Building Systems of Support for Classroom Teachers Working With English Language Learners

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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Building Systems of Support for Classroom Teachers Working With English Language Learners

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Increasing numbers of English learner (EL) students and corresponding pressures to mainstream them mean that districts around the country are facing new challenges as they adapt to meet the needs of these students. For general education teachers, the challenges stem from a role shift in which they are now primarily responsible for the instructional needs of the EL students in their classrooms. This qualitative case study examined the assistance and support general education teachers received to work with linguistically diverse students. This article addresses the ways these efforts can form a “system of support” for teachers. The analysis focuses on 4 districts that serve different populations and proportions of EL students. Through interviews, classroom observations, and document analyses, this article examines how these districts attempted to provide coherent, sustained support to classroom teachers at all levels and, in doing so, created systems of support.

Keywords: EL students, policy, teacher learning

Recent immigration from Asia, Latin America, and Africa is dramatically altering the context of public schooling. Today, one in seven students nationwide speaks a language other than English at home, and more than one in nine qualifies for special services due to low English proficiency (Goldenberg, 2008). Immigrants constitute the fastest growing group of students in U.S. schools, and many demographers predict that by 2025, approximately 20% to 25% of students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools will have limited proficiency in English (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Torodova, 2008). Considerable evidence documents the struggle schools and
districts experience in providing appropriate instruction for English learner (EL) students and their persistent and acute underachievement (Rumberger & Gándara, 2004).

As the number of EL students has increased, so have policy pressures like No Child Left Behind, budget constraints, and initiatives that seek to keep EL students in mainstream classes for the bulk of their education. General education teachers are, therefore, expected to assume greater responsibility for the learning and educational progress of these students (Harper & de Jong, 2009). As such, they need to adapt their instruction to address EL students’ learning needs and collaborate with others who serve them. Yet, general education teachers are typically unprepared or underprepared for this task. Large-scale studies have demonstrated that classroom teachers lack both the credentials and self-efficacy to work with these students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002; Rumberger & Gándara, 2004). Smaller-scale studies of EL students’ classroom experiences show that this lack of capacity can have deleterious effects on student progress, performance, and life prospects (e.g., Olsen, 1997; Stritikus & Garcia, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999).

This inadequate teaching capacity, along with other schooling conditions, creates serious equity challenges for schools. For example, EL students commonly do not have access to appropriate instructional materials and curriculum. Programs designed to meet their unique educational needs are sometimes structured in ways that inadvertently deprive them of high-quality learning opportunities. Alternatively, attempts to integrate students in structured English immersion classes without well-trained and well-supported teachers can rob them of the specialized help they need (de Jong & Harper, 2005; Rumberger & Gándara, 2004). Furthermore, schools and districts typically lack appropriate assessment measures to gauge EL learning needs, or to hold these systems accountable for students’ academic progress (Abedi, 2001).

Although researchers have assembled a detailed picture of the diverse EL student population and teaching practices that can support their learning, less is known about how schools and districts can support general education teachers as they implement these practices. In this study, we examined the assistance and support classroom teachers in four districts received to work with linguistically diverse students. In doing so, we explore the ways these efforts can form a “system of supports” for general education teachers and improve teaching for EL students. This article presents a conceptual model for how to support effective instructional practices among general education teachers who work with EL students.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF A DYNAMIC EL STUDENT POPULATION

ELs come to school with a wide range of native language and English literacy experience and skills, content-area backgrounds, and family and schooling experiences (August & Hakuta, 1997;}

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1In this study, we use the terms general education teacher and classroom teacher interchangeably to refer to elementary and secondary teachers whose primary assignment is teaching a range of students within a regular education classroom. Some general education or classroom teachers work in bilingual or dual language classrooms, yet need support in their instruction of English learners.

2By structured English immersion classes, we mean classes in which nearly all instruction is provided in English, but the instruction and curriculum are designed to support students who are learning English. Structured English immersion classrooms may vary in the amount of time dedicated to English language instruction and the grouping of students by language proficiency.
Freeman & Freeman, 2007; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008; Walqui, 2000). Research has highlighted general policies and practices that can facilitate the academic learning of these students (de Jong & Harper, 2005; Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-González, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000). The following conditions have been identified as leading to high academic performance for EL students:

A supportive school-wide climate, school leadership, a customized learning environment, articulation and coordination within and between schools, use of native language and culture in instruction, a balanced curriculum that includes both basic and higher-order skills, explicit skill instruction, opportunities for student-directed instruction, use of instructional strategies that enhance understanding, opportunities for practice, systematic student assessment, staff development, and home and parent involvement. (August & Hakuta, 1997, p. 171)

In terms of the specific learning needs of EL students, three enduring issues surface: the extended timeframe necessary for second-language acquisition; the challenge of mastering academic language, and the sociocultural dimensions of the schooling experience.

