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THE PROVISION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES TO
DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Worldwide, millions of children are raised in multi-lingual homes or settings (National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness, n.d.). In fact, it has been estimated that over half of adults across the globe regularly use two or more languages. Although the known benefits of multilingualism range from greater economic opportunity to enhanced cognitive skills (Bhattacharjee, 2012; National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 2000; Zelasko & Antunez, 2000), with the exception of a few states, U.S. policy has persisted in promoting monolingualism, or preparation to move students from emergent bilingual to monolingual language proficiency in English.

In the US, official government terminology used to identify students who are learning English as another language, including Limited English Proficient and English Language Learner, has reflected a deficit-based view of those students and of the bilingual or multilingual potential they bring both to their learning and to the classroom. In contrast, using a term that recognizes learning the heritage language alongside or in sequence with English validates the heritage language as an asset. Thus, Dual Language Learner (DLL), now used by several federal agencies, is advocated by the School Psychology Educators of California (SPEC) and used in this paper as the asset-based term to describe this population. *1

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1 Although the terms DLL and English Learner (EL) are now found interchangeably in the literature, DLL is used in this paper to discuss students who are identified in schools as English Learners, as well as those learning multiple languages. Several agencies now use the term DLL. For example, the U.S. Office of Health and Human Services’ Head Start (HHS/ACF/OHS) (2009) adopted the following definition: “Dual language learners are children who are acquiring two or more languages simultaneously and learn a second language while continuing to develop their first language.”
Nationally, DLLs represent close to 10% of all public-school, K-12 students (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Percentages for younger DLL children reflect the growing numbers who will soon enter the K-12 school system. As of 2012, preschool programs nationally enrolled 4 million DLLs, or 30% of students in Head Start and Early Head Start (National Conference of State Legislators, 2016). Nationally, larger percentages cluster in larger urban settings, with a reported average of 15% DLL students compared to an average of 6% in smaller towns (NCES, 2017). In 2013-2014, the high school graduation rate for DLLs was just 62.6%, compared to 82.3% for all students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). In addition, a significant and troubling variation is found in the placement rates of DLLs in special education, which range from 0-17% (Hopstock & Stephenson, 2003). Razo (2004) found that dual language learner students are often overrepresented in special education or are not referred for special education evaluation because of the complexity of assessing students learning English. Some districts actually exclude DLL students from receiving special education services and exclude those identified with special education needs from receiving EL services (Sullivan, 2011). This, together with evidence of the disproportionate representation of DLLs identified as having disabilities (Harry & Klingner, 2014), mandates school psychologists’ attention to using a range of preventive and intervention services within general education, as well as to becoming better informed in the identification of and service to dual language learners with special education needs.

California has the highest percentage of dual language learners in the country, including one third of the Latino population, and over 22% of the total student enrollment in K-12. In
2016, California schools identified 1.376 million students as English Learners [California Department of Education (CDE), 2017]. While vast percentages of those speak Spanish (83.5%), significant numbers also speak Vietnamese, Mandarin, Filipino, Arabic, Cantonese, Korean, Hmong, Punjabi and Russian; 50 additional language groups are also tracked by the CDE. Overall, California’s track record on academic achievement with DLL youth has been unacceptable. The achievement gap nationally and in California has averaged close to 40 percentage points on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) between EL and Non-EL students on both fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math assessments (Child Trends, 2014). Furthermore, misdiagnosis leading to overrepresentation of DLL students in special education is pervasive and well documented (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Sullivan & Proctor, 2016).

In 2017, California overwhelmingly passed Proposition 280, overturning a ban on bilingual education put in place in 1998, and opening the path to instituting more effective bilingual programs. While not requiring specific programs, many schools will now move from models that emphasized Sheltered English Instruction and pull-out programs to those which use heritage languages alongside English. Because of the increasing interest and strong results in dual immersion programs across the country (Sparks, 2017), the demand for more bilingual educators capable of teaching with this model is increasing. The demand for more bilingual school psychologists should follow.

Dual Language learner students enter school at virtually every grade level. They range in histories of school attendance from none to full; come with and without disabilities; and often come from backgrounds of poverty and family strife or fear. In fact, the trauma that surrounds
the fear of deportation of self or a family member, or the actual loss of a parent due to deportation poses a unique set of social-emotional as well as academic needs for many DLL students. Yet, school psychologists tasked with assessing, supporting, and intervening with these students, their teachers, and their families often lack not only Spanish or other relevant language competence, but also a depth of knowledge of cultural variables, dual language acquisition, knowledge of programs to effectively serve DLL students, bilingual assessment, and research and evidence-based practice to serve DLLs competently.

