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Using On-Going Mentoring to Support Elementary Teachers of Language Learners

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Using On-Going Mentoring to Support Elementary Teachers of Language Learners

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Research Question

In my ten years of teaching, I have completed over 700 hours of continuing

education. Were you to ask me what the effect of the majority of those were, I would

ruefully admit that almost none of them made substantive or meaningful impact on my

teaching or my students. This lack of change is not because I lack the drive to learn or am

intractable in my teaching practices. I typically both attend and leave sessions with the

desire to learn something new that I can apply to my students. When I look at all of the

professional development sessions I've attended and all the time spent, there are common

threads between the ones that helped me make change and the ones that did not. In this

chapter, I will explore my experiences with the flaws of professional development as it

exists now, my teaching experiences, and lay out what my Capstone Project will entail.

This chapter will look at how my experiences and motivation led me to my research

question: *How can implementing a mentoring program support elementary classroom*

teachers in changing their practices with language learners?

According to the Learning Policy Institute, effective teacher professional development

must consist of expert support, a sustained duration, and time for reflection and feedback,

as well as focusing on topics that pertain to the specific content (i.e. science, literacy,

math) teachers are expected to teach (Darling-Hammond & Gardner, 2017). These

specific points run counter to most of my experience with professional learning and that of many of my colleagues.

Among one of the greatest challenges with teacher PD is its tendency to be a one-time learning opportunity. At the schools I've worked at, professional development is offered at the beginning of the school year as new initiatives and goals are set. New learning is always uncovered within these sessions that is exciting and new, something that could be implemented with my students as soon as the moment presents itself. Then I walk down the hall, start unpacking boxes, putting up bulletin boards, and calling families to invite them to Open House. I put down the page with my hurriedly scribbled notes from the PD and forget all about it. As the new school year begins, my focus shifts to how to teach using lockers and raising hands and learning letter sounds and an endless to-do list, but the new learning falls by the wayside.

I do not believe I am alone in this pattern.

All the schools I have worked in start the year with initiatives and goals for the school year, but fail to follow through as the school year progresses. In my experience, teachers are left with lofty ideas of what they want to do, but no accountability or ongoing support for the changes they want to make. This continuing cycle of delivering professional development and then never talking about it again creates a wasted learning opportunity when there are teachers, myself included, who want to hone their craft and become stronger practitioners.

As I have progressed in my teaching career, I have also found that most professional development sessions are delivered via an undifferentiated whole-group teaching approach. The P.E. teacher, the veteran literacy specialist, and the brand-new classroom

teacher all sit getting the same information whether it is irrelevant, known, or overwhelming.

This traditional method of professional development leaves many educators out. It is everything that the teaching profession has been told not to do. As teachers, we are told extensively about– and many professional developments focus specifically on – differentiation. Differentiation can be defined simply as, "a teacher's reacting responsively to a learner's needs" (Tomlinson & Allen, 2000). Looking at this definition, and knowing that to be a teacher is to be a learner, it becomes clear that learning for teachers needs to be differentiated to be meaningful. Teachers, in a learning environment, need the same consideration of their needs and existing skills to be acknowledged and valued for the time to be meaningful.

One other thread runs through the ineffective professional learning I have taken part in: multiple goals and areas of focus. The schools that I have worked at have been considered "low performing" and "high needs." These labels create a sense of urgency both with teachers and administrators to do everything in our power to create a strong learning environment for our students. This same urgency, however, also creates the impression that everything needs to get done at once. This leads to professional development throughout the year ranging from math to trauma informed teaching, from guided reading to parent relationships. All of these things are critical, but when they are all the priority then none of them are. Schools need to focus on the students in front of them and choose one primary area of focus. In my experience, the more goals are piled on the worse the quality of each becomes, leaving schools that desperately want to make change spinning their wheels.

I have had a few experiences that changed my view about how effective professional development can be implemented that both impacts teacher practice and student growth. In one of my first years teaching, the district hired a consultant who came in multiple times throughout the year. Her professional development focused on the same overarching goals. She modeled in classrooms, observed people's teaching, and gave feedback around practice. The school took on the challenge of having teachers' Professional Learning Cycles (PLCs) focus around the same topics. Seeing this inspired change in the staff. Teacher practice began to shift. Students began to grow. This change led me to the first part of my research question, considering how implementing on-going mentoring shifts teacher practice. The next section will dive into how my teaching experience impacted the area of focus for language learners.

Teaching Experience and Personal Relevance

I started my teaching career as an English as a Second Language teacher (hereafter referred to as EL), working in co-teaching settings with kindergarten, first, third, and fourth graders. This experience gave me the opportunity to see multiple teachers at multiple grade levels. In this, it my eyes opened to how they interacted with students, what teaching strategies they used, and how they managed their classes. It became evident how lessons that were planned with a team were implemented differently in various classrooms. During this time, I gained an appreciation for the sheer variety of ways to approach teaching and learned more about what I valued as a teacher by observing and co-teaching.

Additionally, I was able to build my own craft as a teacher and figure out where my own skills and area of expertise fit into a larger picture. Many of my classes were

Spanish Dual Language Immersion, meaning that the time I was in the classroom was the only time they used English for academic purposes. The rest of the day the students were learning in their native language. Because of this, there was pressure to help students learn English so that when they exited the program they would be ready to participate in English-only classes. However, there was also the knowledge that they were not missing out on content, such as reading and math, so the focus could truly be language development. During this time, there were ample opportunities for mentoring and professional development around supporting students through content, which helped me build my own capacity for focusing on language.

These opportunities helped me hone my skills with creating intentional grouping based on language ability, appropriate scaffolds for language learners, tools for vocabulary development, and how to transfer oral language skills, which develop rapidly at the elementary level, to writing.

In my third year of teaching, I transitioned to be a second-grade classroom teacher. My class was in the other program in the school, in which students learned only in English. About half of my class did not speak English as their first language. My practice needed to shift to meet their needs. I moved from a class where all of my students did the majority of their learning in their native language to a classroom where only half did. My students needed language support for almost every task we undertook. They had an EL teacher, who co-taught for 45 minutes a day, but the rest of the day they needed me to be able to use my skills as an EL teacher to support their content learning.

For the next seven years my classes were made up of similar demographics of students. Sometimes the ratio of ELs to native English speakers was lower, but there were

always students who needed support with their language development in a mainstream classroom setting.

During this time, I have developed and presented multiple professional development sessions around this topic. All, however, have fallen into the trap laid out earlier in the chapter. They were one-time only and not a true priority for the participants. Although many teachers commented after these sessions that this is what their students needed, I am doubtful that any have made substantial changes to their practice.

As Minnesota and the nation diversify and we welcome more and more students into our classrooms who need English language support, teachers need to grow in their ability to support these learners. In thinking about this need for teachers to make change, I worry about schools delivering a single-day professional development about the needs of language learners and then moving on. Students need their teachers to make changes in practice. With this project, I am hoping to develop a trajectory for schools to support teachers in a way that will create the learning students are entitled to.