The Extended Timeframe for Second-Language Acquisition

Research in second-language learning has documented that second-language development is a long process, even under the best circumstances (Cummins, 1981; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). In a rigorous study of high- and low-performing districts, Hakuta et al. examined the length of time students needed to acquire school-appropriate English. In high-performing districts, they found that EL students needed between three and five years to develop oral proficiency and four to seven years to develop academic proficiency. Because learning English transcends the work of one individual teacher or even one school, a system-wide coordinated approach to language development issues is important to learning outcomes.

The Challenge of Mastering Academic Language

Language occupies a predominant place in learning (Lucas et al., 2008) and an important body of research has devoted attention to the study of academic language development (Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1981; Hakuta et al., 2000). ELs constantly interact with texts that are saturated with academic language—discourse that relies on language itself to convey meaning, is more impersonal, technical, and abstract than the conversational English they use in other social situations (Lucas et al., 2008).

Attention to Sociocultural Needs

In addition to the more technical aspects of language learning, EL learners have sociocultural needs that are frequently unmet by schools (Olsen, 1997; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008; Valdés, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999). Studies have documented the segregation that linguistically diverse students experience in the overall school context. Often these students are placed in low academic
tracks with the most inexperienced teachers and they experience pressure to forgo defining elements of their culture and language. Recent immigrant students often face challenges related to institutional racism in schools and social marginalization by teachers and peers (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008; Valdés, 1998) or non-equivalent “opportunities to learn” (Gee, 2003).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

It may be tempting for school leaders and policymakers to think the answer lies in creating better specialized programs (e.g., English as a Second Language [ESL] classes or specialized bilingual classrooms), but the fact remains that these arrangements cannot replace the large numbers of instructional hours that EL students will spend in classrooms taught by non-specialists. Although these policies and practices are intended to be inclusive, EL students may continue to be marginalized if classroom teaching is simply reduced to a generic set of good teaching practices for diverse learners (Harper & de Jong, 2009). Considerable research addresses the specific learning needs of EL students, and some studies have examined effective instructional practices for helping these students learn; however, to date, no one has put the necessary pieces into a framework for supporting general education teachers’ efforts to improve their instruction of EL students. A substantial knowledge base concerns second-language acquisition; scholarship has also addressed what EL students need in classroom instruction, and what constitutes effective teaching for this student population (August & Hakuta, 1997; August & Shanahan, 2006). Yet, as a highly visible report (Horowitz et al., 2009) has stressed, over-emphasis on research designed to answer questions about the language of instruction has limited scholarly attention to the nature of instruction that works and does not work in classrooms serving EL and native English-speaking students. In the same vein, less attention has been paid to helping teachers become adept at serving this student population and sustaining practice that is fully responsive to EL students’ learning needs.

Research on effective teaching approaches for EL students identifies a variety of optimal learning conditions. A common thread across each of these conditions is the central role that teachers play in delivering and ensuring quality learning for EL students (August & Hakuta, 1997; Slavin, Madden, Calderon, Chamberlain, & Hennessy, 2010). Several other lines of research suggest the nature of teachers’ professional learning in general, as well as the role that targeted preparation and other school supports play in building teacher capacity in this domain. How to coordinate various aspects of the schooling enterprise to best support teachers in their learning and delivery of high quality instruction is less clear (Horowitz et al., 2009). To begin, we briefly review what is currently known about how EL students’ learning can be guided most effectively. We also examine relevant research on the conditions that support teacher learning.

Conditions That Support EL Students’ Learning

Case studies of exemplary U.S. schools serving highly diverse and low income student populations (e.g., Berman, Minicucci, McLaughlin, Nelson, & Woodworth, 1995; Corallo & McDonald, 2002; Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990) support many of the attributes advanced by August and Hakuta (1997) and highlight aspects such as the challenge of delivering grade-level content in ways that are integrally connected to the goal of English language learning. In addition to the
broad characteristics of instruction and the organization of school programs noted earlier, the
majority of research has focused on what it means to teach EL students well in particular con-
tent areas (Janzen, 2008). Some of this research concerns literacy development, with certain
experimental studies showing a positive impact for explicit instruction in the components of lit-
eracy (August & Shanahan, 2006). Finally, clear articulation and coordination of services for
EL students within a school can lead to a more cohesive education (August & Hakuta, 1997;
Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins, 1997).

Taken together, these curricular designs and instructional strategies, couched within a larger
set of assumptions about teaching and learning, comprise a body of practices that could be labeled
“EL-responsive instruction.” Analogous to “culturally responsive teaching” (Gay, 2000), the field
has begun to acknowledge that teaching can be successfully adapted to engage EL students in
challenging content, at various levels of English proficiency while building their grasp of aca-
demic English and treating their home language and culture as a learning resource, rather than
a deficit. Such responsiveness is not a simple matter of the language of instruction. Rigorous
research has demonstrated that the language of instruction has limited impact on reading achieve-
ment (Slavin et al., 2010) and that the quality of instruction and teacher practice is likely a far
more important factor in student outcomes. Other studies have similarly highlighted the role that
quality of instruction has played in EL student outcomes (Horwitz et al., 2009).

