Dr. Jamie Burho:

The National Center for Systemic Improvement, or NCSI, is pleased to host a new Thought Leader conversation series, pursuing equity at the intersection of language, culture, and disability. In this work, NCSI commits to supporting state education agencies, which we will refer to as SEA's, 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.

Welcome to episode two of the NCSI podcast series on pursuing equity at the intersection of language, culture, and disability focused on data literacy. If you're a new listener to this podcast, make sure you check out episode one of the podcast series where we lay the foundation for our conversation on these systems elements. And if you're a returning listener, welcome back. 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:

And 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. In today's episode, we're sharing highlights from the second session of the Thought Leader series, which took place on July 27th, 2022. Our conversation centered on how we can use data literacy to create equitable learning environments for English learners To thrive, learn, and grow. We share some of the challenges educators face in evaluating students for special education support and services. We also provide a variety of strategies including the application of a culturally and linguistically responsive mindset within a multi-tiered system of supports, or MTSS, framework. These strategies drive equitable database decision making that can address these challenges. We are delighted to have you join us as we reimagine comprehensive data systems to better support students with disabilities designated as English learners.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

So to start, what exactly is data literacy and how is it used in our education systems? According to the NCSI essential elements of comprehensive data literacy, resource data literacy begins with the questions you have, or in other words, your purpose for collecting the data. These questions help define the data sources and processes that will allow for meaningful analysis, interpretation, and data used to make informed decisions.

As you and your colleagues consider which questions could inform improvement efforts, it's helpful to examine the specific ways in which you are assessing student knowledge and learning. As we discussed in the foundational session, assessing the strengths and needs of students designated as English learners with disabilities is a highly complex process because they have intersecting learning needs. Speech pathologist, Timothy Tipton, shares with us how he and his team in San Diego Unified School district craft questions to explore student data and systems needs.

Mr. Timothy Tipton:

The best assessments that happen for students when we really want to get to know them, it's not just here's some data, then we come up with our questions. Obviously, the questions come first. We need to say, "well, what are we even asking?" And then when we ask these questions, sometimes it's not just about, well, what's going on with the student? We are not asking just what students require additional support or when is it? But our questions are always about, well, when is it the system that needs that additional support as well?

Dr. Jamie Burho:

This session focuses on how educators, specialists, and families can work together to use data to answer the questions about our systems that Mr. Tipton mentions. When we prioritize these questions, we can collectively expand our use of data sources to create an environment that supports instruction for English learners, reduces gaps in achievement and accurately determines their eligibility for special education services.

Ms. Swati Guin:

This is important because as we learned in the foundational session, English learners have been disproportionately identified as needing special education supports and services for decades. This problem is multidimensional. Sometimes we witness English learners are disproportionately over-identified as compared to their peers, whereas other times they are under-identified. The nuances for why this occurs depends on a number of factors, including inequitable assessment and data practices. Marika Kobayashi, Manager of the Department of Student Services at Cincinnati Public Schools, explains how biases can affect data collection, processes, analysis, and interpretation.

Ms. Marika Kobayashi:

So oftentimes, traditional diagnostic practices are based upon assumptions. They're based upon biases, and often the data that are collected simply confirm these existing biases and assumptions to identify and simply to serve as a justification for that inappropriate identification. The challenges continue to exist that involve the use of data to make placement decisions. In special education.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

Mr. Tipton shares some advice on addressing these challenges to ensure students designated as English learners are not incorrectly identified to receive special education services. First, he says it is important to recognize individual students linguistic assets.

Mr. Timothy Tipton:

So if I look at that variability, variability of exposure, variability of motivation for learning different languages and opportunities to learn those languages, the minority language versus the majority languages, are having such a big influence on who these students are, the value we put on their primary language, and of course the different communication styles they have, and then of course the aptitude as well that different students have in learning language.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

With those variables in mind, Mr. Tipton says, we need to look at the student's growth over time rather than just a snapshot of data. And for his team, a diagnosis isn't accurate unless it includes an interpreter and incorporates multiple authentic and relevant data sources and tools. He shares some of these strategies with us.