Mentoring experience and connection

Over the last year, I have been working as a mentor to teachers who are new to the school district. This position has a focus of helping teachers develop a wide range of skills from planning, to classroom environment, to instruction. My work has been with teachers who come from different backgrounds, with varying degrees of skills and experiences. Working with teachers who have different needs has given me insight into how adults learn and how support for each person needs to be tailored to their needs and abilities.

As a mentor, I have gained a new set of skills and insight into how teachers change and grow their practices. There have been opportunities to watch teachers grow in confidence, competence, and capacity. In my experience, one of the greatest motivations for teachers has been seeing the needs of their students and recognizing the impact they can have on their learning when they begin to implement new strategies. I have yet to come across a teacher in this work who did not want to make changes to be a stronger practitioner for their students. In an end of year survey, all the teachers on my caseload reported that they either agreed or strongly agreed that mentoring helped them impact student learning. If there is a way to support teachers that truly impacts students, I want to investigate how to target this kind of learning towards specific aims.

This project

Thinking of my own experience in mentoring and my experience both delivering and participating in professional development sessions – where I suspect the impact on student learning is far lower – I want to explore how mentoring supports can be applied to promote teacher and student growth in a targeted way around specific goals, as a professional development session aims to do. This exploration will support my research question: *How can implementing a mentoring program support elementary classroom teachers in changing their practices with language learners?* Linking back to my time teaching classes of multilingual students, I will work to create a mentoring system that promotes student language accessibility and acquisition in the mainstream classroom. This project will take the form of a slide deck for an initial workshop and a guidebook that provides a trajectory for a mentor to develop teachers' capacity to engage and teach EL students.

Conclusion and next steps

Teacher growth and development is critical. In Minnesota in 2019, the last year with recorded data, 81% of ELs did not meet grade level standards as assessed by the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021). This number has actually decreased over the last five years.

Looking at these numbers creates a sense of urgency within me. As an educator I want to find ways to help teachers change their practices in ways that will improve student learning for all language learners. All students are entitled to classrooms that meet their needs. This is an area I am passionate about because of the students I have worked with and the growth I know is possible for them.

The next chapter will delve into research around methods and models of mentoring; what makes professional development effective, both including and beyond the traditional one day model; areas of focus to support language learners in the mainstream classroom; and why language learners struggle in mainstream classrooms. Through this research I hope to answer the question: "How can on-going mentoring support teachers in changing their practices around language learners in a mainstream classroom?"

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Teachers continuously work to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms. As demographics shift and teachers begin working with more and more language learners, they are often left to their own devices or inadequate training in an attempt to do so. This section seeks to answer the following question: *"How can on-going mentoring support teachers in changing their practices around language learners in a mainstream classroom?"*

To explore this question, there are two divergent areas of research that will be examined. The first section will look into common current methods of professional development and the conditions under which teachers are able to make effective changes in their practice. This portion of the chapter will also look at the impacts of mentoring as a means of creating change in teacher practice, as well as the core competencies of mentoring. The second section of the chapter will look at literature around the needs of language learners. It will discuss how their needs vary from native language speakers and some areas of consideration for teachers who serve these students. These areas will be explored separately due to the literature available, and each address one half of the research question.

This chapter will review existing literature around best practices in professional development as well as the needs of language learners to create a cohesive case for the need of on-going support for teachers who support language learners in their classrooms.

Professional Development

Professional development plays a critical role in helping educators implement and adapt as standards, demographics, and educational priorities shift. In the state of Minnesota, teachers must demonstrate every five years that they have completed 125 Continuing Education Units (CEUS). As teachers work towards re-licensure there are seven mandatory areas of professional development including language learning, reading instruction, and cultural competency (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2020). Educators are able to meet these requirements by attending and participating in professional development sessions. Professional development, for the purposes of this paper, will be defined as the process by which teachers and educators continue to learn and grow in their professional practices in a structured setting with other educators. These learning opportunities range from single presentations of information on a topic to on-going, year long instructional teams or mentoring (Rebora, 2011).

Ozer and Beycioglu (2010), of Inonu University in Turkey, explain that particularly in this time of education reform and increased demands on teachers, professional development is a critical piece of ensuring both teachers' and students' successes. They also espouse that professional development is a key piece of lowering teacher burnout, but only when done effectively. The need for professional development is high, not only according to researchers, but teachers and administrators themselves. A 2012 survey of teachers found that 78% of teachers and 83% of principals say that meeting the needs of diverse learners is a challenge. At the same time, 50% of teachers say it is difficult to find the guidance and support needed to meet those changing needs (METLife teacher survey, 2012)

In looking at this need for teacher support, research around professional development provides critical features that distinguish effective and ineffective practices. Ineffective professional development typically combines surface-level understanding of new teaching skills as well as a lack of follow-through on the part of either the teacher or the facilitator (Schmoker, 2021). Conversely, effective professional development relies on a deep focus on skills, orientation towards action, reflection, and feedback (Darling-Hammond & Gardner, 2017) .

Ineffective Professional Development. Researchers have found varying impacts of learning opportunities for educators. Before delving into best practices, this paper will explore the literature around what common features of professional development are less impactful for changing teacher practices. Valerie Strauss, education writer for *The Washington Post*, explained that the problems with many models of professional development stem from what is known as the "workshop" model, in which participants spend a single day learning about a topic and then have no follow up on what they learned. This was best exemplified when the Los Angeles Unified School District spent five hundred million dollars on continuing education for teachers using this model, with no measurable change in results for students (Strauss, 2011).

In the one-day workshop models used, teachers had little time for practice and improvement with the skills they were supposed to acquire (Schmoker, 2021). One study showed that when teachers engaged in professional learning that was fewer than 14 hours, neither student outcomes nor teacher practices changed in any way (What Makes Professional Development for Teachers Effective? 2018). As Schmoker explained, "Despite huge investments of time and treasure, professional development has had

minimal overall impact on instructional quality. It hasn't ensured that the best evidence-based practices are routinely employed in classrooms" (Schmoker, 2021 p. 65). Using single day workshops creates both an expensive and ineffective model for professional development.

In the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, the single day professional development model was derided as being ineffective and funding for them was cut; however, this lack of funding did not change the frequency or prevalence of these one-off professional opportunities, with 96% of teachers reporting having been involved in them over the course of a year (Rebora, 2011). These models persist, despite evidence available that demonstrates which practices create stronger and more lasting change in teacher practices.

Focus. In creating professional development, researchers agreed on several aspects that must be in place for success and growth to occur. One of the themes that emerged in research is focus: focus on content, focus on who is being trained, and duration of focus. Darling-Hammond and Gardner (2017) explained that teachers need to learn something that is applicable to what they teach and how they teach it. Professional development needs to hone in on specific pedagogical or curriculum design specifically related to content areas. Focus also pertains to considering the specific needs of the educators involved in the training. As much as is feasible, sessions should be specific to both grade and content areas. When this occurs, teachers are more connected to the discipline content and feel more engaged and willing to implement it. Not all teachers need to attend all professional development, especially when it is not applicable to their work (What Makes Professional Development for Teachers Effective?, 2018). Creating a large

and overarching professional development is less impactful than a targeted approach for specific individuals whose practice would benefit (Strauss, 2011).

