disabilities, school teams must understand strategic models that detail

systematic structures for teams to use as guides in distinguishing typical language acquisition processes from potential learning disabilities for individual ELs (e.g., Esparza-Brown & Doolittle, 2008; Hamayan et al., 2013; Klingner et al., 2006; Klingner et al., 2008). In addition, teams must understand and identify the interplay of special education processes and individual student learning goals, linguistic implications for student programming and instruction, and principles of culturally responsive core instruction for ELs in biliteracy settings (Dray & Vigil, 2014; Hamayan et al., 2013).

Transitional bilingual program. Professionals working in transition contexts must understand cultural and linguistic considerations that are specific to the process of transitioning. Cheung & Slavin (2012) define transitional bilingual programs as those that temporarily "provide most instruction in students' L1 in the early grades then gradually transition into an all-English (L2) learning environment in later grades" (p. 353). Particularly disconcerting are data indicating that students are more likely to be referred for remediation or special education during the transition years due to changes in levels of academic and language supports (Gersten, 1996). Systematic and explicit measures must be taken to ensure that students are supported prior to, during, and after transitioning in relation to continual cultural and linguistic adjustments that attend thinking, learning, and expressing oneself in new ways (August, 2002; Hollins, 2008).

To that end, in addition to the considerations relative to biliteracy contexts mentioned above, educators working with transitioning students must understand not only acculturation relative to transition, but also the need to predict and support common second language learning issues (e.g., orthographic, grammatical, syntactic, and semantic errors) that students may make during the transition process (Klingner et al., 2008). Inherent in this imperative is continued collaboration in planning systematic instruction to guide and support the transition, as well as knowing students' strengths, monitoring progress, and providing needed programmatic and instructional supports (Artiles & Kozleski, 2010; August, 2002; Calderón, August, Slavin, Cheung, Durán, & Madden, 2005; García & Dray, 2006).

English-only instruction with language support programs. In educational contexts in which formal opportunities for native language development are not available, educators should stress the importance of native language development and cultural cohesion within the students' community and home environments (García & Dray, 2007). In relation to English language development, the aforementioned considerations relative to transitioning also apply in English instructional environments. Instruction relative to literacy skill transfer from L1 to L2, however, may present challenges if the EL has not developed written language skills in his or her home language (Escamilla, 2006), as the student will be developing these skills at the same time he or she is gaining English proficiency (August & Shanahan, 2008; Klingner et al., 2008).

Tiers II and III: Considerations for Linguistic Interventions

In instructional contexts in which some ELs either enter significantly behind their peers or continue to struggle to master literacy and language skills, more intensive instructional supports should be provided through *supplemental* interventions (in addition to, not in place of, core instruction). RTI frameworks typically assert that Tier II

and Tier III interventions are those that are evidence-based *for the population with which the intervention is implemented;* are more intensive and systematic in addressing the core skill difficulty areas of each student; and take place using a small-group or individual formats nested within optimal core literacy and language instruction in general education settings described above.

What distinguishes Tier II from Tier III interventions are the level of intensity (targeted and extensive skill development) and the frequency and duration (e.g., number of days/amount of time) of any supplemental instruction. Tier III interventions are designed for children who are considered to be at high risk for failure and, if not responsive, are considered to be candidates for prereferral considerations relative to special education processes (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010; Shapiro, n.d.). For some districts, Tier III interventions are considered special education interventions; for others, they are interventions for students whose needs are most appropriately served by receiving the highest levels of instructional intensity and frequency, though such students may not necessarily diagnosed with a disability (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010; Shapiro, n.d.). For broad and specific understandings of Tier II and III structures for ELs—implementation, progress monitoring, decision-making points, curriculum-based assessment—see Esparza-Brown and Doolittle (2008), Gersten et al. (2007), and Klinger et al. (2008).

Considerations relative to more intensive interventions for assisting Latina/o ELs across language program models must build on students' strengths and address specific skill needs. The following are recommendations for optimal language development across interventions within both Tier II and Tier III instruction to include targeted instruction, explicit skill instruction, and attention to cross-linguistic transfer.

