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RESEARCH REPORT

Developing an Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessment System: A Theory of Action

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The purpose of this report is to propose a theory of action for the development of an alternate English language proficiency assessment (AELPA) system to support the integrated instruction and assessment for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities (ELSCDs). This theory of action examines the purposes of an ELP assessment system based on the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) regulations requiring the assessment of all ELSCDs. This report seeks to inform assessment considerations for the development of an AELPA system for state education agencies (SEAs) and test developers. This theory of action identifies assumptions, purposes, and goals for assessment development and includes a logic model to represent system claims. The report ends with a discussion of unintended consequences and ways to mitigate them, as well as future research recommendations.

Keywords English language proficiency (ELP) assessment; theory of action; alternate assessment; English learners with significant cognitive disabilities (ELSCD)

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Students who need an initial alternate English language proficiency assessment (AELPA) are students who have been identified by an individualized education program (IEP) team as having a significant cognitive disability (SCD) and are potential English learners (ELs) according to the home language survey (HLS). After an AELPA is administered, eligible students with SCDs are identified as initial fluent English proficient (IFEP) or ELSCD.¹ This identification includes ELs as defined under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015) who also have disabilities needing special education and/or related services as regulated under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 2004) and is further narrowed to include only those special education students with SCDs (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

Although all ELs must be assessed,² “English learners with the most significant cognitive disabilities may participate in a state’s Alternate English language proficiency assessment (AELPA) if they cannot participate in the regular ELP assessment with accommodations” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 6). In an effort to meet federal mandates to include ELs with disabilities without exception in annual ELP accountability assessments, states must develop an (AELPA) system to meet the needs of ELSCDs.

Recent changes in federal policy have spurred SEAs, test developers, and researchers to explore English language development (ELD) in U.S. schools inclusive of how ELP is conceptualized and measured for ELSCDs. While there is no common definition, ELSCDs have been defined as “individuals who have one or more disabilities that significantly limit their intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior as documented in their Individualized Education Programs (IEP), and who are progressing toward English language proficiency in speaking, reading, writing, and understanding” (Christensen, Gholson, & Shyyan, 2018, p. 2). Additionally, students must meet the state policy criteria for participation in AELPAs.

A review of previous research investigating the published literature on alternate assessments found that only three studies even mentioned ELSCDs and zero studies focused on an AELPA (Guzman-Orth, Cavalie, & Blood, 2016). Designed to measure ELP for ELSCDs, an AELPA is, we believe, a critical accompaniment to a state’s approach to meeting the needs of all students. Adding to the range of students that can be appropriately included in accountability assessments, the AELPA provides a critical access point for ELSCDs to have the opportunity for alternate standards-based EL identification, progress monitoring, and reclassification out of the EL designation. The lack of any such approach in current practice is an open opportunity to conceptualize how to approach the need for an AELPA in such a way

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that it promotes the goals of meaningful assessment and results, rather than meeting requirements of the federally mandated test.

The risk of an AELPA being viewed as another federal mandate is rooted in the fact that, practically speaking, students enrolled in the U.S. K–12 educational system encounter numerous assessments throughout their educational career, and this is especially true for dually identified students, including ELSCDs. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that any new assessment opportunities are meaningful and relevant so that they promote authentic opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and abilities in order to achieve equitable outcomes. Our approach is to conceptually balance recommendations for a fair, valid, and reliable assessment system that achieves the intended outcomes of an AELPA system and minimizes unintended consequences.