Conditions That Support Teacher Learning

A variety of conditions may impact the quality of instruction and assist in creating the supportive
“school-wide climate” identified by August and Hakuta (1997). For example, without skilled and
committed leaders helping to shape teaching and learning, there is little hope of creating and sus-
taining high-quality learning environments for students. A number of studies have identified the
nature of the workplace environment and leadership support as making a difference in teachers’
ability to work effectively with all students (Leithwood, 1994; Rosenholtz, 1989; Seashore Louis
& Kruse, 1995). Teachers themselves identify features of the school as a support to their teach-
ing, such as a collegial school community, teacher collaboration, effective school leadership and
access to appropriate curriculum and materials (Berry, Smylie, & Fuller, 2008; Ingersoll, 2003;
Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

Professional learning opportunities can be an important vehicle for instructional improvement.
The images of effective instructional practice for EL students emerging in recent years have
prompted scholars and reformers to consider professional learning opportunities for teachers,
especially at the preservice stage. For example, scholars have begun to specify what preservice
teacher candidates would need to know to teach effectively in linguistically diverse settings (e.g.,
de Jong & Harper, 2005; Lucas et al., 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Wong Fillmore & Snow,
2000). Less work has been done on how to build environments that facilitate new or sustained
learning for practicing teachers. To date, professional development for teaching EL students has
tended to focus on beliefs that teachers hold about EL students and their families, as these beliefs
and theories have considerable impact on the manner in which teachers create (or limit) learning
opportunities (Orellana, 1995; Stritikus & Garcia, 2003). In addition, some professional devel-
opyment for working with EL students has focused on changing instructional practices to make
them more EL-responsive, and specific “packaged” models (e.g., Guided Language Acquisition

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Design [GLAD] or Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol [SIOP] have been developed to offer practicing teachers an initial set of tools. Activities that support the ongoing learning of practicing teachers in general highlight the value of experiences that focus on high learning standards aligned with reform initiatives, build pedagogical content knowledge, take place in or close to the sites of practice, build school-based collegial environments for professional learning, and offer repeated learning opportunities over time (Knapp, 2003).

Building on existing research, this study sought to examine how schools and districts attempted to provide coherent, sustained support to classroom teachers and, in doing so, create a system of supports that could influence instructional practice, and ultimately learning for EL students.

**STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD**

This research utilized a qualitative case study design with a strategic sample of four school districts in Washington state. A qualitative design enabled us to examine the nature of support as experienced by general education teachers and others working with EL students in specific school and district contexts (Merriam, 2009). The utilization of four districts allowed for cross-case examination by factors such as district size, regional location and the linguistic diversity of students served. In each of the four districts, three schools were chosen for in-depth study. Overall, the twelve school sites included seven elementary, three middle and two high schools. At each study site, a research team comprised of university faculty and graduate students conducted semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, and collected relevant school and district documents. Multiple site visits were conducted over a four-month period during Fall and Winter of the 2008 through 2009 school year.

**Research Questions**

The study was guided by two central research questions. First, what supports or “system of supports” do schools and districts put in place to help classroom teachers to work effectively with linguistically diverse student populations? The focus of the first question was on general education teachers who have EL students in their classrooms. Although students may work with a specialist for a portion of each day, it is likely that the bulk of the student’s time is spent with regular education teachers. The “system of supports” refers to well-intentioned efforts put in place by district and school leaders to assist teachers in working with EL students. The second question focused on what teachers, educational specialists, instructional assistants and leaders in such settings believed they needed to better serve their EL students. Understanding school and district leadership around these issues was an important aspect of the study.

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3Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD) is a model of professional development designed to promote English language acquisition, academic achievement, and cross-cultural skills. GLAD purports to train teachers to develop instructional strategies effective for the learning of English learner students, along with the theory and research behind the model. Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol, another national model of English as a Second Language professional development, focuses on teaching English language development through the content areas and, as such, is used more frequently with middle and high school teachers.
Study Samples

Given the purpose of the study, a strategic sample of districts and schools was necessary to attend to key factors at multiple levels of the system. We hypothesized that a support system for general education teachers might reflect policies, leadership actions, and conditions at classroom, school and district levels (Patton, 2003). A multi-stage sampling design began with the identification of sample districts that met three main criteria: (a) Districts were engaged in deliberate and carefully considered practices for serving EL students, (b) districts were located in geographically diverse areas of the state, and (c) districts varied in the languages spoken by their EL students. We identified districts whose proportion of EL students was equal to or exceeded the state average of 7.9% in 2008. A series of matrices was created to categorize districts by size, concentration of EL students, number and diversity of language groups, and region in which the district was located. We also examined trends in the performance of EL students in each district. As a final step, we sought recommendations from superintendents, principals and a network of National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) in the state. As accomplished teachers, the NBCTs provided another perspective to identify potential school and district sites. Of the four districts selected, two were located in a heavily populated and linguistically diverse area of the state and served multilingual student populations. The other two districts were considerably smaller and served primarily Spanish-speaking immigrant and migrant children. A description of the case study districts and their EL students is provided in Table 1.

