

Dr. Karen Thompson: Students classified as English learners in some cases are excluded from enrollment in any course in a particular content area. Does specialized preparation for working with English learner classified students expand students' access to core content? Our research suggests yes, it does.

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Host: Welcome to this two-part podcast hosted by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition, OELA. Today, we will be discussing the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the experiences and academic achievement of English learners, and post-pandemic support for English learners and their educators.

We have an exceptional panel of experts with us today, and I am pleased to introduce Amaya Garcia, the Director of PreK-12 Research and Practice Education Policy Program at New America, Dr. Karen Thompson, an Associate Professor in the College of Education at Oregon State University, Dr. Kelsey Krausen, the Director of the Strategic Resource Allocation and Systems Planning team at WestEd, Dr. Megan Hopkins, an associate professor in the Department of Education Studies at the University of California, San Diego, and Samuel Klein, the Supervisor of the Office of English Learners in Arlington Public Schools, in Virginia.

In Part 1 of the podcast, Amaya Garcia will present the findings of the New America report on educating English learners during the pandemic, and Dr. Karen Thompson will discuss the levers for expanding opportunities for multilingual learners, the importance of specialized teacher preparation, and access to bilingual education.

In Part 2 of the podcast, Dr. Kelsey Krausen will report on the use of ESSER, funds and other fiscal considerations for English learner support, Dr. Megan Hopkins will talk about the considerations for leadership that promotes English learners' equity in the post-pandemic context, and Sam Klein will discuss Arlington Public Schools' journey towards recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact on English learners' experiences and academic achievement.

Please note that in this podcast, the terms "English learners" and "multilingual learners" are used interchangeably, and refer to the population of students defined as English learners in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by Every Student Succeeds Act.

Let's get the conversation started.

Amaya Garcia: Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to be part of this panel, and to learn from my fellow panelists. I'm going to be sharing information from a report that my colleague, Leslie Villegas and I published in 2022.

So in the early months of the pandemic, the reports coming from local media were quite alarming, with coverage noting a lack of access to technology and broadband, high rates of chronic absenteeism, and course failure among students identified as English learners. So in the fall of 2021, my colleague and I wanted to learn more about what was happening on the ground, and so we interviewed 20 EL experts, advocates, and practitioners.

When we think about EL education, there are a few big buckets to consider. One, how are EL students screened and identified for language services? Two, how are ELs' learning and progress with achieving English language proficiency assessed? Three, what instructional practices and strategies are being used to support ELs in the classroom? And four, what resources are available, and I'm including teachers when I think about resources, to promote EL student's success? So we used those questions to kind of guide the topics of interest for the questions that we asked all the folks that we interviewed.

Our findings related to EL identification, enrollment, and attendance, so I'm going to try to be brief, since we only have 10 minutes. There's a lot more in the report, if you're interested. But essentially, as all of you know, school closures and remote learning impacted all aspects of EL education. Briefly, the processes used to screen and identify ELs were adapted to allow for virtual participation. So those alternative procedures depended heavily on a few questions asked on a home language survey that are used during intake typically, and were sometimes supplemented with interviews with parents. This did offer a lot of flexibility, but it also impacted the accuracy of the process.

Many of the folks we spoke with said they "erred on the side of caution to ensure that no student fell through the cracks," which led to an inflation of currently identified ELs going into the 2021-2022 school year, when most schools were back open again. One district administrator from Chicago shared that going into the fall of 2021, they had to screen roughly 19,000 students between August and October in order to clean up these provisional identifications. So that is a very big job.

The other thing that was really impacted was enrollment and attendance. So several interviewees confirmed declines in their EL populations. Michigan, which I know we have some folks in Michigan on here today, for example observed a 6% reduction in 2021, which was attributed anecdotally to restrictive national immigration policies, compounded by the pandemic. California also saw a major decline in enrollment of dual language learners in early childhood settings, on top of already low enrollment since families, as many of you know also, many families just simply disappeared.

