The Provision of School Psychological Services to Multilingual Students

NASP recognizes the critical importance of promoting equitable and systemic practices in the provision of school psychology services when working with multilingual learners. This includes delivery of school psychological services in the language that best meets the student’s 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 multilingual students are implemented equitably and are responsive to culture, language, and their intersections.

RATIONALE

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021), English language learners in U.S. public schools represent 10.2% of the public school population (5.0 million students). Although percentages of multilingual students vary extensively by state, Latinx students comprise the largest racial/ethnic group of multilingual students overall (77.6%), followed by students who are Asian (10.7%), White (6.7%), and Black (4.4%). Less than 1% of multilingual students identify as Pacific Islanders, American Indian/Alaska Natives, or individuals of two or more races combined. Multilingual learners in the United States speak more than 400 unique languages and are an extremely heterogeneous population (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Multilingualism is defined as knowledge of more than one language, with the understanding that language proficiency may vary across languages and aspects of language (e.g., speaking, writing). Various terms are utilized for multilingual children and families in school systems, although multilingual is preferred because of its asset-based nature as well as the importance of understanding linguistic identities outside of English proficiency. Multilingualism has significant advantages that have been identified for decades. For example, multilingual populations have advantages on some measures of cognitive ability, increased metalinguistic awareness, and heightened executive functioning, although age, cultural factors, and other variables contribute to such advantages (Xie et al., 2022). Bilingual education models have the ultimate goal of fluency and literacy in two languages and occur in various forms within public education settings. Although bilingual education models have numerous educational benefits, equity issues are pervasive; bilingual programs are more likely to enroll White, native English speaking, monolingual children than native speakers of languages other than English, which emphasizes privilege and hierarchy in bilingual educational contexts (Chavez-Moreno, 2021).

A total of 15.3% of multilingual students are identified as having disabilities (NCES, 2021). Multilingual students are most likely to be identified with specific learning disability (SLD) and speech language impairment, and they are disproportionately overrepresented and identified later within the SLD category compared to their monolingual peers. Inadequate or inappropriate psychoeducational assessment practices, restricted access to effective instruction, lack of understanding about language acquisition, prior academic experiences in one or more languages and unawareness of 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). Per IDEA legislation, school professionals must consider the “exclusionary clause” during special education identification, which prohibits identification for learning difficulties that are primarily attributable to contextual or linguistic factors. However, professional guidance on the interpretation of the influence of culture and language on disability identification is limited (Harris et al., 2023).
THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

NASP affirms the critical role of culturally and linguistically responsive school psychologists in helping to close achievement gaps and decrease respective overrepresentation and underrepresentation of multilingual children in special and gifted education. NASP also aims to improve educational and mental health outcomes for multilingual children and families through advocacy and guidance. Best practices require training for school psychologists that includes, but is not limited to, the developmental processes of language acquisition and acculturation, their effect on standardized test performance, the effectiveness of instructional strategies and interventions, cultural influences, family collaborations, and oppressive systems and their impact on students’ lives. Per NASP’s Professional Standards (2020), “school psychologists recognize that equitable practices for diverse student populations, respect for development and learning, and advocacy for social justice are foundational to effective service delivery.” School psychologists must see their role and opportunity for greatest impact as those efforts that positively impact systems and communities and disrupt inequity.

Multitiered Systems of Support

The availability of a continuum of culturally responsive language and academic skill acquisition supports is critical for multilingual students’ equitable access to educational opportunities. School psychologists must be aware of evidence related to the use of universal screening and progress monitoring data to inform decision making and intervention selection with the heterogeneous population of multilingual learners (Linan-Thompson et al., 2022), particularly related to language proficiency (Marrs et al., 2021) and the potential for different growth trajectories in skills across languages (Linan-Thompson et al., 2022). Furthermore, school psychologists should be aware that ongoing evaluation and data collection are necessary to determine the appropriateness of instruction and intervention for multilingual students, as suggested by response to intervention frameworks. School psychologists also work to provide a continuum of culturally responsive mental and behavioral health supports (Fallon et al., 2021) within multitiered frameworks (Linan-Thompson et al., 2022) such as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS; Horner & Sugai, 2015), to minimize barriers to access and enhance equitable discipline procedures for multilingual learners. School psychologists can help ensure prevention-focused resources are allocated through culturally and linguistically responsive assessment and data-based decision making.

Mental and Behavioral Health Services and Interventions

School psychologists understand the cultural, social, and biological influences on the mental and behavioral health of multilingual children who may have endured stressors and adversity that are traumatic, oppressive, and systemic. School psychologists use culturally responsive and sustaining practices to reduce the harm of biases and systemic oppression against culturally and linguistically minoritized children and families. They take culture into consideration and apply culturally responsive adaptations when working with multilingual children who experience mental illness. School psychologists use culturally responsive supports to reduce disparities in mental health needs among student groups, remove barriers to services, and address perceived stigma. Furthermore, school psychologists engage in systems-level prevention and intervention strategies to maximize the resiliency and success of multilingual students. School psychologists prioritize wellness for children, families, and school staff by implementing evidence-based mental and behavioral health supports.

