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Professional Development: The Key to Better Instruction and Achievement of English Learners

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Changing Populations & Literacy Crisis

The education system in the United States is consistently growing and improving, trying to find the most effective strategies for student success. One group of students that research has not significantly focused on, though, is English Learners (ELs), despite the fact that this population is exponentially increasing, particularly ELs of Hispanic heritage. The Hispanic population increased by more than 100% between the years 1980 and 2000, becoming the largest minority population, as stated by McIntyre, Kyle, Chen, Muñoz, and Beldon (2010). Short declared that the population grew another 51% between the years 1998/1999 and 2008/2009 although the entire student population across the nation only grew 7.2% (2013). The more worrisome aspect of this data is the fact that these numbers do not include ELs that were not identified because they passed their English proficiency tests, but still may struggle with academic English in the classroom. If those students were included in the population data, the number of ELs could double (Short, 2013). With the gradual explosion of this subgroup in our nation, it is concerning that educational research has not dedicated more time to examining strategies that support these students.

As a result of the lack of research, ELs across the country consistently underperform on assessments compared to native English speakers. Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Chinn, and Ratteff lamented how 34% of non-EL students in the eighth grade achieved proficient or advanced on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading section in 2009 while only 3% of ELs earned those score levels (2011). This should be important to all members of the system of education because the “underperformance of any one subgroup on large-scale
measures of achievement will negatively impact the average score of the entire sample,” as mentioned by Crawford, Schmeister, and Biggs (2008). This “literacy crisis” is partially the result of the prevalence of more sophisticated academic language used in schools when ELs are still acquiring basic English (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Chinn, & Ratleff, 2011). According to Short, Lidelman, and Louguit, another “significant barrier to success” is the fact that ELs are expected to take standardized high-stakes tests that use this academic language without any accommodations for their limited English proficiency (2012). Friend, Most, and McCrary also describe how educators who lower their expectations for EL students do not provide a positive environment that both supports and challenges these students (2009). All of these influences converge and present immense obstacles for English Learners who are struggling with a new country, new culture, new language, and much more in addition to the typical stress of being children and adolescents. The contributing factor to the achievement gap that this literature review will focus on is the lack of high-quality professional development for educators who have diverse student populations in their classrooms, including ELs.

Lack of Professional Development

Despite the large population of English Learners in schools, teachers are not typically prepared to utilize instruction that benefits and supports these students. As of 2009, only six states across the nation required collegiate teacher preparation programs to include courses focused on English as a second language (ESL) strategies (Short, 2013). Not surprisingly, these six states are those that have some of the most dense populations of ELs in their schools: Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania. However, all states are home to ELs in some capacity. Professional development is designed to train and update teachers
who are already employed, so they stay informed of best practices in a career that is constantly evolving. Unfortunately, in 2008, only 26% of teachers in mainstream classrooms with ELs received professional development concerning methods for ELs (Short, 2013). When teachers do have the opportunity for professional development, it is typically “one-shot workshops” that are not effective in improving instruction (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Chinn, & Ratleff, 2011; McIntyre, Kyle, Chen, Muñoz, & Beldon, 2010; Short, Fidelman, & Louguit, 2012; Short, 2013). In survey responses, teachers, even teachers with ESL certifications, strongly emphasized that they wanted to learn more about effective methods for ELs (Crawford, Schmeister, and Biggs, 2008). Although there is a great need for quality professional development, there are many barriers, including lack of leadership and resources, forced programs that require too much time, and more (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Chinn, & Ratleff, 2011). This lack of high-quality professional development impacts the achievement of ELs, which demonstrates the necessity for improving professional development opportunities for teachers of ELs.

Improving Instruction

In order to improve teachers’ instructional methods, they need access to intensive and personalized professional development concerning strategies for supporting ELs. Short described the analogy of educators’ need for support and training being the same as students who need scaffolding and review (2013). One method that is renowned and well-grounded in research is the Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol (SIOP), the origin of which is attributed to Stephen Krashen’s research of language acquisition in the 1980s (Crawford, Schmeister, & Biggs, 2008). This model is so beneficial because it “guides teachers toward teaching content to all students and simultaneously assist English learnings in developing
literacy skills” (McIntyre, Kyle, Chen, Muñoz, & Beldon, 2010). The most important factor in effective professional development is ensuring that teachers implement these strategies with fidelity (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Chinn, & Ratleff, 2011; McIntyre, Kyle, Chen, Muñoz, & Beldon, 2010; Short, 2013; Short, Echevarria, & Richards-Tutor, 2011). Previous research has demonstrated that intensive and personalized professional development with coaching and mentoring significantly increases teachers’ use of the SIOP model with fidelity (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Chinn, & Ratleff, 2011; McIntyre, Kyle, Chen, Muñoz, & Beldon, 2010; Short, Fidelman, & Louguit, 2012). One study in particular described how “the professional development activities in which teachers participated obviously enriched their repertoire of strategies” and encouraged teachers to be more thoughtful and purposeful in their planning (Crawford, Schmeister, & Biggs, 2008). This aligns with another study’s findings that developing long-term changes in teacher practices requires explicitly teaching manners of thinking and decision-making rather than merely providing activity options (McIntyre, Kyle, Chen, Muñoz, & Beldon, 2010). Another study established that teachers become “high implementers”, who implement the intervention with high fidelity, after two years of professional development (Short, Fidelman, & Louguit, 2012). These findings emphasize the need for high-quality professional development for teachers of ELs because their instructional methods in the classroom clearly improve when they participate in long-term, collaborative learning communities with experienced mentors focused on the SIOP model.