The current trend of operating within a standards-based system design relies on the alignment of standards, instruction, and assessment along with accountability measures to improve the performance of all students, including students with SCDs (Courtade, Spooner, Browder, & Jimenez, 2012). This trend is echoed in national standards for assessment design and use, so that standards-based systems utilize fair, valid, and reliable assessments that serve a variety of purposes, including those that support learning, improve achievement, and inform accountability (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education [NCME], 2014). One way to articulate this alignment among standards, assessment, instruction, and intended outcomes is through the development of a theory of action. Recently, the NCME published a position statement encouraging all states to develop a theory of action as part of their technical documentation and to be transparent in how programs are designed, implemented, and monitored to achieve their intended goals and avoid unintended outcomes (NCME, 2018). The purpose of this report is to articulate a model AELPA theory of action that states can adapt to suit their individual standards-based assessment system.

A Theory of Action

Description of a Theory of Action

We posit that a theory of action is a critical initial step for the development of an AELPA system (described further in the section, “Developing an AELPA System”). A theory of action is a conceptual model where the assessment purposes, uses, and claims are conceptually articulated and linked to outcomes to guide the overall test development process from the design work to the development to the ongoing validity evidence.

A theory of action illustrates the claims made about a program through a logic model (a diagram that links program components to intermediate and long-term outcomes for various stakeholders) and a review of supporting literature for those claims (Leusner & Lyon, 2008). This logic model functions as a map to show how a program is intended to be implemented and the relationship between the claims and the desired outcomes (Patton, 1978). The logic model explicates “the cause-effect relationships among inputs, activities, and intended outcomes” (Bennett, 2010, pp. 70–71).

Supporting Validity

A theory of action provides guidance for the design, development, implementation, and monitoring of the assessment system components. Designing a comprehensive theory of action implies that all steps, including the collection of validity evidence to support the claims, can support the idea of continuous program improvement by evaluating the relationships between the claims and outcomes. This concept of continuous improvement ensures that the intended purposes are being met and the unintended consequences are being minimized to the extent possible.

Within any assessment system ongoing maintenance and continuous improvement is desirable and is a requirement under federal peer review. Peer review requires a strategic collection of evidence from a range of sources for monitoring, maintaining, and improving, as needed, the quality of an assessment system, including clear and technically sound criteria for the analyses of all the assessments in the assessment system (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). For SEAs striving to have their assessment programs meet federal peer review requirements, these elements may be particularly challenging to conceptualize and implement given that they may imply an intentionally iterative test life span, rather than a traditional operate-and-maintain approach from years prior.

AELPA Description and Purposes

In the discussion of a theory of action for an AELPA, one must also describe the AELPA system in mind. At the time of this writing, no operational AELPAs have undergone peer review. Thus, we provide a conceptual overview of what an AELPA—one that meets federal peer review requirements—would entail.

An AELPA should be part of an existing system of assessments that provides fair, valid, and reliable measures of the state's ELD and content standards. For the purposes of this report we make the assumption that states have existing general and alternate content assessments, as well as a general ELP assessment, that have established technical and validity evidence. Likewise, we make the assumption that SEAs and local education agencies (LEAs) are employing and supporting high-quality educators who are providing their students with high-quality, evidence-based, and differentiated instruction to meet their students' individual needs.

An AELPA must have adequate technical quality (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 6). The AELPA must align at the grade level (or grade band) of the ELD standards. The alignment is measured in terms of content (both knowledge and linguistic processes), depth and breadth, and balance of linguistic skills that are assessed. The test design must be tailored to the specific knowledge and linguistic skills in the state's ELD standards and reflect academic language complexity appropriate for each grade level/grade band (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Experts and practitioners in this area could argue that there are additional requirements that should be articulated, but at the time of this writing, these are the minimum federal requirements.

Similar to the general ELP assessment system, the AELPA must also accomplish four purposes: identification, progress, reclassification, and accountability. The first purpose is the appropriate identification of students with an SCD who are eligible for classification as an EL. The initial AELPA assesses the ELP of the student to determine if the student will be classified as an EL. Once students are classified and provided appropriate instruction, they will be assessed annually on a summative ELP assessment that determines ELD progress and if students are eligible for reclassification by meeting the established exit criteria. Reclassification for ELSCD should be determined by an IEP team. Teams may include other measures to determine exit (e.g., consider competitive integrated employment outcomes for individual learners). States must consider how the AELPA fits into their accountability plans (ESSA, 2015).

