



Multilingual students benefit when grade-level and specialist teachers collaborate

BY LESLIE M. BABINSKI, STEVEN J. AMENDUM, STEVEN E. KNOTEK, AND JENNIFER C. MANN

Most teachers in public schools (67.3%) will have at least one multilingual learner in their class, yet many have no preparation for supporting these students (NCES, 2022; Johnson & Wells, 2017). For example, less than half of teachers

(47.9%) have taken a course on how to provide effective instruction for multilingual learners (NCES, 2022). Recognizing this gap, school district administrators have called for more professional learning about instructional strategies for students who are learning English and academic content simultaneously (U.S.

Government Accountability Office, 2009).

A promising approach is professional learning that provides opportunities for meaningful collaboration between grade-level classroom teachers and ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers. This can be especially impactful in the early



elementary grades because oral language and literacy development in these formative years are integrally connected (Cain, 2015).

Yet while ESL teachers are often better prepared to support multilingual students' oral language development, grade-level teachers are often better prepared to promote reading and writing. Creating opportunities for co-planning and aligning instruction can bridge that gap, but research on such collaborative learning efforts has been limited.

The BELLA (Bridging English Language Learning and Academics) professional learning program (bellapd.org) addresses this need. BELLA, which was developed and tested with support from the Institute of Education Sciences (Babinski et al., 2018; 2024a; 2024b) in collaboration with teachers and administrators, aims to enhance teachers' practices and accelerate multilingual learners' language and literacy growth by bringing together ESL and grade-level teachers in a yearlong, job-embedded professional learning experience. Multiple rigorous randomized controlled trials show that the program is accomplishing those goals and leading to increased student learning.

PROGRAM CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

BELLA is a hybrid professional learning program that includes online modules, in-person application and implementation co-planning, and virtual implementation coaching. It is grounded in research on effective professional learning (Desimone, 2009) and Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022), including conditions for success, transformational processes, and rigorous content. ESL and K-2 classroom teachers participate together so they can bridge one another's expertise and instructional time to support the multilingual learners they share instructionally.

BELLA includes three key components to support teachers working with multilingual learners. First are evidence-based instructional strategies for literacy. BELLA is aligned with both decoding and language comprehension skills and is consistent with the IES Practice Guide for teaching academic content and literacy to multilingual learners (Baker et al., 2014).

BELLA instructional strategies support the concepts that strong

oral language skills provide the foundation for literacy development (Snow & Matthews, 2016) and that the relationship between the two is reciprocal, with progress in one area supporting growth in the other.

The second component is teacher collaboration. Given the importance of integrating language development with academic content, meaningful collaboration between ESL and grade-level teachers can facilitate their students' learning. BELLA facilitates the development of shared language around instructional strategies and an asset-based framework for supporting multilingual learners.

ESL and grade-level teachers can intentionally co-plan to align both how and what they teach (Babinski et al., 2024a). For example, previous research shows that when multilingual learners see academic vocabulary front-loaded during their ESL instruction, they are more likely to engage with it during their grade-level literacy instruction (e.g., Baker et al., 2014). Collaborative professional learning gives teachers an opportunity to build such scaffolds.

The third key component of BELLA focuses on instructional design that embraces students' cultural assets

and uses their existing knowledge to facilitate new learning. This approach, grounded in Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, challenges deficit-oriented views by highlighting the strengths and knowledge that culturally and linguistically diverse students bring to the classroom.

By intentionally planning lessons to make connections to students' experiences, backgrounds, cultures, and languages, teachers in both ESL and grade-level classroom settings can build on students' strengths and enhance their learning.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

Rigorous research has demonstrated positive impacts of the BELLA professional learning program on teachers' instructional practices and multilingual learners' language and literacy growth.

In an initial randomized controlled trial, 45 teachers and 105 Latino multilingual learners in kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grades from 12 elementary schools participated in the yearlong BELLA program (Babinski et al., 2018). At the end of the school year, teachers who participated in the program used more evidence-based instructional strategies, such as decoding strategies and strategies to support comprehension, for multilingual learners than those who didn't participate (Hedges' $g = 2.02$).

Furthermore, students whose teachers participated in the program showed higher growth compared to the control group on two subtests on the Woodcock Muñoz Language Survey-Revised Normative Update (Schrang et al., 2010): story recall [$g = 0.29$] and verbal analogies [$g = 0.23$]. These subtests measure students' oral language and the ability to reason using lexical knowledge.

A second randomized controlled trial (Babinski et al., 2024b) also found positive impacts. In a yearlong study with 39 K-1 teachers and 106 Latino multilingual learners from 13 schools in two districts, students

By intentionally planning lessons to make connections to students' experiences, backgrounds, cultures, and languages, teachers in both ESL and grade-level classroom settings can build on students' strengths and enhance their learning.

whose teachers were in the professional learning group experienced significantly greater growth ($d = 0.30$) in overall language and literacy skills (RIT score) as measured by the MAP Growth Reading K-2 assessment (Northwest Evaluation Association, 2019).

In addition, grade-level teachers in the professional learning group were more likely to intentionally collaborate with ESL teachers to plan for their multilingual learners than teachers in the comparison group ($d = 1.40$).

TEACHER INSIGHTS

Interviews with teachers who participated in BELLA illustrate the ways in which the professional learning program helped to enhance their instruction and support their collaboration with one another.