When it came to attendance, during virtual learning, states, schools, and districts adopted more flexible attendance policies to kind of deal with the fact that some kids weren't able to be connected, and other issues. At one charter school network here in D.C., the threshold for what constituted being present was significantly relaxed. So here we have a rule where to be present, you have to be there 80% of the day, but during the pandemic, they actually changed it that in order to be present, you just had to attend at least one class, log into one class, and complete work for each class in order to get credit for the whole day.

Once students started returning to school in the fall of 2021, attendance was still a prominent issue. And we know, actually, that chronic absence is still a significant problem. And several individuals shared that they thought maybe the slower attendance was due to the challenge of the transition back to in-person school. For older students, it might have been that they had to work. There were communication challenges with families, and again, the fact that many kids just sort of seemed to disappear.

Looking forward, we can talk about assessment, which is a huge component of the EL student experience. So assessment, the Department of Education did

grant significant flexibility for how states could carry out standardized assessments. So states could extend the testing window through summer or fall, they could administer assessments remotely, and/or shorten the state assessment. Despite this flexibility, test administration was uneven within and across states, and when I talk about assessment here, I'm talking about the English language proficiency exams, which made for a more interrupted assessment process in 2021 than compared to the first year of the pandemic. And that's because when schools closed in March, many of them had already administered the ELP exam, and so they weren't as impacted.

Lots of school districts that we spoke with were not able to offer a remote option for the English language proficiency exam. And so this was difficult, because many folks were not comfortable having their kids come into school just to be tested. And lots of folks took advantage of the flexibility offered by the Department by extending the testing window through September and October of 2021, which gave them higher participation rates, as well as higher than expected scores, because students simply had more time to receive instruction and language services before they were tested.

Another big component, and something that we were all interested in is what was the impact on linguistic growth? And it was interesting, what the folks that we interviewed told us aligned with some research that came out from WIDA around this same time. So in terms of the assessment results, EL's productive skills such as speaking and writing were the most negatively impacted by remote instruction. And with receptive skills, such as listening and reading, those remain relatively steady. Building on this idea, many participants commented that remote learning inhibited ELs language development, and one reason is that many of the tools that teachers use to scaffold ELs learning are visual, and displayed all around the classroom walls, and it was difficult to make a virtual classroom feel alive in the same way.

Providing designated English language instruction was also complicated, due to gaps in policy and guidance from states around how to ensure it was happening, and supports for teachers on how to design instruction to accommodate for these changes to a virtual setting. And while curricula was translated to help increase access for ELs, it was a challenge to ensure accuracy, particularly

when using things like Google Translate. And of course, the lack of opportunity for peer-to-peer interaction, particularly for younger ELs, meant less time to practice speaking and using language.

So this is probably the area that we have the most to say about, because it was such an important component of what happened, is what kinds of access kids had to remote learning, what kinds of infrastructure were in place, and the kinds of instruction that were actually happening.

So many school systems worked really hard to close the digital divide, and provide students with access to devices and internet hotspots. One district we spoke to in Virginia, they actually had sort of like a bus, kind of, with internet, and that was what the hotspots were, and they would drive them into different communities to try to increase access, and they also prioritized English learners with the lowest levels of language proficiency to come for in-person learning. But in the immediate stage of the pandemic, we're thinking, like, right when it happened, ELs and their families may have been shut out due to communication challenges.

I do want to highlight what one state EL director told us, which is that districts really had to scramble to provide devices, to provide internet service. In many areas of our state, there was tremendous work that took place to make this happen. And her state is Washington, and so there's rural communities, and so in urban communities, they were able to manage more rapidly, and deploy a lot of that support. But in rural areas, it was more challenging, because a lot of them already struggle with internet service.

And then we all know, you know, just having access doesn't guarantee that the internet connection is going to be strong or reliable. And not to mention that the platforms used by schools weren't necessarily friendly to folks who don't speak English as their first language, and had limited translation functions, and were hard to use on mobile devices, because we have to think about the fact that kids were logging in on computers, they were logging in on phones, and so some of that was challenging. And so according to research from the Migration Policy Institute, teachers, homeschool liaisons, and community organizations, they

worked really hard to bridge that gap, and offer training and direct support to students and families on how to use the technology and learning platforms.