Focus extends not only to what is taught or expected from professional development, but also the length of time educators are given to learn and practice skills to adequately develop them. One key to creating an effective practice shift is having a single initiative at a time, not many. This allows teachers to hone their skills and make improvements rather than jumping to the next thing. In his findings, Schomker (2021) explained that the reason so many initiatives fail is an institution's desire to implement many things at once instead of giving teachers time to develop new practices . Teachers need at least 20 instances of practice for a new technique to become automatic, which only happens through on-going support and consideration. When teachers rapidly move on to new initiatives or are unsupported following a professional development session, they are much less likely to be able to implement it (What Makes Professional Development for Teachers Effective?, 2018). Teachers require the ability to focus on content that matters to them and their subject area as well as sustained focus over time to grow in their skills.

Action-oriented professional development. Another theme among research is the need to have action oriented professional development that can be implemented in classrooms. Implementing new strategies is the most difficult part of professional development. Teachers are often excited and enthusiastic about new strategies and skills, but then struggle to use them in the classroom (What Makes Professional Development for Teachers Effective? 2018). Darling-Hammond and Gardner (2017) explained that this difficulty can be overcome in part by having participants engage in the same strategies and practices that they will be using in the classroom. When teachers engage with the

exact type of strategy they will be using with students they are more able to implement it in their practice.

One study found that teachers were more invested and engaged in learning when they had the opportunity to practice with the curriculum they were supposed to be learning (Bransford, 2000). Having time to practice and plan within professional development sessions is a necessity to help teachers build skill and confidence in their new practices (Schmoker, 2021). Giving the space and ability to practice within a session creates an environment in which teachers are able to build their abilities, causing a greater likelihood of success once back in the classroom.

Reflection and feedback. A final theme that emerges from a variety of research is the need for educators to engage in reflection and receive feedback around their practices. Teachers need time to think about how they are interacting with new skills and how they want to improve. They also need objective feedback directly related to what they are working on (Jacobson, et. al., 2020).

Reflection can come in many forms from self-reflection to Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to work with a coach or mentor (Darling-Hammond & Gardner 2017). The purpose of reflection is to help understand how new skills and strategies are being implemented, what improvements need to be made, as well as what successes have occurred; being able to highlight success within practice and have time for reflection increases teachers' sense of efficacy and decreases teacher burnout (Ozer & Beycioglu, 2010). Reflection can be facilitated by an instructional coach or mentor and coupled with observations and feedback (Darling-Hammond & Gardner, 2017).

Observations accompanied by meaningful feedback are also brought up across research. A team of researchers in North Dakota found that ongoing cycles of reflection and feedback increased both teacher efficacy and retention. When new teachers were involved in programs where they had access to regular observations and feedback, they were more likely to stay in the profession and show decreased levels of burnout (Jacobson et. al, 2020). In addition to this finding in North Dakota, Schmoker (2021) contrasted the educators' ability to master new skills with increased feedback instead of the traditional one-and-done style workshops. Schmoker writes, "Sustained, consistent performance depends upon our willingness to observe, guide, and celebrate implementation of evidence-based practices" (pp. 68-69). With this, he explained the necessity of ongoing feedback and reflection to improve teacher practice. Without consistent levels of support and scaffolding, teachers are unable to make the changes necessary for their students.

Mentoring and coaching

Several of the researchers pointed out that among the most valuable aspects of professional development was feedback and reflection, but neglected in the previous section was *who* is responsible for facilitating those critical aspects of professional development. This section will explore the role and importance of coaching and mentoring, for these purposes used interchangeably, to increase the effectiveness of professional development and growth of professional practices.

In education, the term mentor can mean several things. Bransford differentiated between informal mentoring -- chats in the hall or the staff lounge -- and formal mentoring -- a more experienced teacher taking a new teacher under their wing

encouraged or directed by the school (2000). Aguilar, founder of Bright Morning Consulting, a mentoring and educational firm, explained mentoring differently as a formalized relationship often set up by a school or district with specific goals or targets identified by the mentor, the teacher, or the school. The mentor is often someone who is not a current teacher, but focuses specifically on coaching and mentoring as a full time role. Additionally, Aguilar argued that the goal of mentoring should be to explore and shift behavior, beliefs, and ways of being to improve outcomes for students (2013). In their research Crawford, et. al. (2017) of The Ohio State University discussed a common misconception among coaches. They say many believe that their job is simply to support a teacher in whatever their efforts are. In reality, they say, a coaching model requires a structural understanding of the time and frequency of coaching, as well as focus on a specific intervention. While these three differ on the exact role of a mentor, they share some common threads, primarily that the focus is on having an expert work with someone with less experience or skill to increase outcomes for students.

Mentoring and coaching can look different according to different models. Bransford (2000) noted that it is critical to understand that educators at different levels of both experience and skill require varying degrees of mentoring and support. He explained that a second year teacher will have a different set of needs than a 25-year veteran teacher. Eller and Eller (2018), both principals, explain that mentoring can take the form of consulting, collaborating, or guiding based on the needs and experience of the teacher. Mentors work best when they understand who they are working with and what their specific needs are, as well as the parameters of school-based decisions and priorities. This

process involves time for building trust between the mentor and teacher, as well as a baseline understanding of the teachers' existing practices and beliefs (Aguilar, 2013).

Coaching, Aguilar argued, should be done in conjunction with larger goals and not simply whatever a teacher wants to work on at a given moment. She, for example, created a coaching model specifically focused on equity for students as well as a formalized work plan in which goals are set and monitored throughout the coaching process (Aguilar, 2020, Aguilar, 2013). Educators in Texas developed a system of mentoring to help teachers meet school readiness goals with preschoolers (Crawford, et. al. 2017). North Dakota's model focused on teacher retention in the early years in the profession (Jacobson, et. al. 2020). Though all of these models differ in their desired outcomes, they share a recognition that to help teachers improve their practice they need on-going support from a designated person, and that the mentor must also possess a set of core competencies to make the work effective.

Impacts of mentoring. According to a 2021 study by the Minnesota Teacher Licensing and Standards Board, 22.5% of teachers leave their teaching position within the first three years of their career. The study showed that this attrition rate causes a higher teacher demand than supply. This attrituation created the need for lower-tiered licensures, which means more teachers coming in with little to no preparation. Statewide, 70% of districts report that teacher shortages either significantly or very significantly impacted them. School districts spend time and money training teachers, often to have a significant portion leave the district within a three year period.

There are a variety of reasons listed by the report with the highest proportion of them being "personal;" however, in his research, Bryan Zugelder, associate dean at James

Madison University (2019) found that 17% of teachers leave the profession because of

lack of professional support. Another study found that in the first five years of teaching

between 20-44% of teachers quit, many citing either lack of professional support or job

dissatisfaction. This attrition rate directly impacts students, particularly as states undergo

demographic shifts (Jacobson, et. al. 2020). Both Zugelder and Jacobson also found that

implementing effective teacher mentoring programs increased teacher retention rates.

Zugelder found that retention improved by 11% with mentoring (2019). Creating the

conditions that foster professional satisfaction and support allows schools to cultivate

effective practitioners who will be more likely to meet the needs of their students.