One theme teachers highlighted was the benefit of support for collaboration. Teachers described their collaboration as becoming more intentional, substantive, and efficient as a result of participating in the program.

One teacher said, "Before (BELLA), we didn't really collaborate. We'd see each other in the hall, and we'd say, 'How are (the multilingual students) doing?' And you might just talk about what (reading) level they're on. Now we're talking about specific skills and specific strategies."

Teachers also mentioned the culture of community they gained through collaboration and the sense

of being part of a team effort. One teacher described the collaboration as "two people working toward the same goal, a feeling of sharing responsibilities. So it took the burden off my shoulder and her shoulder that you're not ... (the) only one working toward the growth of the children."

Another said, "It has made me closer to the (other teachers). I feel more supported by them. I feel like I'm working with a team now."

A third theme from teachers was the role of implementation coaching. It provided time for reflection, intentional planning, and support and encouragement. One teacher explained how the coach helped her apply what she learned about instructional scaffolds to everyday teaching practices, saying that the coach "was crucial for (implementation) because the workshops are wonderful, but you get back into the classroom and you can't remember what you've learned and you're trying to pull out the notebook. She helped put all the pieces together."

SEEING IMPROVEMENTS FOR STUDENTS

Interviews with teachers also highlighted how they thought the program led to improved student outcomes.

One ESL teacher said that her students felt more confident because they knew she was working with the general education teacher: "I've noticed a big change this year in their confidence," she said, because the students recognized "that I knew what they were doing in their (grade-level) classroom (and that) I was communicating with their (classroom) teacher."

A 1st-grade teacher pointed out how students benefited from her increased understanding of what her students needed to be successful. She said, "They don't have a problem making connections; they had a problem accessing vocabulary. Once I unlocked that, it was like, 'I

understand how to teach you now.’ You need the vocabulary support to equal the playing field here.”

These kinds of reflections are an important part of teachers’ professional learning as well as a window into how the BELLA professional learning program achieved success. As district leaders prioritize the educational needs of their multilingual learners with evidence-based professional learning such as the BELLA program, we encourage them to continue tapping into teachers’ insights and evaluating students’ progress to understand the impacts of teacher professional learning programs.

The results of our research suggest that meaningful collaboration and reflection among grade-level and ESL teachers can enhance instruction and, most importantly, multilingual learners’ development of both language and literacy.

REFERENCES

- Babinski, L., Amendum, S., Carrig, M., Knotek, S., Mann, J., & Sánchez, M. (2024a).** Professional learning for ESL teachers: A randomized controlled trial to examine the impact on instruction, collaboration, and cultural wealth. *Education Sciences*, 14(7), 690. doi.org/10.3390/educsci14070690
- Babinski, L.M., Amendum, S., Carrig, M., Knotek, S., & Sánchez, M. (2024b).** *Teaching young multilingual learners: Impacts of a professional learning program on teachers’ practices and students’ language and literacy skills* [Manuscript under review].
- Babinski, L.M., Amendum, S., Knotek, S., Sánchez, M., & Malone, P. (2018).** Improving young English learners’ language and literacy skills through teacher professional development: A randomized controlled trial. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55(1), 117-143.
- Baker, S., Lesaux, N., Jayanthi, M., Dimino, J., Proctor, C.P., Morris, J., Gersten, R., Haymond, K., Kieffer, M.J., Linan-Thompson, S., & Newman-Gonchar, R. (2014).** *Teaching academic content and literacy to English learners in elementary and middle school* (NCEE 2014-4012). National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
- Cain, K. (2015).** Literacy development. The interdependent roles of oral language and reading comprehension. In R.H. Bahr & E.R. Silliman (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Communication Disorders* (pp. 204-214). Routledge.
- Desimone, L.M. (2009).** Improving impact studies of teachers’ professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational Researcher*, 38(3), 181-199.
- Johnson, T. & Wells, L. (2017).** English language learner teacher effectiveness and the Common Core. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(23). doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2395
- Learning Forward. (2022).** *Standards for Professional Learning*.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2022).** *English learners in public schools: Condition of education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.
- Northwest Evaluation Association. (2011).** *Technical manual: For Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Measures of Academic Progress for Primary Grades (MPG)*. Author.
- Schrank, F.A., McGrew, K.S., & Dailey, D.E.H. (2010).** *Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey – Revised Normative Update*. Riverside Publishing.
- Snow, C.E. & Matthews, T.J. (2016).** Reading and language in the early grades. *The Future of Children*, 26(2), 57-74.
- U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2009, July).** *Teacher preparation: Multiple federal education offices support teacher preparation for instructing students with disabilities and English language learners, but systematic department-wide coordination could enhance this assistance* (Publication No. GAO-09-573). Author.
- Yosso, T. (2005).** Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of who has wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 66-91.
-
- Leslie M. Babinski is a research professor at the Duke University Center for Child and Family Policy and co-founder of FigStar Learning. Steven J. Amendum is a professor and director of the School of Education at the University of Delaware and co-founder of FigStar Learning. Steven E. Knotek is an associate professor at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Jennifer C. Mann is a research scientist at the Duke University Center for Child and Family Policy. ■**

The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grants R305A120290, R305A180336, and R305A220311 to Duke University. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.