

Reading League Blog

Melody Ilk, M.A.

Literacy Transformations

Literacy Systems Design and Implementation

Sara Reeser, M.A.

Lumbreara Literacy Consulting

Literacy Implementation Specialist

Lina Castellanos-Gaitan , M.A.– Literacy Coach

Ximena Aboud -Literacy Coach

A Tale of Two Languages: Literacy System Design for Multilingual Learners

Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Introduction

The explosion of support for implementing practices aligned with the Science of Reading is now palpable across the country. Numerous states, districts, and schools are exploring the scientific research base that underpins effective literacy assessment and instruction. The research base that evolved into the SoR came from many varied fields: education, communication and implementation sciences, linguistics, neuroscience, and cognitive, developmental, and school psychology (Defining Movement, 2021). But how does a school shift to practices that will serve students better for all learners, especially our students learning English as a second language?

The latest report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), published every spring, reported that as of fall 2020, there were 5 million English learners in schools across the country, accounting for 10.3 percent of the total student population, with Spanish-speaking ELS representing close to 80% of the second language learner population. In addition, the National Council on Teacher Quality (2023) recently published a startling statistic: 71 percent of Educator Preparation Programs reviewed dedicate fewer than two instructional hours to supporting English language learners, and 88 percent of those same programs offer no practice opportunities for teaching English language learners. Only 3% of teachers have specialized training in providing instruction to this diverse population.

A Tale of Two Schools

In 2012, the state of Colorado passed legislation giving the state the guiding philosophy, structure, and resources to get children at grade level by the time they enter fourth grade. That same year, the Early Literacy Grant Program was established through legislation to provide schools the opportunity to apply for competitive grants that provide funding for schools to purchase vetted core reading programs, supplemental programs and interventions, and adopt vetted assessments. Schools participating in the Early Literacy Grant Program are required to have a school-based literacy coach and utilize a state-vetted consultant to guide schools through the implementation of a model steeped in the science of reading. Schools are given 4 to 5 years to maintain strong systems and structures.

There are three goals schools are required to meet in order to keep their Early Literacy Grant funding:

- Make above to well above average progress moving students out of the well below benchmark category as measured by the Acadience Growth Tool
- Make above to well above average progress moving students into the benchmark category as measured by the Acadience Growth Tool
- Move 50% of students scoring below benchmark up at least one performance category (well below benchmark to below benchmark/benchmark or below benchmark to benchmark)

The Reason for Change

We are currently supporting several inner-city schools in a large urban district in the Denver metro area that received state Early Literacy Grants. In previous years, the district supported a balanced literacy approach to teaching reading and writing. Since then, the district has embraced the need to change to an approach steeped in good empirical research in literacy. This blog will discuss two of these fourteen schools with the Early Literacy Grant. It is important to note that each school implements a different model for supporting English language learners. School #1 provides native Spanish speakers the opportunity to opt in instruction in Spanish across all subjects while supporting them in acquiring English language and literacy over their elementary years and provides English instruction across all subjects for native English speakers and speakers of other languages. School #2 provides Spanish and English instruction to native Spanish speakers and non-native Spanish speakers through a 90:10 dual language instructional model. Below are the demographics of two of these schools and their beginning data.

School One - A Transitional Native Language Instruction Model

- 93% of students receive free and reduced lunch
- 45% are multilingual learners
- 19% receive SPED services
- 97% identify as minority
- Began structured literacy implementation in 2021
- Beginning data on Acadience/IDEL
 - 24% of students scoring at benchmark
 - 66% of students in need of targeted and/or intensive support

School Two - A Dual Language Instructional Model

- 92% of students receive free and reduced lunch
- 86% are multilingual learners
- 15% of students receive SPED services
- 98% identify as minority
- Began structured literacy implementation in 2022
- Beginning data on Acadience/IDEL
 - 23% of students scoring at benchmark
 - 60% of students in need of targeted and/or intensive support

“If you truly consider these demographics and everything between lines, you realize our school has all odds stacked against it. The opportunity gap at the school is present in every single aspect of its constitution and yet, all of our students are full of dreams, hopes, and potential, waiting to be unlocked. Most of our students need not just a good teacher and a good program to ensure they will make a year’s worth of growth, they need an exceptional teacher and a precisely designed instructional program that will help them win the catch-up race that they have been set up to run.” (Castellanos-Gaitan, Literacy Coach)

What Needed to Change in Our Literacy Systems and Infrastructures?