Challenges

We recognize that in the articulated purpose of the assessment there are also inherent challenges due to the unique variability in the target student population and the federal accountability requirements placed on the assessment design. These challenges interact with and impact how the AELPA can be feasibly used in the K–12 setting. We recognize and articulate that there are inherent challenges with the federal requirements to identify potential students as EL or IFEP within the first 30 days of school enrollment especially because it is possible that students may not be identified with an SCD by the time of their assessment administration. As a result, when we refer to an ELSCD, we assume that the student had been identified with an SCD prior to his or her AELPA administration. We acknowledge that there are many other state specific scenarios and topics that go beyond the scope of this report, such as guidance for participation in alternate assessments (Thurlow, Liu, Goldstone, Albus, & Rogers, 2018) and the development of alternate ELD standards (Michaels, Gholson, & Sheinker, 2018).

Focusing on the target students is a critical step in the AELPA design. Students with SCDs who may be potential ELs prior to the administration of an initial AELPA or who are identified ELs after the AELPA is administered are the target students for this assessment. Experts acknowledge a key consideration for students with SCDs is the variability in students' communicative skills, both in proficiency and in how language is functionally produced through traditional oral expression, written expression, or nonverbal paralinguistic cues such as eye gaze and distal or proximal pointing (Houwen, Visser, van der Putten, & Vlaskamp, 2016). Further, students may also use augmentative/alternative communication (AAC) devices or other communication systems (e.g., picture communication systems; Picture Exchange Communication System) or switch systems to aid in their communication (Erickson & Geist, 2016). This variation is appropriate and authentic to the students' experience to allow them to meaningfully participate in family, school, and community settings.

We posit that ELSCDs taking an AELPA are inherently multilingual and strategically use all their linguistic resources (verbal and nonverbal, or paralinguistic). The use of all of these resources helps ELSCDs to engage in translanguaging moments (instances where linguistic resources are strategically used with interlocutors to communicate intended

meaning). ELSCDs use translanguaging to meaningfully participate in an environment where English is the medium of communication (Gort, 2015). ELSCDs are resourceful and bring with them a host of languages and cultures and a range of cognitive abilities and communication needs. We believe that ELSCDs are capable of learning English at levels aligned to alternate content standards (alternate academic achievement standards). ELSCDs will learn English, but they will learn in a variety of ways and paths that require support and individualized instruction with scaffolding. This scaffolding will be individualized to meet the needs of each student and their range of functional abilities and communicative skills as well as their communicative system (e.g., AAC).

Developing an AELPA System

In this section, we articulate the goals of an AELPA by further integrating details such as initial/screener assessment considerations, summative assessment considerations, and whole-system supports. We briefly describe the components of the system and identify the principles that undergird the theory of action and the logic model. We then present the logic model diagram and set of claims in the logic model that are ultimately intended to lead to improved student outcomes in the educational system. This model includes the components of the assessment system, the actions they are expected to lead to, the intermediate outcomes of those actions, the ultimate desired actions of the system, and possible unintended outcomes and how they could be mitigated. The report ends with a summary of logical, theoretical, and empirical evidence that supports these claims.

Components of the Assessment System

The AELPA system includes the components of an initial assessment, a summative assessment, and system supports. The purpose of this report is to focus on the development of an assessment system for ELSCDs. Once mature, a standards-based AELPA system would include formative processes supported by a variety of tools.

AELPA Initial Identification

If the student is identified as being exposed to a language in the home other than English on the HLS, the student is required to take the initial ELP assessment to screen whether he or she is an EL and would need EL services. The initial assessment is intended to measure student proficiency with respect to each state's ELD standards for determination of EL status. This initial assessment provides information to determine a student's initial classification as either an EL or an IFEP. If a student is not able to demonstrate fluent English proficiency then the student is classified as an ELSCD.