Family, School, and Community Collaboration

NASP acknowledges the vital role of families as part of the educational system. School psychologists apply their social justice advocacy and family, school, and community collaboration skills to their interactions with families (NASP, 2020). School psychologists are attentive to within- and between-group differences among all cultural groups, and to the language proficiencies and preferences of families and children. When language differences exist, school psychologists use a trained interpreter (when available) who is proficient in the target language and cultural implications of communication. School psychologists are aware of sociocultural factors that may prevent familial collaboration when developing services, and they work with families to prioritize their needs (NASP, 2020). They position families as equal partners and decision makers, and they affirm and value families’ perspectives, knowledge, and experiences.
Consultation

Multicultural consultation is a valuable form of indirect service that can enhance school staff’s knowledge, skills, and confidence in working with students and families from minoritized backgrounds. The delivery of consultation services within a framework that is sensitive to the needs of multilingual students requires 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 about language development, cultural factors, and systemic inequities to assist consultees to gather relevant data to plan, adapt, and deliver effective individual, group, and systemic interventions and supports (Lopez & Rogers, 2010). Furthermore, the need to incorporate intersectional and affirming approaches to consultation is increasingly important for school psychologists (Brown et al., 2022).

Assessment

NASP promotes the standards set forth by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004), and in the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (American Educational Research Association et al., 2014) that require the use of reliable, valid, and fair assessment tools and procedures. NASP supports the rights of multilingual learners who are referred for a psychoeducational evaluation to be assessed in their heritage languages when such evaluations will provide the most useful data to inform interventions. Most school psychologists (92%; Goforth et al., 2021) are monolingual, English-speaking practitioners, and even when available, multilingualism does not guarantee culturally and linguistically responsive assessment; rather a school psychologist’s training, experience, and ongoing professional development determine competent and ethical evaluations. Therefore, all school psychologists must be trained in the complexity of culturally and linguistically responsive practices, including seeking support and resources as needed to best and most efficiently collaborate with multilingual and multicultural colleagues (locally or through professional organizations like NASP) to ensure that the most useful data are collected, interpreted with cultural humility, and reported in a nondiscriminatory fashion. When multilingual and multicultural colleagues are not available locally, partnering with interpreters who are familiar with the basic tenets of psychological/psychoeducational assessment (e.g., standardization, confidentiality; Carvalho et al., 2014)—as well as developing relationships with local families, community members, family liaisons and advocates, community organizations, and agencies that serve multilingual families—is recommended to better understand the cultural and linguistic context of the student.

Best practices for assessing multilingual learners dictate a grounding in—and interpretation of—data through a robust, strengths-based, contextual understanding of the individual student. This is achieved by first understanding the acquisition and development of the student’s multiple languages (including history of instructional language and the length of time exposed to each language) as well as the student’s level of acculturation, academic functioning in the languages of instruction, opportunities for learning, and lived experience. These data points are gathered from parent, student, and teacher interviews; observations; formal measures, when possible; and classroom data (standardized and unstandardized), and then they are used to build a holistic picture of the student’s linguistic, cultural, academic, and familial history. Next, this contextualized framing of the student guides the decision of the appropriate language of assessment, appropriate measures in the areas of need in that language (when possible) and—if needed—the decision to use resources such as interpreters, bilingual school psychologists, and nonverbal measures. Instruments in the student’s native language or nonverbal tools cannot guarantee an accurate understanding of the student’s abilities because of the impact of each student’s individual linguistic and cultural history, and the norms may not represent the types of multilingual learners typically found in U.S. schools. Therefore, all gathered information must be interpreted through the lens of the student’s linguistic and cultural experience, as well as with cultural humility by the practitioner, to ensure a fair and valid assessment of a student’s abilities.

SUMMARY

NASP is committed to advocating for culturally and linguistically responsive services for all children and families. School psychologists share the responsibility of providing systemically focused services that consider the assets and needs of multilingual children and families with all stakeholders. Given the extensive inequities in educational and
mental health resources, services, and outcomes associated with this population, school psychologists serve as critical advocates for multilingual students and promote equitable practices to support the development of this population. Graduate training programs must prepare school psychologists to provide culturally and linguistically responsive services to multilingual students. In addition, all professional learning opportunities for practicing school psychologists should include an emphasis on multilingual learners. Data pertaining to academic, social–emotional, special education identification and placement, and other outcomes should regularly be disseminated, and plans for improving equity among multilingual learners and their families must be central to the role of the school psychologist.

REFERENCES


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