For school psychologists, working competently with large percentages of students who are using or learning more than one language first necessitates an understanding the assets of bilingualism. Rather than considering DLL students as a group at risk who might need special help to catch up to monolingual English speakers (and whom we should test early on and possible place outside the general education classroom), dual language learners need to be seen as bringing assets into the learning environments of the school. Research over the years has shown cognitive, social, personal, and economic benefits to the students who develop bilingual proficiency as compared to students who do not (Tucker, 1999). Several cognitive advantages have been demonstrated, specifically, enhanced executive functioning (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Bialystok, 1999), cognitive flexibility, and enhanced attention and inhibition skills (Marian & Shok, 2012). Thus, supporting strong development in DLL should be a priority. Yet, our DLLs are all too often our students left behind academically, misdiagnosed and over- or under-represented in special education. Their families are less engaged with our schools, and their school completion rates are unacceptably low. As a profession whose mission embraces enhancing the educational experience of all students, school psychologists must acquire the information essential to become advocates for DLL students. They must understand the benefits
of, and the processes essential to becoming bilingual. The school psychologists’ role as systems change agents, consultants, and interventionists become paramount in assuring this occurs.

Consistent with this, SPEC affirms the critical need for school psychologists to employ practices consistent with supporting all students to gain equal access to education. Thus, practicing with models of multi-tiered systems of support, school psychologists must begin by considering the larger systemic variables that interface with dual language learners and their families. For example, they understand, can assess, and support interventions with factors extrinsic to the individual which impact individual achievement, from school community relationships to classroom structure and environment, and understanding how language acquisition develops. They employ culturally responsive consultation (Ingraham, 2000; Miranda, 2016) and research-informed interventions at all levels to improve DLL school and social emotional success. All school psychologists should be prepared “within the context of a comprehensive framework for nondiscriminatory assessment” (Ortiz, 2009, p. 668).

For school psychologists who will conduct bilingual assessments, and who identify as Bilingual School Psychologists (BSP), they must additionally possess sufficient depth in the primary language and culture to engage in meaningful and valid interactions with families and students, whether in consultation, in the development of classroom interventions, or in evaluation for determination of the need for special education services. Bilingual school psychologists (BSP) must be far more than school psychologists who happen to speak another language; ideally, they are specialists in the interface of language, culture, and education (Cook-Morales, 2009). Simply having a level of second language skills sufficient to administer a test in the student’s primary language is insufficient to remove the potential for bias in the assessment
process (Cook-Morales, 1994; Ortiz, 2009). School psychologists must be able to meet the needs of DLLs in a manner that is culturally valid in both assessment and intervention. This comprehensive approach to school psychological services for dual language learners leads to the enumeration of essential skills and information needed to do so.

**ROLES AND COMPETENCIES OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST SPECIFIC TO SERVING DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

In 2015, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) published its position statement on *The Provision of School Psychological Services to Bilingual Students*. This White Paper builds on that work and acknowledges the comprehensive role of school psychologists in service delivery to bilingual or DLL students. It is SPEC’s position that the school psychologist’s role in serving DLLs first be prevention oriented, attending to variables extrinsic to the individual through consultation and intervention prior to assessing and intervening with individual factors. Systemic consultation and intervention should precede individual assessment and intervention.

School psychologists use multiple levels of assessment, analysis, and intervention, ranging from system-wide to individual, to help schools support DLLs, their teachers, their families and their communities. They must not only know what data sets and what units of analysis to employ, but also what key questions and assumptions inform those analyses and accompanying actions. Although it is important to ask, for instance, why disproportionately high numbers of DLLs continue to be identified and classified with special education needs (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Sullivan, 2011), school psychologists must link that question with hypotheses about the school-wide environment, home and culturally based connections, and classroom methodologies, in addition to hypotheses about the individual learner. Being skilled
with a range of services, from consultation to intervention and assessment, and having sufficient
depth of information in each area as it pertains to dual language learners will lead to better outcomes for students, families and schools alike.

**Systemic perspectives and methods of facilitating change.** Pervasive under-achievement of DLLs, and concern for how to adequately serve them in classrooms and schools, demands that school psychologists bring awareness of the critical systemic variables that influence dual language learners. School psychologist must know how to access and use relevant data within each school system related to DLLs, and what systemic interventions can lead to positive change. School climate, family and community engagement, culturally relevant curriculum, and pedagogy that supports development of English must support DLLs, while valuing the home or heritage language. School psychologists knowledgeable in related research consult and collaborate in leading these changes.

