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Exploring the Intersections of UDL & Support for Multilingual Learners:

Future Research Questions

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An innovative exploration of how UDL and SEAL can be used in complementary ways to support multilingual learners to thrive.





Photo courtesy of SEAL

CAST partnered with Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) and two schools who apply the SEAL approach to support multilingual learners to explore how this approach might complement Universal Design for Learning (UDL). In the first phase of the partnership, we explored the intersections of the UDL Guidelines and the SEAL approach. In the second phase of the partnership, we explored ways to enhance CAST's professional learning approaches to better support teachers of multilingual learners. Specifically, we examined how to improve CAST's professional learning approaches of 1) Journey Mapping, a tool that uses storytelling and visualization to help us better understand and empathize with individual experiences and needs and 2) UDL Instructional Rounds, an approach where educators "round" or conduct brief classroom observation of one another's classrooms and share feedback/ideas for next steps.

This multi-phase partnership generated numerous areas for future study and has inspired the following research questions in the areas of **teacher learning**, **student outcomes**, and **systems change** to deepen and extend our work.

Teacher Learning

1. What professional learning approaches most effectively build teachers' **confidence and competence** in supporting multilingual learners with disabilities?

2. How do **teacher attitudes and beliefs** influence their **expectations** for multilingual learners with disabilities?

3. How do schools support educators to develop teaching practices that **honor and sustain students' identities** related to culture, language, and disability?

Despite growing attention to multilingual learners and students with disabilities, research on how to best prepare teachers to support multilingual learners with disabilities is limited (Jozwik, et al., 2020; Kangas, 2017; Miranda, et al., 2019). Most studies address these populations of students separately, leaving gaps in understanding approaches that support both language acquisition and specific disabilities. More robust evidence on the professional learning approaches that best support teachers' confidence and competence to teach multilingual learners with disabilities is needed. Further, additional research is needed to more fully explore teachers' beliefs and orientations regarding students' language acquisition and students' identities related to culture, language, and disability. Addressing these gaps is essential to develop educators' capacity to support multilingual learners with disabilities.

Student Outcomes

1. Which **language acquisition methods** most effectively support multilingual learners with disabilities to develop language skills?

2. How are educators applying **Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and other approaches** for supporting multilingual learners in complementary ways? What kinds of **impact** does this combined approach have on the learning of multilingual learners with disabilities?

3. How do **multilingual learners with disabilities *themselves*** experience learning in the classroom? What challenges and supports stand out most for them?

Similar to research on teacher learning, more robust research that explores ways to enhance learning outcomes for multilingual learners with disabilities is needed. In terms of language acquisition, most research focuses either on multilingual learners *without* disabilities or on monolingual learners *with* disabilities. There's a significant lack of empirical studies addressing both dimensions together (Kormos, 2017). Further, research on the complementary nature of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and other approaches for supporting multilingual learners is just emerging, and more research is needed on the ways these combined approaches can impact student learning (CAST, 2024). Finally, there is limited research that centers the voices of multilingual learners with disabilities *themselves* (Kangas, 2020; Tripp & Waight, 2024; Umansky & Avelar, 2023). The intersection of multilingualism and disability is under-represented in studies of student experience. Studies may explore the experiences of multilingual learners or students with disabilities, but do not always explicitly examine these multiple and intersecting identities in depth.

Systems Change

1. How do educator attitudes and beliefs about **language acquisition** affect the placement of multilingual learners in **special education**? How do educator attitudes and beliefs about **disability** affect the placement of multilingual learners with disabilities in **language programs**?

2. How are schools addressing the **disproportionate representation** (both overrepresentation and underrepresentation) of multilingual learners in special education? What approaches are most **successful**?

3. How do school systems **structure collaboration** between general educators and special education educators, including dual language educators and multilingual specialists?

4. How do **parents and caregivers** of multilingual learners with disabilities experience navigating the educational system? What challenges and supports stand out most for them?

As described above, there remain significant gaps in research on multilingual learners with disabilities, and this is particularly true regarding best practices for systemic supports. Much of the existing literature focuses on teaching strategies for multilingual learners or students with disabilities, leaving limited insight into how school systems and families support multilingual learners with disabilities. Additional research is needed to explore the ways that educator attitudes and beliefs around language acquisition and disability affect placement decisions (Kilinc & Borowski, 2025). Questions remain about ways to address the enduring disproportionate representation of multilingual learners in special education (Artiles, et al., 2005; Cuba, 2024; Tankard Carnock & Silva, 2019) and structures for encouraging sustained partnerships among dual language educators, multilingual specialists, general educators, and special educators (Kangas, 2018). Further, similar to the limited research that centers the voices of multilingual learners with disabilities, there is a need for more research that centers the perspectives and lived experiences of families of multilingual learners with disabilities (Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018; Cioè-Peña, 2021; Thurlow, et al., 2022). Understanding these approaches and experiences can offer critical insight to develop systems that ensure multilingual learners with disabilities receive equitable access to high-quality instruction and meaningful opportunities to thrive academically and socially.

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