School sites were selected in collaboration with district and school leaders in a purposive fashion based on the following criteria: the concentration of EL students (schools with relatively large EL populations), the level of schooling (to reflect differences in EL-related instructional challenges across levels), and the configuration of school-based resources and structures aimed at supporting general education teachers.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research team visited each school site at least twice on separate occasions. The time lag between visits, usually between four and six weeks, was deliberate and allowed the team to review data that was collected, reflect on and discuss preliminary findings, and prepare more targeted and in-depth questions for subsequent visits. Nearly 200 semi-structured interviews were conducted with classroom teachers who had EL students in their regular classrooms, EL specialists, school and district support staff, administrators, and parents. Interviews were arranged in collaboration with building administrators. The number and type of interviews conducted at each site were similar. District and school leaders were typically interviewed twice; teachers, support staff, and parents once.

Coding and classification of the data took place in the initial stages of analysis. The codes were generated from the theoretical framework, research questions and literature (Thomas, 1993). Examples of sample codes included: sociocultural context, student learning challenges, teaching challenges, official and actual teaching practices, professional development, curriculum and material resources, school collaboration, resource allocation, and leadership actions. Each author independently applied the initial set of codes to a random section of the data. We then convened
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regional Location</th>
<th>District Size</th>
<th>Percent Free or Reduced Price Lunch</th>
<th>Percent EL Students&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Major Languages Served</th>
<th>EL Services Offered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District A</td>
<td>Western WA</td>
<td>20,000 students</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>Over 50 languages:</td>
<td>EL push-in services all levels; sheltered instruction classes at secondary level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9% EL students; 72% elementary with majority born in U.S. at secondary level 77% EL students in U.S. &lt; 4 years</td>
<td>Spanish 39%, Russian 15%, &amp; Ukrainian 15%,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District B</td>
<td>Western WA</td>
<td>25,000 students</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>Over 50 languages:</td>
<td>Elementary students clustered with trained teachers and push-in para-educators support; at secondary level, sheltered instruction; newcomer centers for recent immigrants at beginning levels of proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8% EL students</td>
<td>Russian 35%, Spanish 24%, &amp; Ukrainian 15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District C</td>
<td>Eastern WA, rural, agriculturally based</td>
<td>3,500 students</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Elementary and middle schools offer one and two-way dual language programs; push-in services at all levels; some sheltered instruction at secondary level</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>28% EL students; 13% migrant</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>District D</td>
<td>Eastern WA, rural, agriculturally based</td>
<td>6,000 students</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>At elementary level combination of early-exit transitional bilingual, dual immersion, two-way enrichment program and ESL pull-out models; at secondary level sheltered ESL classes in some content areas and push-in support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12% EL students</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<sup>Note</sup>. EL = English learner; ESL = English as a Second Language.

<sup>a</sup>Washington state policy governing the provision of services for EL students is defined by the state’s Transitional Bilingual Instructional Program (TBIP), and is used to determine state and federal funding levels. A TBIP is a program that uses two languages, one of which is English, as the means of instruction while students acquire English language skills.
to refine the codes. The different patterns and themes that emerged from the data were interpreted within the broader social and cultural contexts of the school (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002).

**STUDY FINDINGS: A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR SUPPORT**

In this study we present findings on the supports the case study schools and districts had in place to help classroom teachers work more effectively with EL students. We found that the supports enabled teachers to align their instructional practices, receive assistance from EL staff and specialists, create opportunities for collaboration with other school staff, and increase their sense of efficacy and confidence in working with these students. The alignment, integration and coordination of the supports was vital in creating a system with the potential to transform EL instruction. To begin, we examine five dimensions of support that emerged from this study, noting specific challenges faced by schools and districts in their efforts to provide assistance. Later, we discuss how they can be used to form the framework for a “system of supports” for classroom teachers.

Each of the districts we studied faced challenges in making supports for teachers working with EL students coherent, coordinated, and sustained. Five dimensions of support were evident to a greater or lesser extent in all of the case study schools and districts, although not evenly or in a uniform manner. These five dimensions include support for professional learning, specialized staff support, access to appropriate instructional resources, a collective focus on EL-related issues and collegial community, and school and district leadership. In this section, we describe how these five dimensions of support were experienced at the case study sites.

**Support for professional learning**

The districts in this study sought to support general education teachers by increasing access to and opportunities for high quality professional development to work with EL students. These targeted opportunities focused on helping classroom teachers understand cultural differences, the nature and stages of language acquisition, and strategies for working with second-language learners. Their efforts included context-specific and locally developed training and materials, such as courses designed by district and school staff, or partnerships with a local refugee agency to offer classes taught by individuals from the language and cultural groups represented in the school. The districts also used nationally recognized professional development packages for working with second-language learners. GLAD and SIOP were two common programs used by these districts. Across all four districts, teachers reported that professional development had an impact on their teaching, as this example illustrates:

(It’s) like a huge light bulb just in how [EL] students learn and how much they need to be using language and how much they need to be interacting with each other and the approach of having content language goals. I mean it’s just—my teaching completely changed I think after that as far as EL students. (Teacher interview, District A, November 20, 2008)

In many classrooms, we observed instructional strategies known to be effective for EL students, such as student talk and discussion; use of visuals, charts, and diagrams; small group
instruction; collaborative learning; hands-on activities; and use of tangible items (manipulatives) in illustrating concepts (Goldenberg, 2008; Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000). Other teachers noted how they were beginning to see a positive impact on students as a result of the training, such as an increase in depth of understanding and student engagement, and the application of vocabulary to various contexts. In the words of one teacher, “[T]he students are picking up on the words and they’re using them even outside of [school] situations” (Teacher interview, District A, January 12, 2009).