Mr. Timothy Tipton:

It's again, doing that meaningful, authentic assessment of their primary language, getting to know who they are, and also the use of interpreters, not to interpret tests, not just to give tests, but actually use them as the professionals they are in culture and language and briefing with them and debriefing with them, and using interpreters in a holistic way to really be liaisons with the families and children for us.

Ms. Swati Guin:

Jennifer Kane, who works on secondary transition with the Nevada Department of Education addresses how effective a comprehensive MTSS framework can be to address disproportionality.

Ms. Jennifer Kane:

Too many and not enough special education referrals occur when the MTSS framework is not implemented as intended. For example, when tier one instruction and differentiation are not in place, or do not continue to be in place when tier two targeted small group interventions are added. More effectively utilizing MTSS with English learners will ensure appropriate referral and evaluation processes for students suspected of having an educational disability, reducing disproportionality.

Ms. Swati Guin:

MTSS can also serve as the framework to implement culturally and linguistically responsive and sustaining practices across the system. These practices draw from each student's unique cultural and linguistic profile. Portland State University Professor, Dr. Julie Esparza Brown, shares how culturally and linguistically responsive MTSS framework is crucial for students who are designated as English learners with disabilities.

Dr. Julie Esparza Brown:

All throughout the tiers of support, that appropriateness then, speaks to cultural sustaining practices and ensuring that we are including all cultural groups, that students see themselves and we're highlighting their cultural assets, and that we're responding to their linguistic profiles. Even if we're instructing in English, we have to really understand the student's level of the instructional language proficiency, but also their knowledge of their native language, which we can sometimes bridge, use to bridge, instruction. And it's always based on individual needs and progress monitoring.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

A culturally and linguistically responsive MTSS framework that recognizes students unique strengths and assets is critical to data literacy. Deputy Director of Culture and Language in New Mexico's public education department, Kirsi Laine, shares more on what culturally and linguistically responsive data literacy means.

Ms. Kirsi Laine:

So in the culturally responsive data literacy, the focus is on centering culture, language and equity, while also emphasizing data skills and then the disposition interpreting and using that data.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

While recognizing the student as an individual with a cultural identity. Ms. Lane also emphasizes how culturally and linguistically responsive data literacy ensures student and family voices are at the heart of data collection. To do this, it is vital to use a broad range of qualitative and quantitative data. Observation, for example, is an important piece of qualitative data to shed light on students' range of learning experiences. Ms. Lane shares with us how these observations might look.

Ms. Kirsi Laine:

That would include different areas in the school, so not just the classroom, but cafeteria, the playground. How are students really working with others? What does it look like when they have interactions in the hallway? So those are all part of observation data that can be collected.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

Ms. Lane also poses questions for ensuring all quantitative data are interpreted through the lens of cultural and linguistic responsiveness.

Ms. Kirsi Laine:

So when we think about the core curriculum and then the high quality instructional materials, are they culturally and linguistically responsive? And are they delivered through culturally and linguistically responsive instruction assessments? So how are assessments and assessment practices culturally respond? How are... when are assessments actually administered in the school year? And then for that timing, how are these dates chosen in terms of cultural practices that students may have in their communities?

Ms. Swati Guin:

Ms. Lane is not alone in promoting culturally and linguistically responsive data practices at the state level. As Ms. Kane's team has learned.

Ms. Jennifer Kane:

Using linguistically responsive, and culturally sustaining database decision making will improve our existing systems by ensuring equity. Period.

Ms. Swati Guin:

As mentioned, culturally and linguistically responsive assessments are key tools for data collection. Dr. Esparza Brown recommends looking at tests that push for new norm sample construction, and measurability across languages. Examples of such tests include the bilingual English Spanish assessment, the Penny, and the Ortiz Picture vocabulary acquisition test. Dr. Esparza Brown also recommends that English learners be compared to their true peers to ensure effective data interpretation, she shares more.