Improving Student Achievement

The ultimate objective for all educators is to help students and provide the necessary skills they need to succeed. Professional development is one of the key factors that can be
utilized to benefit the achievement of ELs. Several studies have found that ELs who are taught by teachers who implement the SIOP model significantly improve their scores on high-stakes assessments compared to ELs who are taught by teachers who do not implement the SIOP model (Friend, Most, McCrary, 2009; McIntyre, Kyle, Chen, Muñoz, & Beldon, 2010; Short, Fidelman, & Louguit, 2012). Seymour and Osana (2003) were also cited for explaining that the achievement of ELs is positively impacted because the SIOP model places importance on ensuring that educators understand the fundamental principles of why the strategies work (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Chinn, & Ratleff, 2011). Student learning is also influenced more positively in schools in which leaders and administrators are informed of the characteristics of the proper implementation of the SIOP model so that they can guarantee that teachers’ instruction “aligns with the intervention’s goals” (Short, 2013). These study results express how professional development creates the path to the success of ELs through improving instructional methods used in classrooms.

Future Steps

Using previous findings as a springboard, schools and districts should redirect a portion of funds and dedicate time to intensive and high-quality professional development for teachers of ELs, especially in locations with greater populations of ELs in schools. Future research should consider examining differences in student achievement between schools that implement the SIOP model in every classroom and schools that only implement the SIOP model in particular classrooms.
Research Proposal

Purpose

Research strongly supports the significance of professional development, its impact on altering instructional methods in the classroom, and the resulting positive impacts on the academic achievement of ELs. The purpose of this study is to delve deeper into these findings and figure out if a school-wide implementation of the SIOP model, increasing the teachers’ familiarity and the students’ exposure, would result in even greater gains for the students.

Guiding Principles

- The SIOP model makes content area information accessible to all students while also supporting the language needs of EL students (McIntyre, Kyle, Chen, Muñoz, & Beldon, 2010).
- Fidelity of implementing interventions is necessary for positive results in student achievement (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Chinn, & Ratleff, 2011; McIntyre, Kyle, Chen, Muñoz, & Beldon, 2010; Short, 2013; Short, Echevarria, & Richards-Tutor, 2011).
- Teachers need at least two years of professional development to fully implement an intervention with high fidelity (Short, Fidelman, & Louguit, 2012).
- School leadership needs to understand the intervention being implemented so they can ensure that it is being implemented properly and provide support to the teachers (Short, 2013).

Research Questions

- How can teachers provide an environment that fully embraces the SIOP model in every classroom?
How will consistent engagement in classrooms for every content area fully implementing the SIOP model further impact student achievement?

Method
Participants: I would contact the principals of several elementary and middle schools in one district to request participation. Only three schools would need to participate, and the grade level does not need to be specified.

Materials: The materials needed for this study would simply be the assessments, observations, interviews, and other materials needed to complete high-quality professional development and classroom instruction using the SIOP model.

Method: Of the three participating schools, two would require each teacher across a grade level to participate in intensive professional development to implement the SIOP model while the third would be the comparison school without the intervention. One of the two treatment schools would implement the SIOP model across the entire grade level for one year, and then the next grade level (following the students) would implement the SIOP model the next year. This would simulate a school-wide implementation of the intervention with professional development and coaching. The second school would keep the same grade level as the only implementers of the intervention.

Data Collection: Standardized assessments for each subject area (math, science, reading, etc) would be conducted at the beginning and ending of each year in each school. The Levels of Use Interview Protocol would also be used to rate teachers’ implementation of the SIOP model in conjunction with several observations by a professional development team.

Data Analysis: Specific analysis formulas will not be needed. The student assessments will be
used to examine gains throughout the first year and between the subsequent years to analyze how the students in the simulated school-wide model compare to the single grade level model. The interviews and observations will be used to examine the teachers’ implementation of the model to ensure that they are incorporating all components of the intervention for accurate results.

Educational Importance
This study is important because it would take the knowledge provided by previous research and add another layer of understanding. We know that long-term professional development for individual teachers increases their fidelity of implementation and the achievement of their students. If an entire school (in simulation) were to implement the SIOP model in every classroom, the teachers would become experts and the students would have the greatest access to information in every content area. This study will examine whether or not this increased engagement with this model will further increase the achievement of ELs served by these teachers.
References


