



# RESEARCH SYNOPSIS

## Interviews with Teachers of Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities who are English Learners

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### KEY FINDINGS

#### Language & Disability Needs

- \* Teachers often did not distinguish students' language and disability needs from one another
- \* Teachers expressed the belief that students understand more than they can communicate

#### Instruction & Assessment

- \* Teachers reported instructional emphasis on building vocabulary and heavy reliance on picture-supported text for all instruction, including literacy
- \* Some teachers do not differentiate instruction between EL and non-EL students
- \* Teachers would like more support in selecting and/or adapting curriculum and adopting effective instructional strategies
- \* Teachers reported IEP goals often do not specify English language acquisition goals, and are often indistinguishable from other communication goals for non-ELs

#### Accessibility Supports

- \* Teachers focus on using consistent supports between instruction and assessment
- \* Teachers use similar supports for both EL and non-EL students
- \* Teachers often use picture supports across instruction and assessment
- \* Teachers did not mention using the language translation feature during assessment

### ABOUT THIS STUDY

In the spring of 2018, DLM staff conducted semi-structured one-hour interviews with 10 teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities who were also likely English learners (SCD-EL) in order to help inform the development of DLM assessments that better reflect the learning and instruction of SCD-ELs. Karvonen and Clark (2019) reported that **nearly 14% of students who took DLM assessments were likely to be, or currently identified as, ELs**; 5.8% received EL services and 8.1% of students did not receive EL services but had been indicated as likely-ELs by their teachers on the First Contact survey (Nash et al., 2016).

Students with SCD-EL are a small and understudied population of students. Presently, there is not a consensus definition of SCD-EL in literature or practice. For the purposes of this study, SCD-ELs were identified as students with significant cognitive disabilities for whom English was not the primary language, was not the primary language spoken at home, and/or was not the primary language used for instruction and/or were identified as receiving, eligible, or monitored for EL services.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do teachers describe the disability and language-related needs of their students with SCD-EL?
2. How do teachers approach instruction and assessment for students with SCD-EL?
3. How are accessibility supports for instruction or assessment used for students with SCD-EL?
4. How do teachers communicate with parents of students with SCD-EL about approaches to instruction or assessment?

### RESEARCH PROCESS

We recruited and selected teachers with the goal of maximum variation based on state and teacher background, but we focused especially on teachers who were likely to be information-rich cases: those with more than one student with SCD-EL.

Eight of the ten participants reported teaching at least three students with SCD-EL in the 2017-2018 school year. Five were elementary teachers, and five taught in middle and high schools. Two of the participants reported that they had earned EL endorsements in addition to their special education certifications.

## KEY FINDINGS CONT.

### Parent Relationships

- \* Teachers use many methods to communicate with families including email, phone, text, surveys, and home visits
- \* Some teachers have close relationships with some students' families, including sharing meals at the students' homes, while other teachers have had difficulty establishing communication
- \* Some teachers were concerned that families' cultural expectations, past experiences, or currently realities might be affecting their engagement
- \* The language barrier between teachers and parents can make it difficult to establish and maintain relationships and communicate information about the student without interpreter support

"[The Parent] also came from a refugee camp, so her concerns and her priorities are food and shelter and clothing and cleanliness right now. She's not worried whether or not her child can read..."

## FURTHER INFORMATION

- » Karvonen, M., & Clark, A. K. (2019). Students with significant cognitive disabilities who are also English learners. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 44, 71-86. doi: 10.1177/1540796919835169
- » Nash, B., Clark, A. K., & Karvonen, M. (2016). *First contact: A census report on the characteristics of students eligible to take alternate assessments* (Technical Report No. 16-01). Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, Center for Educational Testing and Evaluation.
- » Nehler, C., Wells-Moreaux, S., Clark, A. K., Burnes, J., & Karvonen, M. (2019, April). *Instruction and assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities who are English learners*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Toronto, Canada.

## TAKEAWAYS

Students with SCD-EL have complex language and disability needs that teachers must be able to navigate. This study highlights key findings and gaps in instructional practices and supports that must be addressed to ensure equal access to challenging grade-level academic content for all students.

"But a lot of those things, I kind of don't see them as being EL problems, I see them as being a symptom of their disability. Sometimes it's hard to understand, how do you separate the two?"

Most participants reported that they did not distinguish disability versus language-related needs for students with SCD-EL. Likewise, it was difficult for them to discern whether cognitive or language barriers prevented students from expressing their knowledge. These are understandable challenges, and students with SCD-EL may demonstrate their knowledge and skills differently in each language. Having information about students' knowledge, skills, and understandings in English and their primary language might allow teachers to identify when needs are related to the disability or language and to activate appropriate resources.

Participants largely approached instruction and assessment equivalently across all students with SCD, rather than differentiating for students with SCD-EL. Although many of their students did receive additional EL services to supplement their special education experience, Karvonen and Clark (2019) found that of 14% of likely-ELs taking DLM assessments, only 5.8% were receiving services. The remaining majority of likely-ELs did not receive EL services, but had been identified by their teachers as students for whom English was not a primary and/or home language. This indicates that special education teachers, and not EL professionals, are likely a primary source of English language support for SCD-ELs.

During DLM assessments, students with SCD-EL used the same accessibility supports as their non-EL peers (e.g., human read aloud). Teachers did not report using language translation for their

students during DLM assessment administration

"If I had a magic wand, I would want more direction from the higher ups, whether it's in the form of [professional development], in the form of a curriculum, in the form of: here's this assessment and here's what you can do with it."

Finally, many participants reported developing close, trusting relationships with their students' families, but others struggled to build rapport due to language and other barriers. Teachers strongly relied on translation services and other staff members to foster communication with parents.

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"The stuff we already use in special education, like the picture supports... the concrete explaining of new vocabulary words, the modeling of sentence structure... is stuff that we have listed under EL supports, but it's also stuff I put in non-EL gen[eral] IEPs... I feel like they overlap a lot."