One teacher explained how the district focus on professional development was supported in terms of time, materials, and staffing. As a result, teachers were able to work toward changing their instructional practice for EL students:

So many different teachers on so many different grade levels at this school have either been previously trained or so many that were at this summer’s training. So even at the beginning of the year when we’re setting up the classroom, we’re running into each other’s classroom—I just made this project, what are you doing? (Teacher interview, District D, December 4, 2008)

This example demonstrates how a coherent, aligned system of support for professional learning can strengthen teachers’ ability to effectively work with their EL students. It also illustrates how supports can be enhanced when a core of teachers within a school has received training to work with EL students.

Teachers across districts explicitly pointed to ongoing support provided by district or school staff to ensure continued development of their skills and knowledge of EL students’ needs. In one district, the Bilingual/Migrant Coordinator provided monthly “refresh and review” sessions where teachers from across the district met to review EL strategies, discuss what they had implemented, and create new materials. As one teacher explained, “[I]t’s so important for me to continue to get training and work with my team and others to continue to have the support . . .” (Teacher interview, District D, December 4, 2008). Another district provided three professional development days at various points during the school year for follow-up where the trainers worked specifically with teachers in grade-level teams at their school. In these sessions, the trainers modeled and debriefed lessons, and collaborated with teachers on lesson planning and goal setting.

Nevertheless, several districts conceded that with classroom teachers feeling overloaded by the demands of increased accountability, ever-changing curriculum, and a growing EL student population, it was sometimes difficult to rally teachers to attend additional professional development workshops or put in extra time to change their instructional practices for EL students. These districts found that when EL strategies were framed as being helpful for all students, general education teachers were more likely to engage with these supports. In describing an upcoming professional development series for secondary teachers, one district leader explained, “We’re not calling it EL specifically because we want to get buy-in from everybody, so we’re framing it as cross-curricular best practices for English language development.”

Secondary teachers in particular indicated that appropriate professional development was lacking, and indicated that they needed help with their EL instruction. One lamented, “Oh, how I wish I was better prepared. I’d say I take any sort of professional development that I can having to do
with EL.” Poorly delivered professional development discouraged secondary teachers in one district from pursuing additional training in working with EL students. Although carefully crafted professional development opportunities provided support to many teachers, providing effective training across all levels was a challenge.

**Specialized staff support**

In addition to professional development, general education teachers identified ongoing staff support by coaches and paraprofessionals as central to their work with EL students, particularly at the elementary level. Use of support staff in these schools was strategic and focused on instructional improvement. For example, elementary teachers in all four districts described how coaching impacted their instruction of EL students. A teacher in District A explained, “[T]he more embedded the practices become, the more important they become to you.” The staff at this school, guided by the coach and principal, had the goal of implementing the same one or two ESL strategies in each classroom each trimester. The coach not only facilitated the creation of these goals, but actively worked with the teachers to implement the strategies, providing modeling, materials, and ideas for modifying units.

Para-educators also were a support, and in most schools, teachers described “highly qualified” para-educators who spoke the students’ languages and had received (or were receiving) training in working with EL students. Para-educators worked with EL students in small groups, one-on-one, or within the context of whole class instruction. Teachers frequently mentioned the role they often play as a communication liaison with parents and families; bilingual para-educators often provided translation support for written documents, parent conferences and phone calls home. In some cases, specialized staff support was provided through ESL specialists, office personnel or district staff who coordinated these services. In one district serving a multilingual population, translation support was provided by a partnership with an outside organization specializing in work with immigrant and refugee families.

The role of support staff serving EL students has shifted dramatically in some schools, changing the nature of teachers’ relationships with other staff members. In some cases, para-educators, ESL specialists, and coaches had moved from the margins to serve a variety of support roles within general education classrooms. Effective integration of such support professionals required planning and coordination, and teachers acknowledged time and scheduling constraints. In secondary schools in particular, staff support and collaboration were often in place, but working with EL students was not a priority. One high school teacher explained: “It seems like they’re more focused towards like the math or science or the content area, more than ways to help these [EL] kids” (Teacher interview, District C, November 13, 2009). The structure of high schools also limited collaboration, and several teachers reported receiving push-in support for their EL students from para-educators, but rarely collaborated with them. This had the effect of leaving instruction of EL students primarily in the hands of para-educators and ESL specialists. Secondary teachers were aware of the existence of ESL specialists, but not necessarily what they did, nor did they identify them as a source of support. A few teachers described the ESL specialist as too “overwhelmed” and busy to work with teachers. Even in these districts with a deliberate focus on serving EL students, the supports did not effectively address all teaching needs.
Appropriate instructional resources

