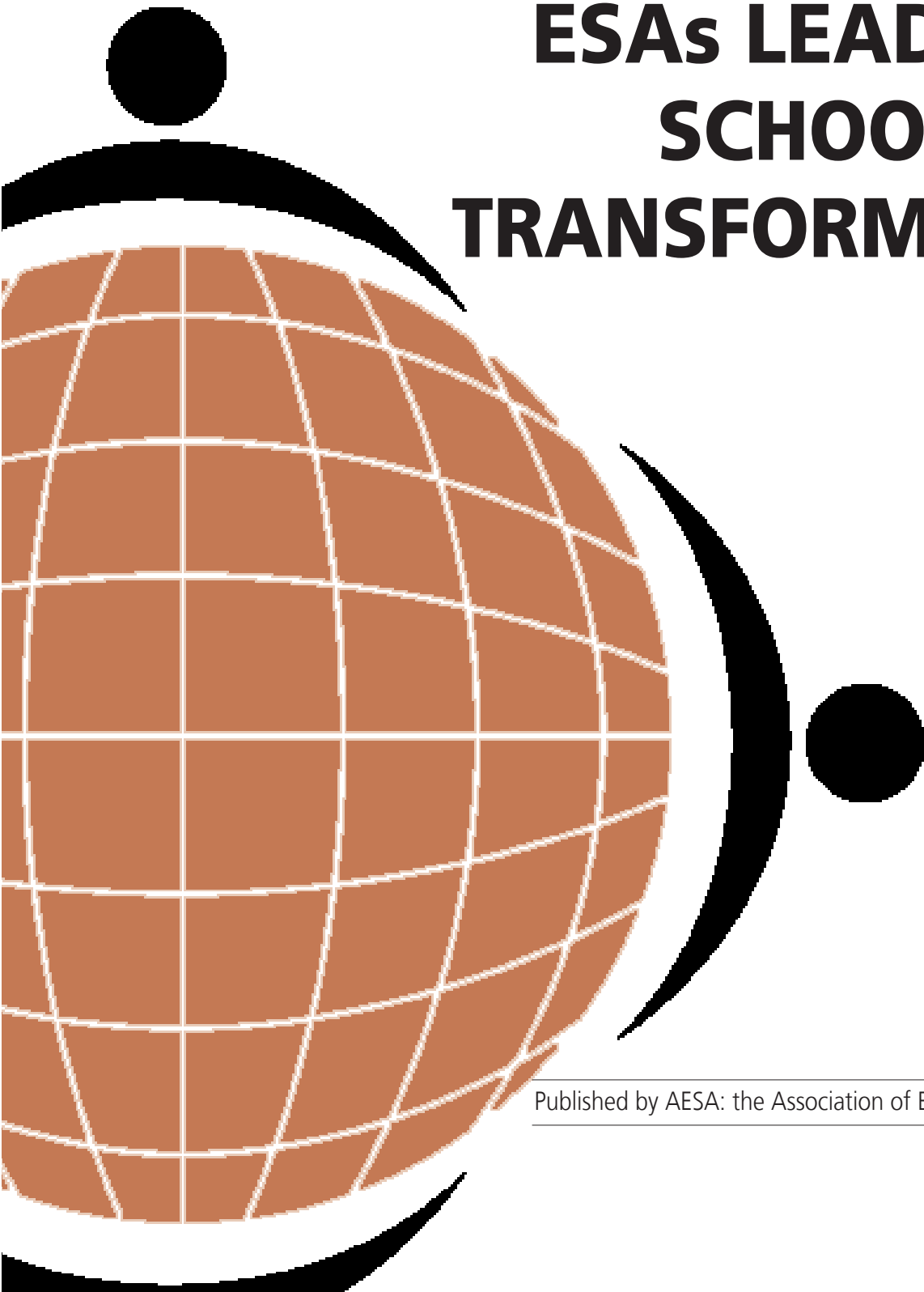


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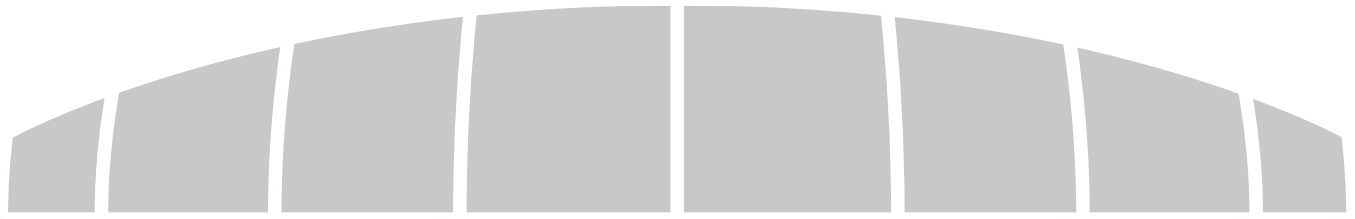
Perspectives

