Putting research into practice in local education agencies: Guidance to support English learners with learning disabilities

<u>Panel Justification and Purpose</u>

In 2012–13, there were 543,916 English learner (EL) students with disabilities in U.S. public schools; this represents 8.5% of EL students and 13% of all students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

While the literature on learning disabilities and on second-language acquisition is relatively extensive within the field of education, less is known about the specific characteristics of EL students with learning disabilities. Schools, districts, and states struggle with this issue because there are no definitive processes for identifying and determining the best academic placement for these students. As a result, EL students are both over- and under-represented in special education classes, and their education suffers when they are mismatched with their academic program.

A recent review of research indicates that two main factors lead to inconsistent identification of EL students who may have learning disabilities: a lack of understanding among teachers about why they are not making adequate academic progress, and poorly designed and implemented referral processes (Burr, Haas & Ferriere, 2015). The review also describes key elements of processes that can help identify and suggest appropriate services for EL students with learning disabilities.

The U.S. Department of Education (2017) recommends that states should create a comprehensive policy for EL students with exceptionalities "based on current research followed by extensive guidance to localities." Additionally, the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to report on the number and percentage of EL students 1) meeting state-determined long-term goals, disaggregated by disability, 2) attaining English proficiency, 3) meeting challenging state academic standards for four years after exiting, disaggregated by disability, and 4) who have not attained proficiency within five years of classification. Therefore, state and local education agencies would benefit from research-based guidance on how to support these dual-identified students, reducing disproportionality and improving students' academic success.

Currently, ten states and districts have comprehensive manuals. Guidance manuals serve as one mechanism by which educators can receive research-based information to inform their practice. Additionally, the manuals can inform policymakers about how to develop or improve protocols for coordinated delivery systems for dual-identified students.

This panel brings together a researcher/policy analyst and authors of manuals from Connecticut and Virginia. The purpose is to present why current research is important and relevant and share lessons learned in the process of translating this research into actionable guidance for educators and policymakers. Session attendees will learn about the policy issue and research on ELs with learning disabilities, understand how two states developed guidance manuals, and have the opportunity to discuss challenges and successes when communicating and disseminating research-based information at the local level.

Abstract, Presentation 1 (Research and California)

Elizabeth Burr, Senior Research Associate, REL West at WestEd

The goal of this presentation is to 1) present research on how to determine whether an English learner (EL) student's academic difficulties are caused by a learning disability or by struggles with second-language acquisition or some other factor, and 2) explain why it is important that this scholarship be communicated and implemented and 3) share key information from ten state and district manuals.

The research literature suggests that answers to the following questions can help determine whether an English learner student's academic difficulties are caused by a learning disability or by struggles with second-language acquisition or some other factor:

- Is the student receiving instruction of sufficient quality to enable him or her to make the accepted levels of academic progress?
- How does the student's progress in hearing, speaking, reading, and writing English as a second language compare with the expected rate of progress for his or her age and initial level of English proficiency?
- To what extent are behaviors that might otherwise indicate a learning disability considered to be normal for the child's cultural background or to be part of the process of U.S. acculturation?
- How might additional factors—including socioeconomic status, previous education experience, fluency in his or her first language, attitude toward school, attitude toward learning English, and personality attributes—impact the student's academic progress?

According to the literature, a structured process designed to answer these questions using key data is likely to be the most effective approach to discovering whether an English learner student may have a learning disability. The research literature discusses using multiple forms of data—including standardized test scores, classroom observations and other nontest data, and parental input—as useful in determining the sources of an English learner student's academic difficulties, since each data type has limitations. Research also suggests:

- Providing professional development for educators
- Using pre-referral strategies, such as the response to intervention approach
- Involving parents
- Considering multiple forms of data; and
- Developing clear policy guidelines and data-tracking systems.

State guidance manuals are a key strategy for making the research accessible to educators. The panelists from Connecticut and Virginia will discuss how they incorporated research into their guidance manuals, as well as how the manuals actually influenced practice.

Abstract, Presentation 2 (Connecticut)
Marie Salazar Glowski, Director, Executive Coaching Program, Connecticut Association of Schools

Glowski will share lessons learned in the process of translating research into actionable guidance for educators, Specifically, she will address the following questions:

- What was the genesis of the manual, i.e., how did your SEA decide that it was needed?
- How was the research behind the manual identified and prioritized, for both research on English language acquisition and special education?
- How was the research distilled into actionable guidance?
- What was the dissemination plan for the manual?
- What kinds of professional development were offered to provide training on the manual's use?
- What kinds of feedback have you received on the manual, in terms of its user-friendliness and usefulness?
- Did researchers develop a study to explore the manual's use and potential impact on teacher practice?
- What were the biggest challenges and successes? Is there anything you would have done differently?