Schools needed to first “own their number.” Based on current data, is what we are doing working? And the answer was a resounding, “NO!” So, we moved forward with analyzing current systems and infrastructures throughout our tiers of instruction. What we know about implementing a successful literacy initiative includes defining each literacy system and developing aligned infrastructures that support each system in both English and Spanish. These systems include the following:

1. Core and Intervention structures, resources, and supports designed around the language needs of all students
2. Development of shared leadership structures that use teacher leaders throughout the system
3. Comprehensive assessment plan design that integrates valid and reliable measures and assessments – screening, progress monitoring, diagnostics, and outcome assessments
4. Data-analysis processes and protocols for leadership teams and grade-level data teams
5. Ongoing alignment of professional development supports to implementation and student data

Tiers of Instruction

First, we met with schools to analyze their current school-wide schedules with their leadership teams to ensure adequate time in each tier of instruction for both languages. In a collaborative process, adjustments were made to the schedule by increasing time for core instruction, supplemental support, and increased time for intervention. A well-designed schoolwide schedule for instruction affords the strategic use of special educators, language support personnel, and paraprofessionals, thereby increasing their time and quality of support in both languages.

After analysis of time, intensity, and instructional literacy practices in each building, we needed to design literacy blocks that integrated the structures of language in both whole and small-group structures. Each school adopted an approved knowledge-building curriculum for core reading instruction, in both English and Spanish, important for building vocabulary and background knowledge connected throughout the grades.

During the first year, consultants supported schools in implementing and analyzing the core curriculum for alignment to the SOR. Strengths and weaknesses were targeted in the curriculum and built into

professional development opportunities for teachers, coaches, and school leadership. We found it necessary to bulk up the explicitness of instruction in phonological awareness, phonics/spelling/morphology, vocabulary, and text structure routines in both English and Spanish. We felt strongly that teachers need to understand these structures of language in both languages in order to make the cross-linguistic connections sorely needed for our ELs. Principals, assistant principals, and coaches trained alongside teachers and were pulled for additional support sessions in order to develop aligned walk-through documents, instructional expectations, coaching cycles, and data analysis processes.

Each school adopted supplemental materials and state-approved interventions for Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction in Spanish and English. Teachers, interventionists, and school leaders attended the professional development for each intervention and set up coaching cycles for each resource. If there were placement assessments for the interventions, they were integrated into the assessment plan, along with any diagnostic screening data pertinent to student placement. We continued to support teachers, coaches, and leaders throughout the year with how to analyze all assessment data to align instructional plans to student needs.

“The first phase of the plan encouraged us, school leaders, to support teachers in their professional development by securing time to collect and interpret data and then take action with any instructional changes needed. Every adult in the building was committed to be an active agent of change in the life of our community, but that did not stop the challenges from arising. At times, teachers felt overwhelmed and frustrated with the increased load of work, high expectations and accountability systems. As leaders, we responded by prioritizing quality implementation over quantity. We didn’t want to just run a fast race, but instead, wanted to cross the finish line as a team, with as many members of our community as possible. (Castellanos- Gaitan, Literacy Coach)

Leadership, Leadership Teams, and Grade-Level Data Teams

Another tenet of the Early Literacy Grant is to educate school and district leaders in the science of reading and initiate and/or improve the quality of current leadership teams. When principals and teachers share knowledge and leadership, teachers’ working relationships are stronger and achievement is higher. These effects of leadership on student achievement occur largely because effective leadership strengthens the professional community—a special environment where teachers work together to improve their practice and improve student learning.