The quantitative impact of job-embedded mentoring also was studied by Liu and Liao

(2019) of Central Connecticut State University and Beijing Normal University,

respectively. They found that mentoring had the most significant increase of any variable

related to professional development on teacher practice in classroom instruction,

management, and the overall feeling of teacher efficacy. This finding showed that with

mentoring in place teachers were more able to implement new practices and increased a

sense of quality when teachers received professional development opportunities.

These pieces of research put together work to demonstrate that mentoring, when

implemented with strategic goals in mind, has a sizable effect on both teacher retention

and teacher practice. However, further research suggests that coaching and mentoring are

most effective when certain conditions are in place to make mentors successful in their

work.

Trust building. The process of mentoring requires that mentors build strong relationships

with teachers. Bransford (2000)explained that coaches need to help create communities

of learning in which teachers feel supported. This comports with Aguilar's (2020) work, in which she explored the necessity of creating trust between teachers and mentors in order to facilitate teacher learning. In both of these examples, there is an acknowledgement that a mentor must understand the teacher they are working with in order to best enhance their practice and show caring for the individual teacher.

Part of this work begins with trust building and asking for permission, according to Hellander-Pung, an instructional coach. She explained that in order for teachers to want to engage in the coaching process, they must first be invited into it and accept that invitation (2015). She and Aguilar agreed that to continue building that trust, coaches must keep the confidentiality of the teacher to the greatest extent possible. They need to set up a system with both the teacher and the administrator at the site, so all parties understand the expectation around communication (Hellander-Pung, 2015; Aguilar, 2013). Aguilar explained that this is not always a popular choice with administrators, but she believes it is necessary to both gain and keep the trust of a teacher, deeming it essential for a teacher to open up to the idea of being coached (2013). The act of building trust is one that these two coaches cite as being a critical piece to creating Bransford's ideal of supportive learning communities.

Goal setting. In mentoring, setting goals gives the work purpose and direction (Hellander-Pung, 2015). Without a direct goal, mentors and teachers alike can get lost in the day-to-day aspects of teaching and lose sight of an overarching aim. Mentors should work with teachers to set goals based on specific parameters that hold meaning to the teacher and are in line with a school's vision (Aguilar, 2013).

Teachers are rarely able to choose what professional development they are involved in, and because of this they feel less efficacious in their work and less invested in what they are doing. Goal setting also allows for an understanding that different educators are in different places with their skills and knowledge (Bransford, 2000). When they are able to set their own goals, teachers are much more likely to commit to those practices and make real change, especially when there are measures of accountability (Hellander-Pung, 2015). By employing goal-setting, mentors are able to understand individual needs and create systems and strategies that support teachers in their practice.

Observations. In his research, Schmoker (2021) explores the idea that when observations and feedback are regularly incorporated into teacher learning, teachers are more likely to improve in their practice. As was discussed earlier, feedback and reflection are pieces of professional development that shift practice. When a mentor comes in to observe a teacher, there should be specific evidence that the mentor is collecting, based on the goals that the teacher and mentor have worked together to set (Aguilar, 2013). By using observations with specific feedback in mind, mentors are better able to understand the realities of the teacher's situation and give evidence to support both strengths and areas of growth. Aguilar (2020) explained that observations give space for feedback that is objective, lead to stronger questioning and thoughts around specific practices or students, and open opportunities for reflection. Observations also allow the mentor and teacher to track progress over time. When teachers are able to see that they are making changes, they are able to understand the impact those changes have on student learning (Crawford, et. al. 2017). By using observations, coaches can guide teachers to understand their own practices in deeper ways.

Research around mentoring has little deviation around best practices and impact. Researchers agree that mentoring, when done with certain components, is an effective way to increase teacher capability and student achievement. It provides individualized professional development that meets the needs of students and teachers.

Summary. By looking at the research around best practices for professional development and mentoring, it becomes possible to see trends that have the most impact on teacher development. Teachers require ongoing practice, understanding of their own professional needs and skills, the ability to set meaningful goals, opportunities to reflect and engage with the work they are doing, and consistent support to make any substantial changes to their practice. If these fundamental structures are in place, teachers can shift what they are doing to meet the needs of their students. The next section will dive into a specific set of learners with whom many teachers still struggle and whose needs they wish to address. Developing on-going mentoring in conjunction with strong professional development is critical to creating change in teacher practices.

Language learners

When looking at professional development and mentoring, it is critical to consider the people who are most impacted by teaching practices: students. While teacher attrition and overall discontent can be a byproduct of poor professional development, the students bear the brunt of this. Schmoker (2021) explained that the students who are impacted at the highest levels are the students who are historically and chronically underserved, namely students of color and students whose first language is not English. Of the 125 CEUs that teachers must complete, only one is required to be in language learning (Minnesota Professional Licensing and Standards Board, 2021). As discussed earlier, single hour

professional development has proved ineffective at making any change in teacher practice. This lack of training is evident in Minnesota, where only 40% of language learners made adequate progress toward targets set by the state in 2019 (MN Report Card, 2021). On the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment, only 13.9% of language learners passed in 2019, a number which has decreased over the past 4 years.

The needs of these students have been recognized by federal law in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in which all teachers are required to attend professional development and demonstrate that they are working to meet the needs of their language learners (Lindahl, 2015). The American Federation of Teachers (n.d.) explained that schools and districts will receive additional funding to meet the needs of language learners in their schools. This law gives schools the motivation and resources to integrate language learners into their understanding of overall achievement. Despite these resources, Lindahl (2015) argued,

It's what's missing from ESSA that is the most relevant for L2 teacher educators. The TESOL statement notes that the ESSA has some new provisions for teacher professional development, but it is limited, leaving out specific resources or conditions for how to expand the knowledge base of current or preservice teachers who work with ELLs....This speaks to the notion that working with ELLs requires "just good teaching" … rather than acknowledging that effectively teaching ELLs requires a sophisticated awareness of language and pedagogical practices (para 7).

In this, she contended that the teaching of language learners cannot be boiled down to the belief that ELs can be taught using the same methods that work for other students. They have their own unique needs, and those that work with teachers who serve language

learners need to understand the differences in pedagogical practice to work ELs. The educators responsible for teaching ELs need professional development and support to shift their own practice to meet the needs of their students.

Lindahl went on to say that teachers need to do more than see teaching ELs as an add-on to what they are already doing and integrate their instructional strategies more fully to meet the needs of their students (Lindahl, 2015). In addition, research by Dugay, et. al. (2016) found that there was a high correlation between teacher knowledge of how to instruct ELs and their ability to implement strong teaching strategies for those learners. In her work, Back (2020) expressed concern that ELs do not have access to highly trained language teachers outside of their designated EL time; however, she contended that by training and enlisting the support outside of the ESL teacher, students will be better supported. These pieces of research suggest that if teachers are going to meet the needs of ELs, there must be shifts in both preparation and practice.