Targeted Instruction

Targeted instruction involves clearly identifying the skill areas with which the EL is having difficulty and providing supplemental instruction that focuses clearly on that skill within varied content areas (Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2013). Identification of specific areas of difficulty can arise from curriculum-based assessments, progress monitoring, and/or, for students diagnosed with a disability, from IEP objectives. For example, if two or three elementary-level Latina/o ELs are struggling with decoding/word analysis, then their supplemental, targeted instruction should begin at the skill level with which they are having difficulty, and advance in strategic ways that build students' understanding and independence with the skill across a variety of academic content areas. Also, when possible, all teachers working with these same ELs should collaborate to address this similar skill area across settings.

Explicit Skill Instruction

Explicit instruction for ELs should be targeted to their areas of difficulty within a context of cultural and linguistic responsiveness. Learning objectives are clearly and directly communicated to the learner, and skills are directly modeled and taught with support for mastery and generalization of those skills across contexts. Furthermore, explicit instruction is strategic and systematic, meaning that instruction in relation to students'

skills and understandings is carefully planned, scaffolded, monitored, and adjusted as ELs gain mastery in them and more responsibility for using them across content and contexts. Explicit instruction in literacy skills in the context of language has been shown to be particularly effective in advancing Spanish-speaking, Latina/o ELs reading skills as well as vocabulary and comprehension (Vaughn, Cirino et al., 2006; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson et al., 2006; Vaughn et al., 2003). In addition, explicit instruction allows for high levels of teacher-student interaction, connections to prior knowledge, and frequent opportunities for student response (Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2013). It also includes opportunities for students to learn and practice self-monitoring and adjusting their learning when skills and understanding break down because, when done well, such instruction can promote metacognitive literacy skills.

Instruction in Cross-Linguistic Transfer

Explicit instruction, which helps ELs connect language skills gained in L1 to those they are acquiring in L2 (or other), is effective in optimizing language development and understanding (Durgunoğlu, 2002); it is particularly relevant to Spanish-speaking ELs in bilingual settings (though relevant as well across all language learning environments). Many ELs intuitively transfer skills such as phonemic awareness, syntax, or metacognition across languages. "Concepts of print"—such as the understanding that what one says can be written down and the awareness of the variety of print styles and purposes available—have also been shown to have strong cross-linguistic transfer (Dorgunoğlu, 2002). There is some evidence that letter/sound correspondence may also benefit from cross-linguistic transfer for Spanish ELs learning English, depending on the language of core instruction and literacy in Spanish (see Cardenas-Hagan, Carlson, & Pollard-Durodola, 2007, for specific considerations). Having educators assist struggling ELs in explicitly making those connects builds understanding of both languages and of cognitive flexibility and awareness; also, attention to more global as well as specific areas of transfer can increase ELs' ability to potentially recognize many areas of linguistic transfer and apply them across settings (Durgunoğlu, 2002).

Although there are many other instructional considerations relative to Tier II and Tier III settings, these three provide the foundation for any effective supplemental instruction programs or interventions for Latina/o ELs, as they directly affect language development. For more in-depth and comprehensive information related to interventions for ELs, see Kamps et al. (2007) and Landa (2009).

Conclusion

Given the continued increase of Latina/o ELs within schools receiving special education services, and particularly those with disabilities, it is imperative that educator professional development and practices continue to address the unique needs of this population. Systematic, structured, intensive instruction related to specific needs of Latina/o ELs at the crossroads of language acquisition and disability must take into consideration core concepts that specifically address language and literacy development nested within a cultural context that is relevant for this population of students. As noted

earlier, ELs who are not provided with optimal language supports (whether in biliteracy or English-only instructional contexts) risk disproportionate, and often more restrictive, special education placements, which continue to further neglect their linguistic development.

Our hope is that educators who read this report will commit themselves to advocacy, so that Latina/o ELs who have disabilities do not have to endure barriers, but rather are deemed equally worthy and able to benefit and contribute—not only academically, but socially and culturally—from being bilingual. Together, we can reimagine quality education within an RTI framework for our Latina/o ELs at the crossroads of disability and second language acquisition. *¡Sí, se puede!*

Notes

[1]Space precludes us from specifically addressing each model of a biliteracy program. Instead, we refer to any program model that promotes maintenance of both L1/L2 literacy as "biliteracy programs."

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