We did extensive professional development in the first year around how a leadership team functions, how to analyze implementation and student data, how often they should be scheduled, and how to align this data to school-based professional development. Just as a good teacher aligns her classroom data to instruction, so should a strong leadership team align data to teacher needs for professional development. We also introduced various protocols that guide teams through looking at their walk-through data, student data, and implementation data to set goals and next steps for improvement throughout the life of the grant. When teams are highly skilled and keep a clear focus on implementing effective practices, 80 percent of those practices will still be successfully in use in three years. However, if skilled teams are not in place, then the implementation of effective practices may only reach 14 percent after 17 years (Jackson et al., 2018)

We used a similar process for introducing strong data analysis protocols for grade-level teams with intervention personnel to determine student needs for instruction and intervention, and, align instruction throughout all personnel who teach the groups. Protocols were first modeled by consultants and then turned over to leaders and coaches once the process was understood. We then followed up data teams with consistent coaching cycles and walk-throughs to ensure a strong implementation of the instructional plans. We must make sure the whole group aligns with small group, which aligns to the intervention. We adults must be on the same page!

Coaching

Each school is required to fund a full-time literacy coach throughout the life of the grant. We find this absolutely critical to the success of the literacy implementation. These literacy coaches lead and facilitate weekly data teams, coordinate the administration of literacy assessments including universal screeners and diagnostic assessments, provide ongoing literacy professional learning for staff, coordinate the distribution and use of curricular materials, model lessons and evidenced-based instructional strategies, collaborate consistently with school leaders, monitor progress towards grant goals, and provide feedback to teachers after walk-through observations. At School #1 and School #2, the coaches are not only knowledgeable in structured literacy and coaching best practices, but are also both bilingual, Native Spanish speakers, formerly trained in Spanish linguistics as well as best practices for supporting English language learners. These coaches spend substantial time in classrooms with teachers focused on the continual improvement of instruction.

To build the knowledge and capacity of coaches among the fourteen schools, we brought all coaches together approximately every six weeks for half-day coaches trainings. During these sessions, we made explicit connections between the professional development teachers had received and the trends in data, so coaches were equipped to support teachers with analyzing their student data based on individual patterns of response and determine the specific instructional strategy to support students. As a result, student data soared.

"After creating rigorous protocols and protecting the time for Data Driven Instruction Meetings (DDI), we moved into strengthening our literacy core block by adding school wide instructional routines related to vocabulary and text structure. Teachers were provided with professional development sessions, implementation time, clear expectations and feedback. Our biggest challenge here was to have all of our coaches delivering the same strong message, this is still a work in progress." (Castellanos- Gaitan, Literacy Coach)

Our Results

School #1 reduced the number of K-3 students scoring significantly below grade level on Acadience/IDEL from 66% to 41% in 2021-2022 and from 45% to 22% in 2022-2023. They increased the number of K-3 students scoring benchmark on Acadience/IDEL from 24% to 45% in 2021-2022 and from 42% to 65% in 2022-2023, outperforming the district average of 58% benchmark in 2022-2023! For the past two school years, they have met all three ELG goals, making above-average progress in goal #1 and goal #2 in 2021-2022 and making well above-average progress on goal #1 and goal #2 in 2022-2023.

School #2 reduced the number of K-3 students scoring significantly below grade level on IDEL from 60% to 34% in 2022-2023. They increased the number of K-3 students scoring benchmark on Acadience/IDEL from 23% to 46% in 2022-2023. In 2022-2023 they met all three ELG goals, making well above average progress on goal #1 and goal #2.

Without a change in educator preparation, state policy, programming, and accountability for school improvement, growth in literacy outcomes for students is extremely difficult. Knowledgeable educational leadership, coaches, and teachers must guide the change and stay the course!

“Our work here is not done yet, this year we are focusing on small group instruction and giving it a bit more thought and action to our multilingual students because they are capable of being biliterate, so far we managed to successfully support most of our Hispanic students in developing their skills in the native language, now we need to support them in acquiring or developing skill in English. Biliteracy is our goal!” (Castellanos- Gaitan, Literacy Coach)