In looking at the gap between expectations for teachers and training they are given, it is necessary to investigate what skills must be built to create conditions for success. The next section will address the specific needs of language learners, outlying areas of focus for teachers seeking to work with language learners in a mainstream classroom setting. This is not an exhaustive list of all topics pertaining to language learning, but an overview of four overarching themes that appeared in a wide range of literature.

Vocabulary. In learning a new language, understanding and being able to use appropriate words is necessary for communication. In English language learning, there is a distinction made between the vocabulary needed for basic, social communication and language used for academic purposes. Different researchers referred to them in different ways, but one

of the most common distinctions is basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Avalos, et. al., 2007).

In the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework (2020) the authors suggest that students must be able to grow their vocabulary at different levels according to their language proficiency in order to gain greater control over their language and convey ideas more precisely in academic contexts. As a student's proficiency grows, their control of specific words must also increase. This need is echoed by Pang (2017), of Bloomsburg University, who explained that many language learners struggle with limited vocabulary, particularly in regards to words that have multiple meanings. When students have greater understanding of the words they need to use, they grow in their reading comprehension and writing skills (Pang, 2017; Dugay, et. al., 2016). By focusing on vocabulary development, teachers can give students a greater understanding of the most basic component of language they will need to build comprehension and language output.

There are a wide variety of strategies that teachers can implement to increase vocabulary development. When planning for students, Avalos et. al. (2007) suggested picking out two or three receptive vocabulary words -- words that would be defined as CALP -- and five to nine productive words -- words that fall under the BICS designation -- that may be confusing to students, even though these same words are used with a relatively high frequency of use by native speakers. These BICS words may include examples of homophones, homographs, and figurative language. ELs differ in their ability to understand this type of vocabulary; by specifically addressing the BICS vocabulary, ELs gain access to a text. Pang, on the other hand, suggests drawing students

attention more highly to the CALP vocabulary, using the example of the water cycle and needing words such as evaporation and condensation. Both Pang and Avalos understand that addressing vocabulary in a dedicated way helps ELs gain access to texts and express themselves effectively. As teachers seek to work with ELs, having an understanding of how different types of vocabulary connect with overall comprehension.

In its instructional framework, WIDA further expressed a differentiation between common social language, language that crosses over disciplines, and language that is technical and only relates to a single content area. It also explained that these different levels of vocabulary development should be taken in context with a student's existing language level. Students who are newly learning English should focus more on BICS than CALP, with increasing focus on technical language as their proficiency increases (WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020). As teachers work with their students, they need to be aware of what vocabulary is appropriate for students depending on their current language proficiency.

While all of these sources have various ideas about how to approach the planning and instruction of vocabulary, they all agree that helping ELs grow their vocabulary is critical to increasing language proficiency and academic success.

Syntax. Building outwards from the word-level of vocabulary, language development relies on growing syntactical understanding and production. Language structures relate to word order, sentence structure, and grammatical features used. In order for ELs to make growth in their language development, they must increase their understanding and use of complex syntaxes (WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020). In its Essential Actions Handbook, WIDA explained that different disciplines rely on

different grammatical structures, and as such it is necessary to plan for the types of structures specific to a subject area. Grammatical structures cannot be learned in isolation and need to be tied to content areas and existing learning (WIDA Essential Actions Handbook, 2013). Teachers must understand how the content they are teaching relates to the language functions they want their students to comprehend and produce.

Avalos, et. al. (2007) added further to the discussion, explaining that when teaching ELs, teachers should remember to find a balance of types of texts being used to create stronger understanding of varieties of syntax and grammatical features. They say that expository texts tend to hold sentence structures more consistent with CALP level communication, while narrative texts are more likely to help students understand and use figurative structures such as metaphors and similes. Building a variety of sentence types helps ELs extend their understanding of language allowing them to build their proficiency.

Pang (2017 also discusses the importance of growing grammatical understanding, explaining that students may need direct instruction to help build their capacity. She states that students who are able to find differences between two things, in a Venn diagram for instance, may need instruction on how to create sentences that use comparing and contrasting language. Language learners require additional levels of instruction surrounding grammatical features, and teachers must plan for both what students will understand and what they will be able to produce from that understanding.

Oral language and cooperative learning. Oral language consists of the modalities of speaking and listening. Students in almost all classes spend a large amount of time listening, and a much smaller proportion of their time speaking. In classroom

observations, research found that in 90% of their interactions, students spoke only one or two words at a time, usually in response to a question posed by a teacher and answered by students raising their hands (Strauss, 2011). According to Soto-Hinman (2011), in order to learn a language, students must have time to practice and grow in their oral language skills. Having time to speak in an academic context is crucial to language development as well as helping students access grade-level content in English. Building oral language skills is not merely a matter of helping students talk, but also a key component in increasing their skills in reading and writing. Zwiers et. al. (2014) explained that by increasing oral language production there are gains for students across language modalities, as well as providing a foundation for students to solidify their own understanding of ideas and concepts in the classroom. The literature is in agreement on the necessity of intentional oral language development in support of both language learning and access to content.

In order to create a classroom that supports oral language development, teachers need to plan for what ELs are going to need, as well as the structures that will be in place to support them. Building academic language can take many forms. Some research talks about cooperative learning structures in which the teacher specifies how students will complete their work and gives form to how conversations can take place. Kagan explained that cooperative learning goes beyond the traditional group work in a classroom; it is incumbent upon the teacher to provide structure for student-student interaction. He identified four key points: positive interaction, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction. These points, he says, create an environment in which all students, including ELs, are required and supported to

participate in the group and develop their oral language skills (2002). Zwiers, et. al. (2014) explained that using structures to support language development moves students beyond the idea of getting the answer right and towards building their own knowledge, while simultaneously building language skills. By engaging with cooperative learning strategies, Zwiers and Kagan argued, students grow their oral language development at a significantly greater rate than they would in classrooms without them.

Not all researchers agree that cooperative learning is highly beneficial to language development. While Zwiers (2014) and Kagan (2002) argue that cooperative learning and intentional language structures are necessary to help students develop their language skills, other studies showed smaller or no impacts of cooperative learning. Harper and de Jong (2004) argue that cooperative learning can have impact, but only when done with intention and with the addition of direct instruction around specific grammatical structures. Ghaith and Yagi (1998) found that in two classes, one in which cooperative learning was implemented and the other where it was not, there was no measurable difference in overall outcomes for most of the students; however, they did find that lower-performing students in the cooperative learning class did make more gains than their peers in the control group. While there is some speculation on the impacts of developing language skills through cooperative learning, Zhang (2010) argued that it is an effective teaching methodology for students learning a new language because it provides increased opportunities for language input and output, creates conditions for a variety of language functions, and gives students independence and responsibility for their learning. By increasing opportunities for students to engage with language in both speaking and listening to peers, ELs increase their oral language production, which

improves their overall language proficiency across modalities. As teachers work with EL, their understanding of strategies and structures to support learning increases students' overall language growth.