Dr. Julie Esparza Brown:

The idea here is to make the best comparisons that we can, and that is to comparing, comparing a student's progress to those in a similar situation. True peers, as we wrote, represent students that have the same time in country, perhaps, or country of birth, or they're US born, so they're same generation, the same first language and second language, and close to similar language proficiencies, similar instructional programs.

Ms. Swati Guin:

Looking at true peers can also help us disaggregate data to find group trends. As Dr. Esparza Brown describes

Dr. Julie Esparza Brown:

The other thing that happens when we disaggregate the data and we start looking at true peer groups as much as we can, we can also look to see if the group as a whole is progressing at a lower level than their English peers or as compared to grade level targets, because then that gives us some instructional data that perhaps core instruction is not meeting the needs of those students. So disaggregating the data, thinking about this true peer concept can give us information about, a, if our English learner group as a whole is, if the instruction is effective and efficient for them, and then two, who might be the outliers that might need more intensive support.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

Data disaggregation within groups can also help us avoid making assumptions as Ms. Kobayashi explains.

Ms. Marika Kobayashi:

However, it's important to recognize the diversity and the assets that our students bring. All students, even within the students who come from Guatemala, they bring diversity in terms of indigenous language such as Mom, [inaudible 00:14:53], and that we have to learn from and respect our students and our families, and that can't happen unless, I think someone said it so beautifully, we get to know our students and have them be part of the ongoing collaboration and processes and data literacy conversations that we are having.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

To help SEA's and LEA's implement these strategies. Ms. Kobayashi says it's helpful to look for explicit examples of work happening across the country.

Ms. Marika Kobayashi:

So it's important also that districts work to recognize each other, and SEA's recognize other districts, that are actually doing good work. So forums like this where we're highlighting what states are doing and we're sharing those resources, we need more of that.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

Beyond the use of qualitative and quantitative data and tools, Ms. Lane explains how this work requires taking a look inwards to recognize our own biases as we interpret the data.

Ms. Kirsi Laine:

So if we think about this reflection, it starts with a transformation of leaders and educators', attitudes, beliefs, and approaches. So the key here is to reflect on one's own stereotypes, on one's own biases.

Ms. Swati Guin:

Ms. Kobayashi agrees with Ms. Lane that culturally and linguistically responsive data literacy begins with looking in the mirror and having difficult conversations with ourselves.

Ms. Marika Kobayashi:

We have to ask ourselves, what have we personally done to contribute to these ineffective systems, and what can we personally do within ourselves to change that? That's a very hard thing for us to do. That comes with very difficult conversations that we have to do about ourselves. It's beyond putting words on paper. It's beyond policies without action. It means that we have to take action, we have to change behaviors, and it means we have to develop ourselves so that we can develop others.

Ms. Swati Guin:

And when having these difficult conversations, Ms. Kobayashi reminds us that we need to work together to create real change in our systems.

Ms. Marika Kobayashi:

I think it's important that we hold each other accountable to make sure that everyone is part of the solution, and that we're not just blaming certain people about a problem that is systemic and that involves processes of dismantling old systems, ineffective systems, and re-imagining new ones.

Ms. Swati Guin:

This process is an important step in creating a system that recognizes each child and family's background knowledge and experiences as assets rather than deficits, as Dr. Esparza Brown explains.

Dr. Julie Esparza Brown:

We've been living in, I think, a deficit view system where we blame students, and not only students, but we also blame the families for what we perceive as deficits rather than just maybe differences, and that our system perpetuates this common practice of blaming students themselves or families, and caregivers, who are oftentimes busy working to put a roof over the head and keep food on the table, and in workplace situations where they're not given time off to attend meetings, or to attend school events where, which is really a privilege. So we place the blame where it doesn't, where it's really unfairly placed because as often our system that perpetuates these practices that are inequitable.

Ms. Swati Guin:

Instead of placing the blame on families, we encourage you to meaningfully engage them in all decision making processes, especially those related to data. As Mr. Tipton reminds us, everything starts with the family.