Background
The Connecticut Administrators of Programs for English Language Learners (CAPELL) decided to develop a resource handbook in response to the needs, interests, and concerns expressed by many educators working with EL students who were experiencing academic difficulties. CAPELL set out to provide educators with easily digestible, research-based information on the process and developmental stages of second language acquisition and how to promote a collaborative approach among teachers, administrators, and other personnel involved in the education of ELs.

Specifically, the handbook includes the following information, guidelines, and resources:

- Information on second language acquisition
- Frequently asked questions about second language acquisition
- Frequently asked questions from across the disciplines
- Avoiding over- and under-identification
- Recommended procedures
- Early intervention flowchart for ELLs
- Sample parent/caregiver interview for determining student's language dominance and past school history
- Checklist: Is this special education referral appropriate for an ELL?
- Assessments
- Translation resources & services
- Terminology

- Overview of legislation pertaining to ELL

The authors drew extensively from research in developing the manual. For example, the section on "Recommended procedures" for referrals to special education relies on research to explain the following:

> "The [referral recommendation] steps are similar to the steps for native speakers of English, with three notable differences:
>
> - At every point in the process, the EL staff should be involved. It is often the EL staff that best knows the strengths and limitations of the EL student, and can help determine if the difficulties the EL student is experiencing are excessive when compared to other EL students of similar backgrounds (Rodriguez- McCleary, B. & Predaris, T., 2002)
> - Because of the complexity of determining if an EL student has a disability, information should be collected from as many sources and in as many ways as possible both at school and at home. All the information together should be used to determine if a referral to special education is warranted (Artiles & Ortiz, Eds, 2002; Cloud, 1998)
> - A native-language assessment is often desirable at a certain point in the process. The school must ensure that the evaluations are in the language most likely to yield accurate information on what the child knows and can do academically, developmentally, and functionally, unless it is clearly not feasible to provide or administer. A true disability will manifest itself in all languages that the student knows (Artiles & Ortiz, Eds, 2002)."

When it was first published, the authors of the handbook provided training on its use for every district. Currently, the handbook is still a resource for the state and is on the CAPELL website, but no training is being provided. In her new role, Glowski works with special education administrators in the state. This provides an ongoing opportunity to make them aware of this resource and to encourage them to ensure that their principals are aware of it and promote its use.

Abstract, Presentation 3 (Virginia)
Judy Radford , ESL Professional Development Coordinator, Office of Program Administration and Accountability, Virginia Department of Education

Radford will share lessons learned in the process of translating research into actionable guidance for educators, using the same guiding questions as the Connecticut presentation, listed above.

Background
The Virginia Department of Education set out to provide local educational agencies (LEAs) with assistance as they identify and assess EL students for possible eligibility for special education and related services to:

- Create an awareness of the laws, regulations, and policies related to the educational rights of students who are EL students
- Explain the process and developmental stages of second language acquisition
- Promote a collaborative approach among teachers, administrators, and other personnel involved in the education of students who are EL students

- Provide consistent guidelines for instructional interventions, special education identification process, and program options for students who are EL students

Specifically, the handbook includes the following research-based information, guidelines, and resources:

- Pre-referral interventions for distinguishing between second-language and disability issues, and decision criteria for when to request a formal special education determination
- Elements of an effective assessment of second-language issues (dual language assessment)
- Elements of an effective special needs assessment for EL students, including criteria for when to use an English learner student's first language in assessment
- Lists of types of evidence and instruments for use in the special needs assessment
- Elements of an effective individualized education program that integrates both second-language and special education support services
- Responses to frequently asked questions about the characteristics and likely behaviors of EL students with suspected learning disabilities and appropriate educator responses
- A description of the second-language acquisition process
- Guidance for working with interpreters
- Guidance for communicating and working with families
- Sample forms and checklists for identifying and placing EL students with learning disabilities in appropriate programs

The handbook authors drew extensively from research (see, for example, Artiles & Ortiz, Eds., 2002; Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 1998; Larry. P. Task Force, 1989; Ortiz, 1992). Radford will present answers to the questions outlined above, as well as describe current professional development opportunities being offered to educators in order to guide their practice using the handbook.

Discussions

After the presentations and Q&A, the session attendees will break into three small groups, according to their biggest challenge (accessing research, translating research to actionable guidance, or disseminating research/guidance). They will discuss, and report back to the group on, their successes, challenges, and/or new opportunities in these areas.

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