Student identity. To effectively teach ELs, teachers must not only understand the language students need to learn and the structures to help them do it, but also the identities of the individual students they work with. Wilson et. al. (2017) explained that students engage best with their language learning when they see it as a vehicle for developing their own independence and connecting with others. ELs are more invested in their learning when they see themselves reflected in the language and content they are being taught (2012). To help foster students' sense of self and identity, a teacher needs to be able to relate to their students and understand the cultural context of those students. Muhamed, creator of a historical and culturally responsive literature framework, explained that often when teachers struggle with students whose identities are different from their own, it is because the curriculum and instruction do not appreciate and reflect the identities of the students. She said that instruction must include a discussion of identity and learning should center the identities and experiences of the students (2020). Further, Aguilar (2020) contended that teachers must understand their own identities and how those are similar and different from the students they serve. The idea of finding identity comports with the findings of Pang (2017), who explained the importance of students writing personal narratives as a way to express themselves through language. When teaching ELs, teachers must understand the context that students bring with them and reflect those understandings in both what they teach and how they teach it (Muhamed, 2020). These authors all explained that student identity is critical to the way

in which teachers instruct and implement curriculum with ELs. When teachers are able to recognize and respond to students' identities, they are better able to teach and connect with them.

Conclusion. Language learners have specific needs that differ from native English speakers. In learning to work with ELs, teachers need to have an understanding of various aspects of language acquisition and how to plan for and instruct them. This section was not an exhaustive summary of how to teach language learners, but instead an overview of areas that researchers agree are necessary for helping ELs make gains, particularly when they are in mainstream classrooms. The areas of vocabulary, syntax, oral language development, and identity are critical pieces that all teachers who work with ELs need to understand. By looking at these aspects, it is possible to narrow focus enough to begin supporting language learners in a mainstream classroom.

Summary

Throughout this literature review, the two aspects of the question, *"How can on-going mentoring support teachers in changing their practices around language learners in a mainstream classroom?"* have been kept separately. First, this chapter looked at the need for on-going mentoring support using the parameters of best practices with professional development. It explored both the failures of more traditional professional development practices and areas that can be improved, with an emphasis on how and why instructional coaching and mentoring benefits teachers and students. The second portion of this chapter reviewed the scholarship around ELs. It looked at how ELs are underserved currently and how that shows up in state-level data. Then the specific

language needs of students were taken into consideration, focusing on four main topics, vocabulary, syntax, oral language development, and student identity.

By taking these two seemingly unrelated topics and combining them, it becomes possible to see not only what aspects of teaching can be improved, but also how to do it. Simply understanding what ELs need in the classroom will not improve instruction and outcomes if teachers are not supported in making changes.

The literature reviewed showed that ELs have unique needs, which teachers must understand in order to support them. It also showed that if teachers are going to change their practices, they should engage with on-going support, ideally with a mentor. Finding ways to support teachers working with ELs is necessary for both teacher satisfaction and student outcomes. Combining mentoring and the skills and strategies needed to teach language learners allows room for a framework to support teachers when working with ELs.

The next chapter will take a deeper look at how implementation of effective mentoring and professional development can be deployed to support mainstream classroom teachers of ELs. Considering the implications of the literature reviewed in this chapter, a professional development model will be developed that takes the critical aspects of language learning and combines them with best practices around mentoring to create tools and a scope and sequence to produce *on-going mentoring support for mainstream classroom teachers of language learners.*

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Chapter Overview

This chapter's purpose is to explore the rationale and methods used to develop my Capstone Project. This chapter will lay out the purpose and scope of the project as well as give details around the timeframe and participants. The purpose will be looking at the ways to support my research question: *How can implementing a mentoring program support elementary classroom teachers in changing their practices with language learners?*

This chapter will focus first on the necessity of this project, both from my personal experience and the research explored in Chapter Two. It will join together the two key parts of research: how to best support teachers through mentoring and coaching and the critical needs of English Learners (ELs) in a mainstream elementary classroom. Next, it will explain how exactly the project will be developed including key resources, tools, timeline, setting, and audience. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a summary of the project and an introduction to Chapter Four.

Context

The purpose of my capstone project is to support mainstream classroom teachers in shifting their practices around language learners. In order to help change what happens in a classroom, teachers need ongoing support from a mentor or coach to provide feedback and space for reflection. The context of this project joins together three of my professional educational experiences: being an EL teacher, an elementary classroom teacher in a setting with many ELs, and a teacher mentor. In each of these roles, I have

gained a new lens on the daily experience of students and teachers. With each of them, I have come to understand both the process and need for adult learning, as well as how ELs can be supported in a mainstream classroom.

Rationale

How can on-going mentoring support teachers in changing their practices around language learners in a mainstream classroom? In classrooms all across Minnesota, there are a growing number of language learners; but teachers are only required to attend a single hour of training over the course of five years. In his research, Bransford (2000) found that these one hour, or even one day training sessions, leave educators lacking both the how and why to implement change. He goes further to say that when teachers participate in this kind of workshop they become disengaged and disinterested in the learning all together. The language learners of Minnesota deserve to have teachers who feel confident and understand how to meet their needs.

The WIDA English language development standards framework (2020) lays out some key foundational pieces to meeting the needs of English learners. They highlight vocabulary as a key building block of language. With vocabulary they explain that different content areas (math, social studies, English language arts, and science) each have their own specific academic language as well as language that is needed across content. Teachers need to understand what kind of vocabulary they are asking students to learn and how it can be applied both specifically and broadly. This framework also points to syntax as an area of focus for language learners, explaining that it cannot be acquired simply through grammar lessons, but rather in the context of academic content. Finally, they discuss the importance of oral language as a key piece of language learning.

Teachers often focus on reading comprehension as the key assessment, but as Zwiers et. al. address, oral language development not only helps students express themselves and develop their ideas more fully, but contributes to all other aspects of language development (2014).

As teachers seek to meet these needs, they require support to do so. Both Bransford and Aguilar discuss the importance of continuing support for educators as they strive to improve their practices. Aguilar (2013) talks about frameworks for coaching that rely on an educator's ability to diagnose the needs of their students, while also allowing room for outside feedback and areas of improvement. As Bransford (2000) explained, all teachers will require different levels of support depending on their existing competence. By providing mentoring support, teachers will be able to set their own goals based around the needs of the students they have. Because both teachers and students have individual needs, this project will develop an outline and framework that can be broadly applied and tailored to the needs of the individuals involved to improve outcomes for language learners in mainstream classrooms.

Project overview

This project will consist of two parts: the first part will be a professional development session and the second part will be a framework for mentoring teachers around the needs of ELs. The project will be developed using the literature review in Chapter Two, which discusses best practices for ELs and mentoring. It will work to join together these two ideas to create change that impacts the practices of teachers and the outcomes for students.

In the first part of the project, I will develop a two hour professional development session. This session will give participants an overview of some of the best practices for teaching ELs in the mainstream. It will discuss vocabulary, syntax, oral language development and student identity. Throughout the session, teachers will have the opportunity to engage with the content using different cooperative learning strategies, so that they gain an understanding of how they could be implemented with students. At the end of this session, teachers will be asked to reflect on their learning and think about which aspects of teaching ELs they would like to apply within their own classrooms.