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Making Data-Driven Decisions Based on Effective Measures of English Learner Performance: How ESAs can Provide Support

by
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Background

Improving student outcomes is an important goal for all school leaders and teachers. This is especially true for educators of English learners [ELs] as our nation's schools have not been successful with this growing population of students. Many are failing, while others are being over-identified or under-identified as having special education needs (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Hamayan, Marler, Sanchez- Lopez, & Damico, 2007), and are dropping out of school at an alarming rate (Zacarian, 2011). Their scores on the National Report Card point to the significant gaps that are occurring between their performances on state mandated tests and that of their English-fluent peers. English learners scored 38.2% in reading versus the general population score of 70.5% and only 43.8% scored proficient in math versus 67.4% of the general population of students (Ballantyne, Sanderman & Levy, 2008). Whether schools measure their achievement by the high stakes tests that each state administers to its students, as required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, or by the national report card known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the achievement gap between the nation's English learners and the general population is alarming.

These outcomes speak to the urgent need for ESAs to support schools to think of more responsive ways for leading schools with and teaching ELs.

The necessity of this work is also punctuated by the rapid growth of this population. Between 1990 and 2000, according to Fix & Passel (2003), the population of English learners increased from 14 million to 21.3 million. While this dramatic growth has been occurring, the nation's total student population has remained relatively unchanged. Indeed, between 1990-2000, the population of ELs grew by 52% while the total population of the nation's students basically flat-lined (Fix & Passel, 2003). Urban schools that had once been dominated by monolingual American speakers of English have dramatically shifted to being much more linguistically diverse. Rural and suburban schools that had no experience working with English learners have begun to notice their presence. While most of the nation's English learners are

concentrated in California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Texas (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel & Herwanto, 2005), over 50% attend schools where they represent less than 1% of their district's total population and it is likely, given the rate of growth, that these percentages are also increasing (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). Thus, while schools are not growing in their total number of students, they are becoming more and more populated with English learners.

Who are English Learners?

English learners are not a monolithic group. They represent over 350 different language groups. Some schools or districts may be heavily dominated with students representing a particular language group while a neighboring district's ELs represent a wide range. While close to 70% of the total population of ELs in the nation is Latino (A Distinct Population, 2009), the primary language that students speak is only one means of describing them. There are other factors that are important to consider. Students who speak Spanish, for example, have distinct cultures and represent many different geographic regions including Central and South America, the Caribbean, Spain, and the United States. Indeed, most of the population of English Learners is born in the United States, including nearly 75% of elementary school-aged ELs (Capps, et al., 2005). In addition, many ELs come from collectivistic cultures where working collaboratively and duty to one's family, clan, ethnic group, or nation are far more important than is individualism. This is quite distinct from dominant U.S. culture where one's capacity to think and judge independently is not only expected, it is highly valued and rewarded (Zacarian & Haynes, in press).

“English learners are not a monolithic group. They represent over 350 different language groups. Some schools or districts may be heavily dominated with students representing a particular language group while a neighboring district's ELs represent a wide range.... Poverty is also a major concern for many of our nation's ELs. Close to 66% come from families whose income is 200% below the poverty level.”

In addition, some of the nation's English learners have had rich prior literacy and schooling experiences and their parents have strong literacy and educational backgrounds. They draw from their prior schooling and their home experiences and learn English more rapidly than do many of their English learning peers. Many wonder why certain groups of ELs seem to learn English more rapidly than others, especially because we are most concerned and even impatient about the speed at which some students learn English. At the same time, others are concerned about their populations of ELs who never seem to become fluent in English (Calderon & Minaya-Rowe, 2010). These concerns are not unreasonable as there is a large group of students who have not had much in the way of prior literacy and schooling experiences, and their parents are much less educated. These include: (1) English learners from countries where schooling is not mandated, (2) ELs enrolled in U.S. schools who travel with their families back and forth to their home countries spending several months, if not years, straddling their time between the two school environments, (3) ELs who begin school in one place and continually move, as is the case for many children of migrant workers, and (4) ELs who have attended school regularly in their native countries, but because the quality of that education was significantly less than that of a U.S. education, they are several years behind their U.S. peers (De Capua & Marshall, 2011). There are also significant numbers of ELs who have experienced trauma due to war, natural disasters, dramatic poverty, or another highly impacting stressor (Zacarian & Haynes, in press). Many

educators are not sure what to do with these significant populations of English learners who do not have the grade-level English or content skills to perform successfully in school.

Poverty is also a major concern for many of our nation's ELs. Close to 66% come from families whose income is 200% below the poverty level (A Distinct Population, 2009; Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010). Indeed, students who are learning English are among the poorest students in our nation's public and public charter schools.

Each of these factors is important for making decisions about instructional programming for ELs and partnering with parents in their child's education. At the same time, it is critical to consider the preparation of teachers and others who work with this growing population.

Who are Teachers of English Learners?

Most of the nation's teachers and administrators have had no training or experience working with English learners. Courses in key areas such as bilingual education, second language acquisition, and methods for teaching ELs and culturally and linguistically diverse populations are often taken as electives, if at all, in teacher preparation programs (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Hollins & Guzman, 2005). Sadly, federal law does not require teachers to be highly qualified to teach English learners (Honawar, 2009). This is particularly true for teachers working in general education, including elementary classroom and secondary subject matter teachers (A Distinct Population, 2009), as well as specialists, such as speech and language pathologists and special educators.