**Family and community engagement.** Meaningful family and community engagement leads to higher success for DLLs. Personal outreach, knowing the issues of the communities, and assuring that families and communities’ roles as their students’ first teachers are acknowledged support asset-based consultation and intervention on behalf of DLLs. School psychologists take active roles in parent and community engagement and must know effective strategies for systematic engagement of community partners. For example, they develop awareness of current literature on highly successful community models (e.g., Parent Institute for Quality Education), as well as from the literature on parent and family engagement and achievement (c.f., El Yaafouri-Kreuze, 2017; Ordoñez-Jasis & Jasis, 2004; Thiers, 2017; Wilder, 2014). They learn and use research specific to their school’s predominant culture; e.g., Latinos (c.f., Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2012; Kugler, 2017). They assure access to parent resources in the first language of their
students. Finally, they consider and respond to the unique needs of the parent and communities from which their DLL students come. Currently in California, for instance, unique needs for legal and ethical information regarding the issues of immigration and deportation strongly influence family engagement with schools.

Language acquisition and models and methods of instructional practice with DLLs.

Assessment and intervention begin at the base of a multi-tiered system, in the general education setting. Working at this Tier 1 level calls for the use of research and evidence-based practice in instructional models and methods. Inadequate instructional models and methods can lead to misdiagnosis of individual learning problems; thus, multiple instructional models and their appropriate application must be understood by school psychologists. In addition, language acquisition itself must be understood in order to avoid misinterpretation of observed behaviors. In fact, language acquisition challenges may mirror cognitive, processing or behaviorally based disabilities, since dual language learner students may experience difficulty with oral directions, be slow to learn letter-sound correspondence, have difficulty concentrating, or seem easily frustrated (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014).

Tremendous heterogeneity characterizes the DLL group, with a multitude of trajectories of needs. Unpacking those issues is incredibly complex. For example, many students now grow up with conversational levels of oral proficiency, but with limited proficiency in reading or writing in their heritage language. For others, code switching (drawing some words, phrases, or ideas from different languages) may be an artifact of language development, or students may consider it as a social skill. Nonetheless, learning is still occurring in both languages.

Translanguaging, a relatively recent term, describes both a common social practice among multilingual students, and a pedagogical practice in which two or more languages are combined
systematically to support learning (Park, n.d.). Thus, school psychologists must have comprehensive knowledge of language acquisition, dual language acquisition, and how to support its development at Tier I through consultation and intervention, as well as how to differentiate difficulties with language acquisition from cognitive or behavioral concerns.

At the whole school, or first tier in a Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS), school psychologists’ understanding of stages of language acquisition includes how those stages may manifest in the classroom. They must know what practices, models, and methods can be used to support second or dual language development, and which models are appropriate for various populations. This allows for adequate assessment of whether they are taking place, and supports consultation or systems change to assure support of our DLL students.

**Research- and evidence-based strategies for academic interventions with DLLs.** The vast majority of our second- and third-tiered interventions currently certified as evidence-based have not been researched with many of the dual language learner populations served. Thus, school psychologists must be aware of how to locate research and evidence-based intervention evaluated on the populations served, whenever possible. In addition, school psychologists must understand that if interventions are not culturally and linguistically appropriate or sensitive, then the validity of the intervention must be questioned. Methods of cultural adaptation are being developed and should be explored (c.f., Ingraham & Oka, 2006), researched, and reported. In addition, culturally competent school psychologists systematically identify cultural assets of the student and family and use them as a foundation in asset-based intervention development to avoid all-too-common traditional deficit-oriented practice models (Aganza, Godinez, Smith, Gonzalez, & Robinson-Zañartu, 2015).

**Culturally relevant research and evidence-based social emotional behavioral interventions.**
Dual language learners and their families come to schools from around the world. The school culture may be unfamiliar; learning a new culture along with a language can give rise to behaviors which may be mistaken as issues of mental health. In addition, many carry traumatic backgrounds from their home countries or their immigration experiences which are likely to manifest in the classroom. DLL students without documents, or whose parents lack documents, often experience forms of trauma associated with fears of deportation or actual deportation of a parent or family member. These situations lead to mental health concerns for which little research or evidence-based practice exists. As with all populations, some will come with more familiar issues of mental health. The school psychologist must be able to differentiate these issues, and to be aware of culturally appropriate considerations in the delivery of consultation and mental health services. For example, awareness of trauma-informed schools and classrooms can support consultation and intervention.

