Dr. Jamie Burho:

The National Center for Systemic Improvement, or NCSI, is pleased to host a new Thought Leader Conversation TLC series, Pursuing Equity at the Intersection of Language, Culture, and Disability. In this work, NCSI commits to supporting state education agencies, SEAs, and their allies in expanding understanding about the intersection of language, culture, and disability in K-12 education, and identifying next steps to enact system improvements that focus on elevating equity in both opportunity and achievement for students who are English learners with disabilities.

For more information about NCSI, please visit our website, ncsi.wested.org. These conversations are organized around NCSI's four systems elements, data literacy, stakeholder and family engagement, research-informed practice, and systems coherence. First, we start with the foundational session.

Welcome to the NCSI podcast series on Pursuing Equity at the Intersection of Language, Culture, and Disability. My name is Jamie Burrow, and I'm a senior researcher at WestEd, as well as one of the thought leaders for the series. My work focuses on students who are identified as English learners with disabilities.

Ms. Swati Guin:

My name is Swati Guin. I'm a research associate at the American Institutes for Research and a member of the NCSI planning team for the series.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

In each episode of this podcast, we'll be sharing key highlights from the live recordings of the five sessions of the Thought Leader Conversation Series. Today we're revisiting the first session of the series, the foundational session, which took place on June 7th, 2022. Stanford University professor Dr. Alfredo Artiles opened the conversation on pursuing equity for English learners who have disabilities with a focus on the need to adopt an asset-based approach. Let's hear from him.

Dr. Artiles:

I was stressing the need to bring forth this idea of asset-based approaches because it compels us to go beyond deficit thinking to acknowledge the fact that communities, students of color particularly, no matter how many adversities they might have faced in their lifetimes, we have to realize that they bring a set of experiences, resources, practices in their languages, in the way they engage with others, the way they approach learning and think and connect with others, that are resources for learning.

Ms. Swati Guin:

While English learners with disabilities have intersecting learning needs, Dr. Artiles explains why it's important not to oversimplify intersectionality as just individual markers of identity. Consistent with an asset-based mindset, we are called to focus on students' individual strengths as we identify potential challenges and explore possible solutions within the fragmented, intersecting systems that serve them.

Dr. Artiles:

We have to also remember that there are systems of oppression in communities, in institutions, in the spaces in which people live, that are connected to those dimensions of difference. Why is it that second-language learners might lose language supports when they are diagnosed with a disability as they move to special education?

Dr. Jamie Burho:

English learners with disabilities are students who are eligible for both English language development, often known as ELD or ESL, and special education services. That's a very simplified definition, considering the complexities that lie in every student. As we advance, please keep in mind that although dually-identified students are part of both groups, English learners and students with disabilities, they have needs that are different from either group due to their unique strengths and learning needs. Portland State University professor Dr. Julie Esparza Brown talks about these complexities and how our educational systems can build spaces for collaboration and partnering that ensure access to appropriate services and supports for students.

Dr. Brown:

Instead of focusing on the many labels that students receive, we need to shift the perspectives to understand instead the spaces that the students inhabit, in other words, the systemic conditions and constraints that are often placed on them. The intersections of multilingualism and disability should not be seen as challenges to overcome, but instead, we must frame them as problems needing remediation through our policies. The systems can think outside the box in terms of partnering in ways in which we can help students continue to build their multilingualism, even in special education programs.

Ms. Swati Guin:

This need to create meaningful partnerships is supported by data that confirms systemic changes can improve the lives and futures of students with disabilities designated as English learners. Indiana University and Purdue University Associate Professor Dr. Cristina Santamaria Graff shares the following significant trends within this population.

Dr. Graff:

We're specifically looking at ages 14 through 21, and English learners were more likely to drop out of school. We've seen these trends for quite a long time, and they're less likely to graduate with a regular high school diploma. We're seeing them more likely to receive a certificate as compared to all students served under IDEA. In comparison to their peers, they are scoring lower as a group at grade four and at grade eight, in comparison to students with disabilities students only categorized as English language learners or English learners, or students who have neither category.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

These trends speak to obvious symptoms of a failing system, such as inadequate services and lack of coordination among general education, special education and ELD. These systemic problems can result in a disproportionate representation of English learners within different disability categories, so where do we go from here? San Diego Unified School District's speech pathologist, Timothy Tipton, says reimagining begins with leading behind the clinical model focused on labels to adopt and embrace a social model that considers the student's individualized progress across multiple settings.