Intentional efforts on the part of schools and districts increased teachers’ access to curriculum and materials appropriate for EL students and improved curricular connections across grades. Teachers in some districts reported having access to sets of literature books, nonfiction materials, and trade books as “very rich language” supports for the literacy instruction of their EL students. In several schools, teachers mentioned access to libraries of native language materials from which to select materials for their EL students. One elementary teacher explained how she was able to utilize her district’s library to help a newcomer student who could read in Spanish, but was still at the beginning stages of learning to read in English:

... We have a huge EL library in the district and they have Russian books and Spanish books and Vietnamese books, and I just went and brought those books in and she read during—while the kids were in their book boxes, she had Spanish books. And she just took off. (Teacher interview, District B, October 15, 2008)

In some schools, teachers made connections within and across grades in developing, adapting, or implementing curriculum for EL students. Curricula and professional development were aligned in a district-wide effort to improve math instruction for EL students. In two elementary schools, vertical team meetings, composed of teachers representing different grade levels, served as a venue through which to discuss the curriculum.

Secondary teachers often did not have the same level of access to grade- and subject-specific curricular support and materials for their EL students. Due to complex concepts and language encountered in high school content classes, finding grade-appropriate texts and materials at the right level of English for EL students was difficult. Aligning professional development and curricula was also seen as a challenge by some elementary and secondary teachers. In response to these challenges, one district chose to focus on developing a secondary level EL curriculum using the expertise of its ESL teachers. An ESL teacher in this district stated the following:

[B]ased on our needs, we work during summertime creating our curriculum. ... We need to do something to make it work for us. ... One teacher from the high school participated in the program, in that work, and now... during our teaching year, we meet together and we discuss the curriculum and what’s good, you know what needs to be improved and so on. (ESL teacher interview, District B, October 16, 2008)

This illustrates how one high school sought to facilitate curricular alignment.

Collective focus on EL-related issues and collegial community

Teachers frequently spoke of the importance of collegial community and the support that colleagues gave each other in the form of sharing knowledge and materials, planning, and moral support. As one teacher summed up, “We really use each other as resources too” (Teacher interview, District A, November 20, 2008). Opportunities for collaboration were often related to ongoing professional development efforts and supported changes in instructional practice. As one teacher noted, “[B]eing able to share ideas and going okay, what works, what doesn’t work and kind of just that support piece has been huge” (Teacher interview, District D, January 15, 2009).
Teachers in schools with a collaborative and student-focused culture talked about the hard-
working, supportive team atmosphere as something special about their schools and related it to
their ability to access other supports such as professional development and materials for their
instruction. Therefore, teachers utilized their school community to put into practice what they
had learned, which, in turn, strengthened the collaborative school culture.

Working in collaborative teams also facilitated ongoing communication among teachers
around EL instruction, which helped teachers problem solve and make informed decisions about
how to meet their students’ needs (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Morgan, 2007). One teacher
described the following:

Almost, I think all of us have taken, just about all of us, have taken the GLAD training—we’ve had a
lot of other trainings and things through the district. So we’re pretty open about saying wow, I have
this kid, it’s not working. (Teacher interview, District B, January 15, 2009)

In some cases, formal Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were recognized as a source
of instructional support, but teachers noted that this was not where EL student learning was typ-
ically discussed. In schools where learning communities were just being established or were in
their second year of implementation, the focus was on developing collaborative relationships
among the teachers and staff and incorporating PLCs into the school culture. In other schools,
the focus of staff collaboration was on implementing school-wide improvement initiatives or the
adoption of new curricula. Teachers indicated that collaboration time was used to discuss the
learning needs of all struggling students, not specifically EL students. Whatever the content of
these interactions, a positive and collaborative school culture, in combination with other support-
ing structures, enabled teachers to work more effectively as a team. Only sometimes did it enable
them to focus instruction for ELs.

At one school, supports such as para-educator push-in instruction of EL students were orga-
nized by teachers and para-educators, using student data and student needs and guided by an
“overlying philosophy . . . that we deliver the services to the kids where the kids are,” accord-
ing to the building principal. Training was determined and guided by the school’s professional
development group, composed mainly of teachers, and all teachers gave input to the schedul-
ing of professional development sessions, as well as the structuring of collaboration time. Thus,
teachers at this school were deeply engaged in a coherent system that was structured around their
professional needs and the needs of their EL students.