One thing I do want to talk about, that I think is interesting, and that I hadn't heard talked about much, was that ELs of different ages experience remote learning differently, with those in the elementary grades having perhaps less English instruction, like direct English language instruction, because of limitations in screen time. And as an EL director told us, and because you're working with really small children, there's not a lot of chance for them to interact with each other on that type of platform. It's more teacher-directed instruction. So you know those natural conversations that come in small groups among children, thinking through whatever content they're working in, and the use of language in that content, you didn't have that in the virtual setting. And I had a kid who was in third grade at that time, and I can confirm that, yes, he was...I heard him in those small groups with his classmates, and there was not a lot of talking going on.

And I also want to mention teachers. I know that other folks are going to talk about teachers. But they were spread incredibly thin, and many went above and beyond in service of the students and families. Some interviewees noted that the school day sort of went out the window during remote learning, as teachers and school system staff were having to work long hours to accommodate this new mode of teaching and learning. We had teachers, you know, meeting kids where they were, working with them on the sidewalk in front of their homes, like my sister did, meeting up with students in parks and parking lots, setting up times for them to come to school to receive one-on-one support. They used text messaging, they used WhatsApp, they really tried hard to maintain and increase communication.

And many adapted their tools and resources to help ensure access on any type of device, and became very adept at using technological tools. As illustrated on the quote before, we talked about a teacher who realized that her graphic organizer didn't show up well on a phone, so she had to modify it to make sure that kids who were accessing her class through their phone were able to use the resource as well.

And then, just moving on, we're going to just talk about our high-level conclusions. So most school systems shifted back to normal, right, at the end of this. We didn't see as much focus on connectivity, we didn't... I mean, people had to return devices, so we kind of went back to the way things were. There's going to be more about federal COVID-19 recovery funding, but later, and by a separate presenter, but for the people we spoke with, many of them saw it as a black box, and they weren't sure how these funds were being used to support EL-identified students in their context.

The experience of ELs was complicated, but I think what I didn't highlight was that one thing that people really thought as a bright side is that kids are being exposed to their home language more, and may have gotten stronger skills in their home language as a result of being home, which we know is a great asset for those kids. And then, you know, the barriers that these students faced before and during the pandemic will persist unless there's a fundamental shift in how these students are viewed by policymakers, and other local leaders across the country. And the schools that kind of knew what they were doing had a much higher start, head start than schools that were struggling already. And so I think that could be changed if we spent more time investing in creating comprehensive systems for English learners across the nation.

And so that is my time, and now we are going to go to Dr. Karen Thompson.

Dr. Karen Thompson: Hello. It's an honor to be here with everyone today. I am going to just set the stage for a little bit before I dive into the details of my presentation. So I'm part of the National Research and Development Center to Improve Education for Secondary English Learners, and that's a federally funded research and development center, funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, which is part of the U.S. Department of Education, and Aida Walqui at WestEd is the PI for our R&D Center. And we are among a variety of projects looking at course-taking for students classified as English learners at the secondary level, and I'm going to be talking about how some information about challenges and successes prior to the pandemic can inform our recovery efforts moving forward, and have already been informing recovery efforts.

So Amaya shared a lot about the incredible challenges, and resourcefulness of educators and families and students, and I want to talk about some policy levers that we've been looking at that seem to potentially expand access to core content courses for secondary students who are classified as English learners. And that's an outcome that is so important as we think about recovery, and think about really ensuring that all students, including all our students classified as English learners, can graduate, and go on to their long-term goals.

So my colleague Ilana Umansky, who I collaborate with in the R&D Center, coined the term a while back, "exclusionary tracking." We hear about tracking at the secondary level a lot, but what she noticed was that students classified as English learners in some cases are excluded from enrollment in any course in a particular content area. In Oregon, students classified as English learners at the secondary level, one in ten of them are not enrolled in any English language arts class, or the same proportion are not enrolled in any math class.