Mr. Tipton:

Really the only way we can do that is not feel that there's going to be one expert, one discipline, one narrow viewpoint that's going to understand the whole student, so looking at how they're functioning in their environments, in their national arts across their environments. When are these actual behaviors happening? Are they happening across their settings?

Ms. Swati Guin:

Timothy Tipton also highlights the importance of meaningful partnerships at the local education agency level. Through professional collaboration, educators can collaboratively implement a social model that supports coordination of services to holistically meet the learning needs of students.

Mr. Tipton:

It's meeting regularly. It's leveraging your resources. It's sharing responsibilities and accountability. The fact that we have our different views that we bring together is important. It's sharing data regularly with shared professionals, building that expertise across different practices. To me, this is building on the collaboration. Looking at children from different perspectives, different contexts, using different tools.

Ms. Swati Guin:

Perhaps most importantly, accurate special education evaluation, identification and instruction depend on meaningful engagement with parents and families.

Mr. Tipton:

It's actual true participation, giving true consent, and making sure that they feel connected with interpreters. It's taking an ethnographic approach to families.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

This model of authentic and meaningful family engagement is currently being delivered by the New Mexico Public Education Department, through the revision of their guidance document on eligibility evaluations. Special Education Director Deborah Dominguez-Clark shares more with us on this process.

Ms. Dominguez-Clark:

As we did that, we invited all of the evaluators in the state to come to several, several series of trainings, and talked to them about what does that look like when we're looking at students who have a second language. Let's really incorporate the home life and their backgrounds. Make sure you have translators available to spend some time with the families to really explain what's happening. It's not just a quick evaluation and boom.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

New Mexico is a great example on how to make change happen in a meaningful way that benefits students and their families while building a strong foundation for success, but this is not everyone's reality. Montclair State University professor Dr. Maria Cioe-Pena talks about compliance versus commitment for students success.

Dr. Cioe-Pena:

What we've seen as of late is that what's emerged from this is an interest to be compliant, not necessarily an interest to change the systemic experiences of students.

Ms. Swati Guin:

The explanation behind this tendency lies in the history of bilingual education. Educational policies that normalize a deficit perspective, stigmatization towards language learning and the English-only movement are just some of the reasons behind a broken system. Stanford University associate professor Dr. Jonathan Rosa shares the implications of history in the present realities of students with disabilities designated as English learners.

Dr. Rosa:

Often we end up orienting to the English language as though it were naturally occurring and as though it were the only language that could be used here. This suggests that we have to think really carefully about the relationship between our contemporary language policies and broader educational policies, and histories of colonialism and frankly of violence that have been meted out towards colonized populations, populations with ties to indigenous genocide, to enslavement, to immigrant labor exploitation.

However, in this post-civil rights era, you see ongoing stereotypes about particular populations that are framed as suffering from language problems or cultural problems, that are said to lack the ability to produce legitimate language practices, or are said to suffer from a so-called culture of poverty or impoverished language use. To trace this trajectory, I think part of what we can reflect on is a history of the institutionalization of monolingualism as a norm in the United States.

Ms. Swati Guin:

Dr. Maria Cioe-Pena helps us to keep reflecting on the connection of history to language, culture, and disability.

Dr. Cioe-Pena:

Informal bilingual practices have been a part of the American landscape since before this land was really usurped and renamed America, right? However, once it was formalized, bilingual education was rooted in serving European interests. This is a period in which bilingualism is really associated with whiteness and with power. Similarly, in 1890 and 1926, scholars start making connections between multilingualism and mental retardation, right?