School and district leadership

Leadership at both school and district levels played a crucial role in creating, aligning, and
sustaining supports for classroom teachers working with EL students. Leaders sought greater
coherence by focusing on the importance of providing high quality instruction for EL students
across all levels of the system. Many leaders in these districts also worked to create a blend of
EL-related initiatives at both school and district levels. Alignment, integration and coordination
was seen as critical to the sustainability of supports.
Resolving fragmentation by focusing on high-quality instruction for EL students. Developing a strong support system for general education teachers implies agreement on the importance of providing high quality instruction for all EL students. As one district leader explained, the first step was awareness: “There is a good growing awareness on the part of people in buildings from principals to teachers about the need to be knowledgeable about serving EL students” (Administrator interview, District D, November 7, 2008). In several of the districts, district-level leaders were in full agreement and pushing for changes necessary to drive reforms for high quality instruction into the classroom. In other districts, however, not everyone was fully engaged. As one district leader described, “I just don’t think there was a deep understanding on the part of leadership at the district office, and a lack of understanding translates into lack of action or inaction” (Administrator interview, District B, October 15, 2008). Without attention to this issue, leadership efforts to serve a segment of the student population can easily become compartmentalized, typically left to the ESL or bilingual coordinator or director of state and federal categorical programs.

Leadership at the central office played a prominent role in how each district organized supports for classroom teachers. In districts in which the EL program was placed under the umbrella of “special programs” and was not included in general decisions regarding curriculum and instruction, district leaders found it difficult to develop comprehensive systems of support that could impact the general education classroom. In the words of one district administrator, “Our EL department at the district level is not at the same table with general ed and curriculum...I think there is a direct correlation between how we are structured at the top and how the work we do throughout the system is or isn’t what we say we want it to be” (Administrator interview, District B, January 15, 2009). District leaders who emphasized the needs of EL students were frustrated by the marginalization of these issues with regard to program structure, funding, and professional development efforts: “We have functioned...and I think to a great degree, continue to function in silos...we still are structured in a way that we’re not about all kids” (Administrator interview, District B, October 15, 2008).

Leveraging data was a key tool used by leaders to bring EL issues away from the margins. Leaders in the case study districts were strong advocates of using disaggregated data to identify areas for improvement, shape training and professional development and support a culture of learning. In one elementary school, a learning specialist kept a “data wall” in her office that the staff used to track the progress of every student in the school. Students’ individual cards were moved across the wall as various kinds of assessment data showed them progressing toward meeting or exceeding grade-level expectations in reading and math. No EL student could remain invisible in this setting. Another district used the three-tiered Response to Intervention model to look at the type of instructional support and interventions needed to meet the needs of every child. Teachers met with a team of specialists and administrators at least three times each year to discuss the progress of each child and determine if the current supports were adequate.

Several district leaders described how failing to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) was a wakeup call for them, as they began to discover which groups of students weren’t reaching standards on state assessments. A district leader described how the initial announcement of several schools not meeting AYP moved from “hand-wringing” to frank discussions about the instructional needs of special populations:
[I]t does force us to look more carefully at our data. So we’re now really having explicit conversations around equity. The superintendent has made disaggregated data part of the district work plan. That wasn’t happening a couple of years ago. (Administrator interview, District B, October 15, 2008)

Creating a blend of district- and school-level leadership initiatives. In the case study sites, we found examples of supports initiated at the district and individual school level. Engaging district and school leaders in a mutual and reinforcing blending of efforts that set direction and mobilized resources proved to be important. In these initiatives, both the locus of decision making and communication between district and school personnel were key to the effectiveness and degree of ownership of the supports and services.

In District C, for example, strong district-level leadership was evident in the design of the bilingual program and supports for classroom teachers, but teacher buy-in at the schools varied. Although some teachers were appreciative of the support they received, their receptiveness to supports was uneven and appeared to be related to their knowledge of various district initiatives to support EL students. Across the district sites, the biggest obstacle was often that staff did not realize they needed support. Once teachers recognized they needed help, they were more responsive. A district EL coordinator described one school’s experience in working with EL students:

They see their need for support. . . . They see their limits in understanding how to work with this population. . . . They see their limits in their own teaching. The numbers get so big that they realize they can’t ignore these kids anymore—that they have to figure out how to help them and they don’t have a clue. (ESL coordinator interview, District A, September 20, 2008)

Clearly, the nature of the relations between individual schools and central office leaders can have an effect on the degree to which supports influence instruction for EL students. Two conditions seemed to set the stage for the development of a system of supports that had the potential to transform EL instruction in general education classroom in these districts. This included having the ESL department as a key player in decision-making at the district level, and two-way communication between schools and district offices.

In schools and districts where systems of support were integrated and coordinated, there was a clear focus on instruction for EL students. Teachers were able to articulate what supports they received, describe how they could leverage them, and identify areas for improvement. When supports were not well-articulated, integrated or aligned with other school initiatives, they sometimes resulted in confusion and incoherence rather than support for instruction:

There are just so many things that are being thrown at us to try this, try this, that I don’t feel like we are able to really get in and do what we need to do before somebody says well let’s do this. So we’ve got all of these strategies and stuff that they’re asking without enough prep time, enough time to give it a chance to work, for us to work out the kinks. (Teacher interview, District C, October 1, 2008)

In other cases, teachers were either not aware of supports or did not know how to leverage the coaching, specialized language support, collaboration time and professional development in useful ways. This suggests that creating and integrating supports for the instruction of EL students is complicated and requires careful consideration of school structures and other ongoing learning initiatives.
Creating a System of Supports

