

The Provision of School Psychological Services to Bilingual¹ Students

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Aud, Hussar, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp & Tahan, 2011), 21% of school-age children ages 5–17 speak a language other than English at home. Although English language learners (ELLs), inclusive of those that are exposed to two or more languages, are the fastest growing subgroup of students within our nation’s public schools (NEA, 2007), typically they do not fare well in the U.S. educational system. Samson and Lesaux (2009) found that bilingual students were underrepresented in special education in the primary grades, but overrepresented beginning in third grade. Furthermore, ELLs are underrepresented in gifted education (King, Artiles, & Kozleski, 2009). Inadequate or inappropriate psychoeducational assessment practices, restricted access to effective instruction, lack of understanding about language acquisition and prior academic experiences in one or more languages and associated impact on academic achievement and grade level expectations, inappropriate special education referral practices, and limited training all have been found to contribute to these phenomena (Sullivan, 2011).

Given the increasing diversity of the nation’s public schools, NASP recognizes the critical importance of establishing best practices in the provision of school psychology services when working with English language learners. This includes supporting students with diverse backgrounds by using culturally and linguistically appropriate methods, including delivery in the language that best meets the students’ needs. Schools are expected to provide effective and comprehensive supports and services to help these students succeed in all domains: academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. School psychologists should ensure that prevention, assessment, consultation, intervention, advocacy, and family–school collaboration services for bilingual students are implemented effectively.

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

NASP affirms the critical role that culturally and linguistically responsive school psychologists play in helping to close achievement gaps and decrease overrepresentation and underrepresentation of ELLs in special and gifted education, respectively. Best practices require training that includes, but is not limited to, the developmental processes of language acquisition and acculturation, their effect on standardized test performance, and the effectiveness of instructional strategies and interventions. All school psychologists are responsible for providing equitable and culturally responsive services to students and families.

¹ Whereas the terms *English language learner* (ELL) and *bilingual* are used interchangeably in this document, and whereas *bilingual* often refers to an individual with proficiency in two languages, our use of the term *bilingual* is general and intended to refer to all individuals with any degree of experience in and exposure to a language other than English, including children who enter the U.S. school system (ELLs) and for whom English was not the native or heritage language. We recognize that an individual need not be bilingual to be an ELL, and conversely, an individual need not be an ELL to be bilingual.

Assessment. NASP promotes the standards set by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) that require the use of reliable and valid assessment tools and procedures. NASP supports the rights of bilingual students who are referred for a psychoeducational evaluation to be assessed in their native languages when such evaluation will provide the most useful data to inform interventions. It should be noted that the use of “nonverbal” tools or native language instruments are not automatic guarantees of reliable and valid data. Nonverbal tests rely on some form of effective communication between examiner and examinee, and may be as culturally loaded as verbal tests, thus limiting the validity of evaluation results. Furthermore, the norms for native language tests may not represent the types of ELLs typically found in U.S. schools, and very limited research exists on how U.S. bilingual students perform on tests in their native languages as opposed to English. Thus, collaboration among school, family, and community stakeholders will help improve evaluation practices and may assist in reducing potentially discriminatory assessment practices and inappropriate interpretation of test results.

Given the relative dearth of bilingual school psychologists, particularly in languages other than Spanish, it is important to recognize that monolingual, English-speaking school psychologists will likely conduct the vast majority of evaluations with bilingual students. Therefore, proper training in the requisite knowledge and skills for culturally and linguistically responsive assessment is necessary for all school psychologists. In addition, monolingual school psychologists will require training in the use of interpreters in all aspects of the assessment process, as well as an awareness of the complexity of issues that may be associated with reliance on interpreters.

Consultation. NASP supports the delivery of culturally and linguistically competent consultation services to all school personnel who work with bilingual students. Multicultural consultation is a valuable form of indirect service that can enhance teachers’ knowledge, skills, and confidence in working with students and families from diverse backgrounds (Ingraham, 2000; Lopez & Truesdell, 2007). The delivery of consultation services within a framework that is sensitive to the needs of bilingual students entails using consultation strategies that incorporate language and cultural considerations at the individual, group, family, and systems levels. Consultation services are an important vehicle through which school psychologists integrate their expertise and research-based knowledge about language development and cultural factors to help consultees gather relevant data to plan, adapt, and deliver effective instructional and mental health interventions (Ingraham, 2000; Lopez & Rogers, 2010).

Systemic intervention and advocacy. Culturally and linguistically responsive practices communicate high expectations for all students (Kozleski, 2005). School psychologists need to engage in relevant, ongoing learning experiences that promote self-assessment and reflection regarding how current service models impact student outcomes and the manner in which beliefs, skills, and practices support educational equity for all learners (King, Artiles, & Kozleski, 2009; Kozleski, 2005). According to the NASP Practice Model (2010), the provision of school psychological services to bilingual students includes consideration of students’ entire school experience such that instructional supports for bilingual students are interwoven into the entire school program. Such instruction can best be provided through a multitiered system of supports (MTSS; NASP, 2009).

Prevention and intervention. Several educationally relevant laws and policies require rigorous academic standards, require built-in accountability systems, and allow use of funds for implementing

MTSS to improve outcomes for all students, including bilingual students (e.g., IDEA, Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA]). NASP endorses multitiered models of evidence-based instruction to meet the linguistic and academic needs of all students (NASP, 2009). The availability of a continuum of English language acquisition supports and responsive instructional methods are critical for bilingual students (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). Program or intervention features, linguistic and cultural factors, quality of instruction, and fidelity of implementation must be examined when planning tiered supports (Moughamian, Rivera, & Francis, 2009).

School psychologists are aware of evidence supporting culturally responsive MTSS frameworks, interventions, and the evaluation of prevention and intervention strategies for their effectiveness with diverse populations. The impact of limited English proficiency and language acquisition on achievement must be considered to ensure accessibility, validity, and support during instruction and intervention (Rabinowitz, 2008).

Family–school collaboration. NASP acknowledges the integral role of parents as part of the educational system. School psychologists apply their multicultural awareness and family–school collaboration skills to their interactions with parents (NASP, 2010). School psychologists are sensitive to within- and between-group differences among all cultural groups, and to the language preferences of parents and children. When a school psychologist is not able to communicate in a language or dialect of a student or parent, s/he should use an interpreter who is fluent in that language. School psychologists also bridge cross-cultural understanding between family and school (Vazquez-Nuttall, Li, & Kaplan, 2006), make school a welcoming environment for bilingual parents, and advocate for the needs and rights of bilingual children and families from a social justice perspective when necessary (Li & Vazquez-Nuttall, 2009).

SUMMARY

NASP is committed to advocating for culturally and linguistically responsive services for all children and families. All school psychologists share the responsibility to provide services that consider the needs of bilingual children and families, particularly in light of demographic trends and the current inequity in educational resources and outcomes that are associated with this population. School psychologists serve as advocates and play an important role in working with bilingual students who may be unable to effectively advocate for themselves.

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