It's at this point that we start seeing bilingualism, particularly in the Black and Brown body, being perceived as a sign of savagery or inferiority, right, which is very different to the way we previously saw this when it was in a white embodiment. Next, we enter a period of English monolingualism for unification and national salvation. It's at this point that we start forming the connection of English monolingualism with whiteness, but especially with American identity.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

By 1968, demands placed on the educational system from the civil rights movement pushed for a shift in the narrative around bilingual education. However, bilingual education began to be marketed as a resource for those in power, focused on supporting the global economy.

Dr. Cioe-Pena:

We then created another resource that could be usurped and reclaimed by whiteness, right, and we see this through the gentrification of bilingual education. We also see it presented as the gifted and talented programs.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

It is important to remember that legal action, albeit in very siloed ways, led to many of the achievements and developments in bilingual education. This starts in 1964 with the passing of the Bilingual Education Act, which provides federal grants to school districts to establish programs for children with limited English ability.

Dr. Cioe-Pena:

This is the first time that the U.S. government officially acknowledged that students who didn't use English needed a different kind of support.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

In 1970, the Diana v. State Board of Education ruling found that students were being inaccurately labeled as special education students based on IQ tests administered in English.

Dr. Cioe-Pena:

As a result, schools were forced to be more diligent in determining whether the educational problems of children who had limited English proficiency were the results of a learning disability or another condition, or if it was a result of a child's limited capacity with English.

Ms. Swati Guin:

Five years later in 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Act first passed, to be reauthorized in 2004. IDEA marks a new beginning for students with disabilities and their families, as Dr. Cioe-Pena explains.

Dr. Cioe-Pena:

Although this Act continues to be amended with further support for families and students, the core purpose of the law remains the same, right, which is to provide a free and appropriate public education to students with disabilities by accurately assessing individual students' needs and implementing appropriate supports.

Ms. Swati Guin:

Students with disabilities who are also designated as English learners are protected not only by IDEA but also by Title III funding. Title III was created to improve the education of English learners by helping them learn English and meet challenging academic standards, but these protections don't seem to be enough, Dr. Rosa states.

Dr. Rosa:

We have to pay very careful attention to how bilingual education is institutionalized and curricularized and organized.

Ms. Swati Guin:

History serves as a great reminder of the why and how we are here today. Going back to the civil rights movement ...

Dr. Rosa:

The vision for bilingual education was societal transformation for racial and economic justice.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

We believe in bilingual education as a tool for societal betterment, and that's why we highlight the need to transform systems to make the most of the immense assets and potential of English learners with disabilities. As Dr. Cristina Santamaria Graff states ...

Dr. Graff:

I think we're going from looking at systems as fragmented to systems as integrative. To me, that is this re-imagining. What does a school setting, how can it be a re-imagined as a place of gathering, as a place of integrating our cultural strengths and knowledge and all of its variants, human variants?

Dr. Jamie Burho:

Instead of looking for problems within individual students, our efforts can focus on remedying the problems in our intersecting and fragmented systems. In the special education referral process, educators can adopt a social model for considering students progress more holistically, and proactively engage families in data collection and decision making.

Regarding instruction, special education, general education and English language development, infrastructure supports are needed to facilitate collaboration so that we are serving students in coherent and effective ways. Finally, bilingual instruction is an integrative approach that honors students' linguistic skills and cultural ways of knowing as resources for learning, but we must coordinate our systems to ensure English learners with disabilities receive these critical services. Integrative systems can help educators adopt more coherent asset-based approaches to teaching students.

As a reminder, in the sessions that follow, the thought leaders will discuss four key systems elements critical to transforming our education systems to improve services for English learners with disabilities. These elements include data literacy, stakeholder and family engagement, research-informed practices, and systems coherence. We hope you will join us for these additional discussions.

Ms. Swati Guin:

Thanks for tuning in. We want to express our deepest gratitude to our thought leaders for their contribution and passion for this work.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

We're your hosts, Jamie Burrow ...

Ms. Swati Guin:

... and Swati Guin. To learn more about the Thought Leader series and the work of the National Center for Systemic Improvement, funded by the Office of Special Education Programs, or to watch the recording of the foundational session, visit our website at ncsi.wested.org.