**Depth in Culture.** Culture impacts how students and their families view the world, relationships, schools, and learning. It informs beliefs about the proper ways to behave (behavioral norms), from how to greet and show respect to familiar and to unfamiliar people, to how to properly relate to schools, teachers, and other professionals, and to learn. School psychologists can learn many of these norms through reading and through engaging with cultural brokers in the community. However, culture is also carried in the language; thus, depth in the language of the student and family, as well as opportunities for cultural immersions, will offer school psychologists more insights. When school psychologists have depth in the culture of the students, family and community engagement, behavioral and academic consultation, as well as assessment, will reflect greater cultural relevance, and thus a greater likelihood of validity. With depth in culture, school psychologists come to understand worldview, social relationships,
linguistic issues, including indigenous, and the relationship of cultural and linguistic
development with academic competence for DLLs. Because culture is carried within heritage
languages, depth in language enhances depth in culture. School psychologists who identify as
*bilingual school psychologists* (BSP) should have depth in this area to engage meaningfully.

**Depth in Language Skills.** Within a language system, worldview is expressed. Speakers of many
languages other than English think about the world differently than English speakers. Therefore,
school psychologists with depth in the languages of their students and families are most likely to
raise culturally informed hypotheses about student behavior; they will be better equipped to
provide culturally responsive consultation.

Cummins (1984) first introduced the concepts of Basic Interpersonal Communication
Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) to illustrate levels of
language acquisition. As cognitive demand increases, the need for CALP increases. Many
students who come to the classroom with a BICS level are at risk of being confused for fully
fluent (CALP) speakers by educators and psychologist unaware of the differences. At this point,
confusion can occur between language acquisition and skill or ability levels. School
psychologists with depth in the language, as well as depth in understanding multiple levels of
language acquisition and how they manifest in the classroom are better equipped to provide
culturally responsive consultation, intervention, and assessment. CALP is needed for working
with abstract concepts. Thus, the nuances of assessment, consultation and intervention in a
second language require the *bilingual school psychologist* (BSP) to have that greater depth – the
CALP level of proficiency – as well.

**Culturally appropriate assessment with DLL students.** Assessment for potential qualification
for special education services cannot be viewed as separate and distinct from a thorough
evaluation of systemic and extrinsic factors which often impact achievement and behavior for
dual language learners. *Bilingual school psychologists* (BSPs) first assess situational variables,
classroom context, culturally and linguistically appropriate instruction, and must differentiate
difference from disability to inform effective practice. Although students will not qualify when
the primary reason for academic difficulty is found to be language acquisition, the school
psychologist must not assume that because a student is acquiring a second language that they do
not qualify for special education services until they learn English. This differentiation is critical
and can be challenging, since language acquisition challenges may appear to be cognitive,
processing, or behaviorally based disabilities (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014). When assessment is
determined appropriate, that assessment needs to be done with close attention to cultural and
linguistically appropriate methods. To understand the nuances of the assessment process, depth
in language and culture is optimal. BSPs have the advantage of being able to communicate with
students and families in two languages and to understand how culture and language development
influences the learning process without mitigating factors like interpreters or translated material
(Ortiz, 2009).

DLL students have the right to be assessed in their primary language when such
evaluation will provide the most useful data to inform interventions (NASP, 2015). Whenever
possible, the school psychologist will use reliable and valid assessment tools and procedures
(Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). The issues of validity are
complex. As asserted by NASP (2015), nonverbal tools or tests are not guarantees of reliable and
valid data; in fact, they may be as culturally loaded as verbal tools. In addition, the norms for
many primary language-based assessment tools do not represent the DLLs typically found in
U.S. schools due to those assessment tools being normed on monolingual speakers who have
been raised in other countries and cultures. Because “very limited research exists on how U.S. bilingual students perform on tests in their native language… collaboration among school, family and community stakeholders will help improve evaluation practices and may assist in reducing… inappropriate interpretation of test results” (NASP, 2015, p. 2). Assessment of dual language learners is a process that should include understanding nondiscriminatory assessment practices and be performed by a well-trained school psychologist.

Summary

The demographics of the U.S. and of California demonstrate a dramatic need for school psychologists’ skills to shift to meet greatly increased need to serve dual language learners (DLLs). School psychologists are on the front lines of making systematic shifts in how schools serve K-12 dual language learners, to consult, and to support the development of culturally and linguistically appropriate interventions. When referred, school psychologists ensure that extrinsic as well as intrinsic factors are considered in assessment, consultation, and intervention for DLLs. School psychologists identifying themselves as bilingual school psychologists must bring depth in culture and language, and specialized skills in assessment to these processes.

SPEC recognizes and affirms the value of fluency in multiple languages and has delineated the important competencies that all school psychologists must demonstrate in order to support California’s dual language learner students, as well as those competencies appropriate to self-identified bilingual school psychologists. Implications for both training and practice are strong. The need to recruit and adequately prepare more bilingual and culturally and linguistically responsive school psychologists to the field remains paramount. Concurrently, providing training to support the development of new skills for current school psychology practitioners will further strengthen California’s capacity to serve its growing DLL population.
References


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