And at first, this seems shocking. Why is this? What's happening here? And when we look in the data, we see that, for example, schools may be putting newcomer students in multiple periods of ELD, thinking we can delay access to core content because it's most important to build students' language proficiency, and we see this happening during the pandemic as well, efforts to really focus on language proficiency development, despite the many challenges involved with that.

But we see that that's a real challenge, and can present barriers to graduation in the long run, when students don't have access to core content. So I'm going to be talking next about two policy levers that we were exploring whether they can potentially be related to expanding students' access to core content. These are things we know have had positive effects on a variety of outcomes, but we were looking particularly, do they seem to be expanding English learner classified students' access to core content?

The first is specialized teacher preparation for working with English learners, and the second is bilingual program participation. We know states and districts and the federal government have invested a variety of resources over the years,

and we see states investing ESSER funds in these policy levers, so we want to understand more about how do they impact students' core content access.

So next, to focus first on specialized teacher preparation, we're looking at a variety of other levers, but today, first, I'm going to focus on specialized teacher preparation, and then bilingual program participation. But what does specialized teacher preparation for working with English learners look like in Oregon? We see similar things across multiple states. There are a variety of particular licenses teachers can hold that give them additional training for working with students classified as English learners. In Oregon, a little under 20% of teachers hold an ESOL endorsement, and much smaller percentages hold bilingual specializations, or dual language specializations.

Next, we can see that there are gaps across grade levels and content areas. Many more teachers at the elementary level have an ESL endorsement than at the middle or high school level. So again, that raises questions about access to core content at the secondary level, where it becomes really important for graduation, when fewer teachers have the specialized preparation there. During the pandemic, who had the resources and training to scaffold for their multilingual students during remote instruction? Who has that now, as we work on recovery?

We also see that there are gaps across content areas. In English language arts and social studies. Teachers are much more likely to have specialized preparation for working with EL-classified students, again, this is Oregon data, but we see the same things across the country, when we know that math and science can be major gatekeepers for students, and very few teachers there have this specialized preparation.

And then, to go to the core of our research question here, does specialized preparation for working with English learner classified students expand students' access to core content? Our research suggests yes, it does. So this is a lesson we can think about as we work on recovery, as we think about how to invest resources, both money and time. We see that students who were taught by a teacher with specialized preparation for working with English learners were more likely to be enrolled in core content courses the following year.

Now, moving on to the second policy lever I'm going to focus on today, bilingual program participation. Again, this is an area where many levels of the education system have been investing funds prior to COVID, and using ESSER funds here in Oregon. The state has given bilingual teacher Pathway grants to districts to try to expand bilingual programs, but we see there are still gaps in access. They're much more common at the elementary level than at the secondary level.

And moving on, we see that there are many students classified as English learners who don't have access to bilingual programs still. In Oregon, a little over a quarter have ever participated in bilingual programs. In some cases, it's only for a few years. But Oregon, like many states, are working on expanding programs for more years.

And again, to get to the core of our research question here, what lessons can we draw from the past to inform recovery efforts? We do see that participation in a bilingual program earlier in students' school careers is associated with greater access to core content in middle and high school. So students who were in bilingual programs in earlier years were more likely to be enrolled in core content courses. And that course enrollment advantage was greater for students who had been in bilingual programs for more years. So again, this suggests that we should continue our efforts to invest time and resources in expanding bilingual programs for the variety of benefits, including potentially greater access to core content, even after students aren't in bilingual programs anymore.

Thank you for your time.

Host: A big thank you to our panelists for discussing the important topic of supporting English learners and their educators in the context of post-pandemic recovery. The information, reflections, and experiences that you shared with us today will certainly help educators support this population of students. You have given us many useful ideas to think about as we continue to serve English and multilingual learners across the country.

Please listen to the second part of this podcast, where our panelists will address fiscal considerations, the importance of leadership, and discuss the experiences of English learners and their educators in Arlington Public Schools.

We also encourage you to visit the NCELA website at www.ncela.ed.gov, and check out the many educator resources available there.

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