This article presents a new model for understanding how to support general education teachers’ in their work with EL students based on building a system of supports. The dimensions of support include, first, *opportunities for classroom-focused professional learning* (e.g., from coaches and others who come into the classroom, or in other forms of high-quality professional development) that target the adaptation of instruction for diverse linguistic learning needs. In this regard, having a critical mass of teachers with common training around EL issues can help facilitate collaboration and instructional improvement efforts within a school. Second, *the presence and extent of specialized staff support in the classroom*—such as bilingual paraprofessionals, ESL or bilingual specialists—offer general education teachers particular kinds of support. Creating regular occasions for joint work on EL issues enables teachers to think through with others how best to serve their student population. Third, general education teachers are helped by the availability and appropriateness of *instructional materials and other resources* that address specific EL-related instructional concerns and provide a meaningful connection to curriculum. Finally, the existence of a *collective focus on serving EL learning needs*, which reflects a more generalized collaborative culture within the school and district, can provide an important source of support.

These streams of teacher support activities and the coherence among them are in large measure a function of *leadership actions* taken by school and district administrators, program coordinators, specialists and others. Leadership actions, such as a focus on serving language needs as a system-wide priority and responsibility, creating a blend of district and school initiatives, and efforts to align, coordinate and articulate the various support activities, play an important role in building systems of support for classroom teachers.

Figure 1 illustrates how these five dimensions interact within the classroom, school and district context to create a system of supports for classroom teachers. A system of supports refers to a set of intentional and differentiated efforts focused on the continuous improvement of teacher and student learning. EL-specific supports for classroom teachers may be situated at a variety of levels (e.g., state, district, and school). These supports can go a long way toward building teachers’ confidence and encouraging ongoing learning, thus enabling educators to do their best work in guiding the learning of EL students.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The findings from this study offer potential implications for educators at multiple levels of the system. EL students bring special needs to the general education classroom that pose instructional challenges for teachers. Many classroom teachers are currently not well equipped to fully meet those challenges and, therefore, could benefit from a system of supports that provide them with explicit assistance to learn about effective, appropriately differentiated instruction for EL students. Supporting classroom teachers who work with EL students must be part of any

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4For this study, we primarily focus on supports provided at school and district levels. The bilingual or English as a Second Language program model adopted by a school or district may provide assistance to general education teachers; but, for the purposes of this study, the program model was considered only one part of a broader framework of supports.
effort to address their long-term learning needs and improve academic performance (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005).

The form and focus of these supports necessarily vary according to the demographics of the district, the presence or absence of ESL or bilingual programs, and the nature of the school and district community. For example, in the case study districts where EL student populations were linguistically and culturally diverse, most of the supports focused on building capacity to teach EL students through extensive, ongoing professional development and coaching to facilitate implementation of the strategies and development of materials. In these districts, staff support, professional development, and collaboration were organized around a cohesive, shared focus on EL learning and achievement at the district and elementary school levels.

The two case study districts serving primarily bilingual populations developed different aspects of their support systems. These districts’ EL student populations were almost exclusively native Spanish-speaking and as such, they implemented a combination of programs including early-exit transitional bilingual, dual language, and content ESL models. Due to limited resources and a developing awareness of EL needs among the teachers, one district strategically centered their professional development around the dual language program, as well as para-educator and Spanish literacy coaching support at the elementary levels. The other district capitalized on a
common focus on EL instruction and strong collaborative school and community environments to build the capacity of their teachers. Ongoing professional development provided through the district and school was aligned with staff support in the form of EL specialists, and bilingual para-educators and coaching.

Supporting teachers’ work with EL students is inherently more difficult at the secondary level than in elementary schools. This underscores the need for continued work at the secondary level to address the pedagogical and content challenges in serving a wide range of adolescent EL learning needs. Given that secondary schools are organized around subject-specific departments, and that EL students enter with a broader range of learning needs, teachers are more likely to see language development as separate from their instruction. This poses a particular dilemma for schools and districts in designing systems of support for classroom teachers while also meeting students’ needs. The challenge is to support teachers in assuming responsibility for EL students while helping them develop appropriate strategies and skills that enable both a rigorous curriculum and language appropriate supports (Janzen, 2008).

Different district contexts reveal the complex interaction of organizational, structural, instructional, and staffing issues necessary to support the learning of EL students (Zehler et al., 2008). The greatest benefit to staff, and ultimately students, exists when the supports are integrated and aligned with ongoing school and district learning initiatives. This inquiry suggests the consideration of a blended approach with regard to district- and school-level initiatives, which recognizes and incorporates the work of EL staff in supporting high quality instruction. In this way, school and district leaders can engage in mutually reinforcing efforts that provide direction and mobilize resources to support classroom teachers in this work. School and district leaders who embrace the challenge of creating high quality learning environments for EL students also encourage mutual responsibility by all staff (Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011). They also use disaggregated student data to inform the conversation about student learning and drive home the message for change in instructional practice.

This article presents a new model for considering how to support effective instructional practices among general education teachers who work with EL students. As educators continue to wrestle with increasing numbers of EL students, this study suggests new ways to envision support for teachers’ work and efforts to provide these students with a better education.

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