The second part of the project will be the creation of a guidebook that builds a framework for coaching based on the learning from the professional development session as well as the goals teachers set for themselves and their students. It will contain five component parts, some of which will be used with all participants and others that can be used as needed. Because mentoring relies heavily on the needs of the individual, the component parts will not be followed in a direct sequence or a course, but rather the mentor will be able to use the parts that apply with each teacher.

The first component will be a critical piece that the mentor will use with all teachers. The purpose of this first component is to build a relationship between the teacher and the mentor, set goals for the work together, and establish norms. To support the mentor in this work, this component will be a set of questions that will establish some key pieces of the relationship. Examples of questions that will be included are, *What brought you to teaching?*; *What do you know about the educational and life experiences of your students?*; *How do the experiences of your ELs differ from those of your native speakers?*; *Which aspect of teaching ELs do you think will have the greatest impact on*

their learning? By using these questions, the mentor will establish a base-level to understand the teacher's perspective and hopes for their students as well as begin the teacher on a path of committing to their own goals for the ELs in their class.

The second component will be a set of tools for data collection. In this instance, data is not test scores, but rather objective data that can be collected in a classroom observation. These tools will include a template for scripting a lesson that the mentor observed, with space for the physical environment and what all members of the class say and do. There will also be a tool where the observer can note what the teacher says and does and what the students say and do. These types of tools are valuable because they allow for relatively unbiased feedback that both the teacher and mentor can use to discuss areas of growth and progress. This component will include tools that will create an area choice for the mentor and possibly the teacher depending on the goal set and what feedback has been solicited.

The third part of the mentoring process will consist of tools for feedback and reflection. It will include specific documents that will be helpful to consider. It will also have a set of reflection questions that the mentor can employ with the teacher as appropriate. These questions will include ideas such as, *How have the new teaching strategies impacted the learning of ELs in the classroom*? and *What are you learning about your students as you implement new strategies?* There will also be a guide about different types of coaching conversations that may be necessary depending on the teacher.

The next part will be specific tools for teaching language learners. As a mentor, it will be important to have strategies that teachers can implement with their students around all four categories. This component will need to include strategies to teach

vocabulary, syntax, oral language, and discuss student identity. This will be the largest section as it contains many pieces related to teaching ELs. It will not be comprehensive of all possible strategies, but will provide a base-level of support that a mentor can use to help teachers who are struggling to generate ways to engage with their students.

The final component of the project will be an end of year reflection. This portion will be a series of questions that the mentor can use to reflect with a teacher about growth throughout the year. There will be a variety of questions that the mentor will be able to choose from depending on the specific teacher and the goals initially set. By using this tool, the mentor and teacher will be able to understand the growth made and set goals for the future, even if a mentor program is not in place the following year.

The project will conclude with a formal survey teachers will complete. This survey will ask them to gauge how effective the mentoring was, what impact it had on student learning, and what they need going forward. This survey will be used to judge the impact of the project as a whole. Using this data will determine how to improve the project as well as what teachers find valuable about having mentor support.

Setting and audience

I work in a school district in Minnesota where 17 percent of students are classified as language learners. Teachers who work within this district serve students from many different backgrounds, but the three primary home languages are Somali, Spanish, and Hmong. EL students within this district are less likely than students throughout the state to be making adequate progress towards proficiency (Minnesota Report Card, 2020). The participants in this project will be classroom teachers with classes that contain at least three ELs. The participants in the project will be elementary classroom teachers who have

ELs in their classroom. This will be the majority of the staff at the site, but will exclude EL, special education, and specialist teachers.

Timeline

As mentioned previously, this project will be designed to span a whole school year. The initial professional development session will occur before the school year begins and the first one-on-one session with a mentor will be within the first two weeks of school as the teachers get to know their students and think about their needs. As mentoring allows for the tailoring of support to individual needs, the timeline for the middle components of mentoring will depend on each teacher. With this in mind, however, the mentor will meet with the teacher at least once a month with a minimum of three observations during the year. There will be an end of year reflection which will occur in late May or early June. By creating support that lasts throughout the school year, teachers will be able to receive support with a specific group of students the entire time they are in that class and understand the overall impact of shifts in teaching practice.

Summary

As teachers continue to work with ELs, their need for support in reaching these students only increases. Many teachers feel inadequately prepared to support ELs in the classroom and more traditional professional development models have failed to increase either skill or student outcomes. The project outlined above created the framework for mentoring and professional development to support classroom teachers working with language learners. It explained the scope of the project as well as the six components that will create a structure for mentoring. The project will have the tools a mentor would need

to implement coaching for teachers around language learning, including an initial professional development session, relationship building, goal setting, observations, reflection, feedback, and specific strategies for language learners. Using these tools, a mentor will be able to support teachers working with ELs.

Chapter Four will provide a reflection on the development of the project, focusing on the research question: *How can implementing a mentoring program support elementary classroom teachers in changing their practices with language learners?* It will also look into what further research is necessary to support the professional development for mainstream teachers of language learners. The reflection will explore the process of developing the project and what was learned throughout the process.

CHAPTER FOUR
Conclusion

Introduction
The guiding question for this project was *How can on-going mentoring support teachers*

in changing their practices around language learners in a mainstream classroom? The

purpose of this chapter is to reflect on the process of researching, writing, and developing

the project. Additionally, this chapter will review the relevant literature that provided the

basis for the capstone project, the potential implications and limitations of the guidebook,

and finally a reflection on the capstone process.

Reflection on Research

For this project, research focused on two separate areas of study: effective

professional development and best practices for language learners. Research around these

topics contains a vast array of suggestions and ideas, but both areas also lend themselves

to themes that lead to growth in teacher practice and English Learners' achievement.

Research into professional development led to four overarching topics that need

to be in place for teachers to accelerate growth in their practice: focus, an orientation

towards action, reflection, and feedback (Darling-Hammond & Gardner, 2017). To create

change in practice, teachers require focus on a specific topic for an extended period of

time. Professional development opportunities must allow educators to focus on building

and retaining a new skill over time, and not ask them to try and implement multiple

initiatives simultaneously (What Makes Professional Development for Teachers

Effective? 2018). When teachers are able to focus on an area that is directly applicable to

what they teach, they are able to make growth. Professional development must also be

action-oriented. Teachers who attend professional development need to be given opportunities to implement the new learning in meaningful ways in their classroom. Professional development is most effective when teachers are able to use the time to plan the implementation of new learning (Schmoker, 2021). Additionally, professional development cannot be done in a one-off capacity. Follow-up and reflection are necessary so that teachers have the chance to gain insight into their practice, highlight growth and understand areas of growth. This feedback and reflection cycle ought to take place over time with a structured level of regularity (Jacobson et. al, 2020).

When taken together, these aspects of professional development demonstrate a need for professional development that is meaningful, on-going, and personalized to the individual needs of an educator. These aspects led the project in the direction of mentoring, which allows teachers to receive differentiated professional development around a specific and relevant topic over the course of time. As schools develop initiatives, teachers need consistent support, feedback, and reflection that can be offered through a mentorship program.

The second area of research was best practices for language learners. This is an area of research with a wide variety of teaching strategies and necessary supports for students; however, because the lens of this project was supporting mainstream elementary classroom teachers, the research focused on four key areas that are realistic in a general education classroom. These foci were vocabulary, syntax, oral language development, and identity. Research showed the impact each of these areas can have on language learners' ability to access and acquire content in a mainstream classroom.