Mr. Timothy Tipton:

The first teachers of language for our students, and so how am I going to, just going to come in, and nice to meet your kid. I'm going to tell you who they are as a language user without getting using all those different data sources.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

Ximena Hurtado, a teacher in Florida's Lee County School District shares her perspective on how states can ensure districts are meaningfully engaging families as equal collaborators and decision makers in the use of data. First and foremost, she says that means making sure families get the support they need to understand the data.

Ms. Ximena Hurtado:

Data needs to be made accessible and understandable for all stakeholders in ways that allow them to participate, interact, and be part of the process of identifying all possible services and supports. Families and students of all groups, minorities, refugees, and immigrants may need extra assistance in order to understand what the data says. This may necessitate the need to hire multiple bilingual staff members trained not to only interpret it, but also to understand various cultures and educational expectations of other countries. Transparency, empathy, approachability, and good communication are all vital components to ensure that all families feel value and comfortable in this collaboration process.

Ms. Swati Guin:

In addition to creating an approachable, friendly environment for parents, Ms. Hurtado shares a few other ways that states can legislate or mandate practices that ensure families are engaging in educational processes and database decision making.

Ms. Ximena Hurtado:

They can require districts to include equitable family involvement in their mission statement. They can reallocate financial resources to promote families engagement in all cultures and groups. They can reward schools that demonstrate a large family involvement in education. They can legislate to ensure that schools communications are accessible and understandable for all. They can offer extra funding to allow school staff members to conduct home visits to families that may not seem engaged in the educational process of their children.

Ms. Swati Guin:

Ms. Kane shares how the state of Nevada has done some of the work described by Ms. Hurtado and our other thought leaders. After recognizing the lack of collaboration across offices, when it came to serving students designated as English learners with disabilities, the state began creating a guidance document aimed at improving their outcomes. When creating the guidance, Ms. Kane describes how important it was for them to have diverse voices at the table.

Ms. Jennifer Kane:

Addressing how students designated as English learners are disproportionately referred and placed into special education was long overdue in our state. To that end, that is not easy data to look at. We recognize we have to have everybody included in this guidance. This is not just guidance for the state level or just district level administrators, and we needed the people like our friends on the panel that are working in classrooms with students, whether they're teachers or whether they're speech pathologists, and the folks who are supporting them at their district levels. We needed all of those voices at the table if we wanted to... And students and families, as we mentioned all day today, we really needed everybody's voices there if we were going to create guidance that could change some systems and that could undo some of what has been done.

Dr. Jamie Burho:

When educators, specialists, families, and other community partners work together to recognize culturally and linguistically responsive data literacy as a crucial component of improving outcomes, we are better equipped to support all students, including English learners in an inclusive environment that embraces their knowledge and personal experiences. When we use culturally and linguistic responsive data literacy practices, we create opportunities to recognize and address our own biases. So instead of trying to change, or fix, students and their families, we use disaggregated data to implement strategies that value the diversity in our classrooms, such as analyzing differences within groups and among each student's true peers, and of course, culturally and linguistically responsive data literacy, as any other component of systemic improvement, is achieved in strong collaboration between SEAs, LEAs and community partners, including the voices and vision of students and families. Stay tuned for our next episode to learn more about the process of meaningful family collaboration and partnership.

Ms. Swati Guin:

As a reminder, in the sessions that follow the Thought Leaders will discuss three other key systems, elements critical to transforming our education systems to improve services for English learners with disabilities, authentic engagement of family schools and community partnership, research informed practice, and systems coherence. We hope you'll join us for these additional conversations, and if you haven't yet, don't forget to listen to the first episode of the podcast on the foundational session that kicked off the Thought Leader series. Thanks for tuning in. We want to express our deepest gratitude to our thought leaders for their contribution and passion for this work. We're your hosts, Swati Guin...

Dr. Jamie Burho:

And Jamie Burrow. 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 data literacy session, visit our website at ncsi.wested.org.