While professional development, including licensure programming, is an obvious solution and ESAs have a critical role to play in this work, keeping pace with the continuous growth of ELs is an extraordinary challenge. It is predicted, for example, that 56,000 English as a Second Language, commonly referred to as ESL, teachers will be needed during the next five years (EPE Research Center, 2009). While some schools do have teachers who are trained to work with ELs, many are members of the same minority groups as their students and report feeling marginalized by their colleagues (Cummins, 2001; Zacarian, 2011). Fortunately, others who have been trained are valued as rich resources and assets by their district (Zacarian, 2011). However, many are finding themselves overwhelmed by the volume of ELs enrolled in their schools and the volume of work that they are given because of the lack of human resources.

How Can We Make Data-driven Decisions on Behalf of This Dynamically Changing Population?

The advent of the No Child Left Behind Act required that all students, including ELs, be held to the same standards (Abeldi & Dietel, 2004). While this helped some schools to pay attention to EL students, it also led to a fair amount of criticism about the efficacy of the testing. Some argue that the tests are culturally and linguistically biased, unfair for students who are not proficient in English to be required to take, as well as difficult for educators to interpret, regarding the testing outcomes for this population of learners (Abeldi & Dietel, 2004; Coltrane, 2002; Zacarian, 2011). In addition, student performance on these tests is commonly disaggregated in two ways, by language group and the total number of ELs. These two characteristics do not provide educators with enough information to make solid data-driven decisions based on ELs outcomes on state testing.

The addition of the Common Core States Initiative (2010) should provide us with even more information about what we want students to know and to be able to do during their K-12 education to be prepared for a college education. It should also bolster our resolve, as ESAs, to support schools to think more seriously about better ways for making data-driven decisions based on effective measures of English learner performance.

An important approach to doing this is to have a more effective means for looking at the learning environments that are likely to yield the best outcomes for ELs and their parents in partnering in their child's schooling. Whether ESAs help schools to better determine the success of the delivery of a lesson, unit of study, parent conference, or school community events, a good ESA approach for assessing effectiveness is to look closely at four interdependent processes of what it is that learners must do to be successful- learn English and subject matters such as math, science, and social studies- as well as what a school must do for their students and families to be actively engaged in their school communities.

The four interdependent processes for language and content learning include:

- Learning is a sociocultural process. Learning must be built on and connected to our students' and their families' personal, social, cultural and world knowledge. It must also be meaningful and compelling so that students and families are invested in being participants. In addition, using collaborative learning and teamwork is highly important since these processes reflect many of the collectivist cultures of ELs and are an important means to engage in a high level and quantity of interactions.
- Learning is a developmental process. Making data-based decisions must be targeted to the development stages of English learning in four key areas: Listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
- Learning is an academic process. Learning involves building on prior academic knowledge to understand key content concepts as well as communicating in the language of content effectively. High quality learning environments must have clearly defined learning objectives and activities that are intentionally targeted to what students will do to learn the content concepts and use the language of content.
- Learning is a cognitive process. Learning involves developing a high level of thinking skills. These higher order cognitive thinking skills must be explicitly taught and visually displayed, and students must be given intentional practice opportunities to use specific thinking skills so that they may learn them successfully.

Using protocols for monitoring learning as well as school and parent engagement environments that draw from this four-pronged framework, such as the ones included in *Transforming Schools for English Learners: A Comprehensive Framework for School Leaders* (Zacarian, 2011), can be a highly effective means for ESAs to provide professional development and support of school-based collaborative teams, coaches, peers, and supervisors to improve and strengthen their students' outcomes. These monitoring protocols should include the tools needed to check that learning is connected to socially relevant issues, that it is relevant to ELs' personal, cultural, language, and world experiences, and that it is a collaborative process. Figure 1 provides a sample of a protocol for examining some elements of collaborative work.

The protocols should also include ways for examining whether instruction and school activities reflect the developmental process of language learning. For example, as a means for strengthening parent involvement, translators should be provided for parents who do not speak English. At the same time,

Figure 1.1

Point Values	Not Observed 0	Rarely Observed 1	Observed 2	Frequently Observed 3
1. Students have been instructed about the process of pair and group work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Students examine their paired or group process	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Comments:				
(Zacarian, D., 2011, p. 167)				

supporting the implementation of adult English classes may also help. In addition, protocols should be used to see whether key concepts, learning goals, and vocabulary are explicitly taught and learned. For example, observing that key unit and the day’s learning goals are continuously displayed in student-friendly language can be an important means for ensuring that students understand what they are expected to learn. Finally, protocols should include the means to see that cognitive higher order thinking skills are explicitly taught at all grade levels.

When ESAs provide professional development and support to ensure that these protocols are used routinely at the point of delivery, they can create, implement, and sustain school environments where English learners and all students flourish, families are more engaged in their child’s education, and our practices are transformed to meet the needs of our dynamically changing student populations.

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