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Exploring And Supporting the Instructional Needs of Young Multilingual Learners in A Metropolitan City

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Abstract

New York City (NYC) has witnessed unprecedented expansion of Universal PreKindergarten (UPK) programs for young children. Due to the highly diverse student population in New York City, UPK classrooms have a high concentration of Emergent Multilingual Learners (EMLs). This study aimed to explore the instructional needs of EMLs and the professional development needs of the workforce that serve this swiftly growing population of students.

We observed 50 UPK classrooms between January 2018 and June 2019. Within this sample, 49 classrooms were monolingual (i.e., English was the primary language of instruction) and one classroom was designated as a dual language classroom. Using mixed methods—direct structured observation through this tool (Classroom Assessment of Supports for English Language Acquisition—CASELA) augmented by interviews and field observation notes, along with survey questionnaires—we identified the instructional practices of and professional supports for teaching teams in meeting the needs of young EMLs in New York City Prekindergarten classrooms, as well as workforce characteristics within these programs. The following research questions were investigated:

1. What are teaching team and program leader characteristics across our sample of UPK classrooms with EML students?
2. What emerging high-quality practices—both general and EML-specific—are enacted by teaching teams to facilitate EMLs' language and literacy development and to support their social emotional development?
3. What support do NYC UPK teachers and site leaders currently receive related to teaching and supporting young EMLs?

Among the 50 participating sites in our sample, the average size of a classroom teaching team was two, and the average class size was 17 students. The average proportion of EMLs was 40% with the majority of EMLs (57%) speaking Spanish. Classrooms varied in language diversity; over 40% of classrooms had 3 or more home languages other than English spoken by EMLs and their families.

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Within these generally warm and supportive environments, CASELA observations revealed significant variation in the extent of teachers' incorporation of individual EML students' backgrounds and experiences into classroom instruction. Collectively, the sampled classrooms did not demonstrate "good" or "strong" evidence in any of the six CASELA domains. Whereas programs performed relatively better in the areas of gathering EMLs' background information, having rich curriculum materials, and demonstrating support for English language learning, there was little evidence of cultural inclusion and integration, bilingual assessment, or instructional support for EMLs' home language.

Our findings point to potential areas requiring increased support for educators. Leaders, lead teachers, and assistant teachers all reported to receive professional development in core areas related to teacherstudent interactions and cultural responsiveness in supporting EMLs. However, these opportunities did not seem to be intensive or systematic. Four general themes emerged in teaching teams' self-identified professional development needs: professional training and workshops (i.e., instructional information and support, multicultural competence); strategies and research-aligned "best practices" for serving EMLS (e.g., instructional support, social emotional support, language and literacy strategies); materials and resources; and family engagement strategies.

Keywords: cultural diversity, bilingualism, professional development