Vocabulary is a critical place to begin language learning because it holds the building blocks of language. As students progress in their understanding of vocabulary, they can use and comprehend more specific language overall (WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020). Syntax is a critical piece for educators to consider as well. While native speakers will often understand the grammar structures of various texts, language learners require direct instruction to understand them (Avalos, et. Al., 2007). Elementary classroom teachers, who typically teach multiple subject areas, can support their students when they understand those needs. Oral language development is another area teachers can use to support English Learners (ELs). By developing oral language skills, students enhance both their understanding of language and the content overall (Zwiers, et. al., 2011). Finally, the research focused on the identity of the students. While best practices often focus on what students are learning, it was important to also focus on how students perceive themselves and how teachers perceive them. Research explained that students, particularly those that are not from the dominant culture, can struggle when they are not represented in the values and curriculum in the classroom (Muhamed, 2020).

Taken together, these four elements -- vocabulary, syntax, oral language development, and identity – encompass a range of skills and best practices for teaching language learners. Combined with best practices on professional development and mentoring, they provide a starting place for the project to understand both the needs of ELs and the teachers who serve them.

Implications of the project

The goal of my project was to create a framework for mentors supporting elementary classroom teachers who teach ELs. In a larger sense, my goal was to shift the way teachers approach language learners in their classroom, not as an add on, but as an integral part of their planning, instruction, and reflection. I hope to help teachers see language learners not solely as the purview of the English as a Second Language teacher, but rather as a resource in the class to create stronger teaching for all students.

In the creation of the project, I ultimately focused on the guidebook for mentors supporting teachers. The intention was to ensure all of the elements of language learning discussed previously were available in a format that could be accessible to a mentor working with teachers, as well as incorporating best practices of mentoring and coaching. The guidebook goes through questions to build a relationship, a goal setting form, observation templates, feedback and reflection questions, strategies for language learning, and tools for cultivating student identity. It also contains directions for each part so that a coach would be able to identify which parts make sense to use at a given point for a specific teacher.

By using this guidebook, a trained mentor should be able to guide a teacher to their own goals for language learners and be able to support them with resources and reflection around that goal. Teachers are empowered by being able to make decisions about professional development that is relevant and meaningful to them. By being able to choose from the area they want to focus on, educators are more likely to implement new practices in their classrooms. They will also have on-going support to build those skills and adapt as necessary. By using this guidebook, a mentor should have the tools they

need to support teachers of language learners. The impact should be a change of practice that leads to growth of all language learners in an elementary school classroom.

This project was designed to fill a specific gap in resources pertaining to the professional development model used to support language learners. Currently Minnesota requires a single hour of professional development over the course of five years to supports ELs. This project aims to demonstrate that that simply is not the best way forward and will leave many students under-supported in their classrooms. By using this guidebook, teachers and schools will, I hope, see the value in investing time and energy into these students.

Future projects

This project serves as a jumping off point for work around language learning and mentoring. In completing this project, I see many avenues for future research and projects. One area is a path I had intended to take at the outset of this project: a workshop introducing the key concepts for teachers and giving an overview of the choices they would be working with. This project would be done in conjunction with the mentoring, allowing for a whole staff to have a common understanding of the goals.

Additional projects could also be done in the area of mentoring, specifically around how to develop mindsets and beliefs about students in a classroom. This project talked specifically about student identity, but there are many other aspects of teaching language learners and understanding them as students and humans that were left untouched by this project. Identity is a critical piece, but certainly not the only one.

While completing this project, I also started wondering how many other aspects of teaching could be supported by mentoring programs. The research I found focused

largely on new teachers, but schools have many visions and initiatives around supporting

students, especially in an area where demographics have shifted. By using specific

focused professional development and mentoring, there are myriad areas for application

of an on-going mentoring process that have yet to be developed.

Limitations

Throughout this project, I attempted to be thorough and create an effective and

usable guidebook for mentors; however, it does not encapsulate everything someone

would need to effectively mentor teachers around language learning. One area

specifically is the skill level of the mentor. While my research and project talked almost

exclusively about the skills of the teacher, being a mentor requires its own set of

competencies. The project was designed to be picked up and implemented, but it also

requires that the person picking it up has an understanding and capacity to mentor.

A further limitation is the scope of the project. While it covers four areas of

language learning, it cannot cover the range of topics and skills that a teacher needs to

support all language learners all the time. More can be done to support ELs than is noted

in the guidebook. While it is a start and a way for teachers to improve their practice with

language learners, it is not fully comprehensive.

Reflections on the capstone process

The capstone process has been illuminating about my own professional practice

and my beliefs about teaching. As I started this process, I knew that I wanted to combine

the range of my experiences as an ESL teacher, a classroom teacher, and a teacher

mentor. I shared in chapter one how these experiences guided me toward my research

question, but the process of creating it has helped me reflect on those experiences to create a project that demonstrate my beliefs in what language learners and teachers need to be successful.

When I began researching, I thought the project I created would be for educators directly. Through my research, I affirmed that mentoring was a critical and missing piece in professional development. This shifted the project towards a framework to be used by mentors instead of teachers. My mindset changed because while I want teachers to have every tool at their disposal, my research showed that as educators we cannot take on all tasks simultaneously. By creating a guidebook for coaches to use with teachers, individual needs can be considered and resources can be used as necessary. I learned, and confirmed, that the best professional development is not one where teachers receive all the information at once and are sent off on their own, but rather is done in a way that respects and scaffolds their autonomy and capacity. My thinking shifted to a model where a mentor would be able to use the guidebook for their own professional practice, rather than putting the sole responsibility on the classroom teacher.

Because of this shift to the mentor-focused guidebook, I also made the decision not to create a professional development session for teachers. The creation of both felt incongruous; one part was for teachers and the other was for coaches. The guidebook was written with directions that could be implemented by a mentor, but creating a presentation that would be able to emulate that did not work. A workshop, much like all other learning, needs to be individualized to the person giving it. Creating something that someone else could simply open and present was not feasible.

In addition to the technical aspects of creating the project, this process reaffirmed my own beliefs in meeting the needs of both teacher and students where they are. Teachers so often want to make changes in their practice. They look at data, get to know their students, and attend professional development, but those changes are often difficult if not impossible to make on their own. By adding in support from a coach or a mentor, teachers can gain new skills and help more students succeed. By engaging with this process, I have grown in my commitment to support teachers and students in a way that acknowledges how they learn best.

Summary

Reflection is a critical piece of any educator's journey. This chapter is a reflection on the process of creating my capstone project and a look at how I went about answering my research question: *How can on-going mentoring support teachers in changing their practices around language learners in a mainstream classroom?* The research helped develop the central tenets of the project: creating a guidebook for mentors. In creating this project, I hope to have a final product that can be employed by a trained coach to support teachers with their language learners. ELs are an important part of the educational landscape, and teachers need to be supported to meet their needs. It is my hope that this project serves as a beginning point for teachers to begin in that growth.

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