AELPA Summative

ELSCDs must be assessed annually. The summative component provides information on annual student progress toward ELP and supports decisions on student reclassification as fluent English proficient (RFEP). The summative AELPA must be appropriate for ELSCDs, align to the ELD standards each state has adopted, measure ELP, and support goals and indicators for accountability purposes.

System Supports

System supports for an AELPA system should be considered during test development. Hauck, Wolf, and Mislevy (2016) recognized the impact that data management and score reporting can have on an ELP assessment system. The AELPA designers should consider the benefits from a single point of entry at which educators access all relevant information related to a student's performance on both the ELP and content assessments and maintaining the data over time. Such data would be invaluable for IEP teams to consider during annual reclassification and decision-making. The AELPA would include professional development training for educators around issues of scoring, using rubrics, and interpretation of test results for supporting ELD instruction.

AELPA System Principles

The AELPA system is intended to demonstrably improve ELP for ELSCDs by supporting timely identification of English learning needs followed by appropriate English learning opportunities. The following research-based principles serve as a framework to support the development of an AELPA system.

Fair

Fairness includes providing an assessment where students have equal opportunity to participate. Through a combination of intentional test design elements and accommodations for ELSCDs, the AELPA will be accessible to meet the broad range of communication needs of ELSCDs participating in the assessment (Kleinert, Browder, & Towels-Reeves, 2009). Underlying these comprehensive supports is the belief that students can meet and exceed high goals when given the appropriate opportunity and scaffolds to do so. To accomplish this, utilizing universal design principles (CAST, 2018) is paramount in the development of the AELPA. An AELPA allows students to demonstrate their ELP by using a variety of communication modes. AELPAs are administered individually and require additional time.

Relevant

Assessment designs must increase student engagement in ways that are consistent with grade-level or grade-band expectations, mirror instructional practices, and minimize the burden of having to learn new skills for taking an assessment.

Aligned

The complexity of the ELD or alternate ELD standards, as determined by the state at grade or grade band, is measured with a range of item types and tasks designed to allow ELSCDs to independently demonstrate their ELP knowledge, skills, and abilities using their preferred mode(s) of communication across domain. A state may use alternate achievement standards that are reduced in depth, breadth, and complexity and establish proficiency levels and cut scores. Additionally, the standards coverage in the assessment blueprint will be functionally representative of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that ELSCDs need to support postsecondary educational outcomes for their eventual transition into the community as productive members of society. The assessment must establish ELP that is commensurate with the performance levels established and mirror the expectations for ELP of their non-ELSCD peers.

Informative

Reports should be timely, clear, and easy to understand so student strengths and weaknesses can be readily identified by all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and administrators as well as other relevant officials at the district and state level, and students when appropriate. Reports should allow meaningful disaggregation of data by subgroups to inform school, district, and state interventions and supports. The reporting and feedback from the system components should address the needs of different stakeholders within the educational system who require information at different grain sizes to inform wide-range policy, resource, and programming decisions.

The Logic Model for Our Theory of Action

In this section, we present the logic model diagram (Figure 1) in which each numbered arrow refers to a specific claim articulated in the text that follows the diagram (see the appendix). Arrows indicate the expected progression through the program. The bidirectional arrows indicate an iterative process of feedback and actions. The logic model is read from left to right. It starts on the left with the primary components of the system. To the right are the intermediate outcomes that we anticipate will occur as a result of sustained and coherent implementation of the system. These intermediate outcomes form a network of claims that are intended to lead to the ultimate goal of postsecondary education or competitive integrated employment outcomes for ELSCDs. The numbered arrows in Figure 1 represent claims about relationships between system components, intermediate and longer term, or ultimate outcomes. Following the logic model is a textual description of the content and evidence-based reasoning to contextualize the claims.

Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessment Logic Model

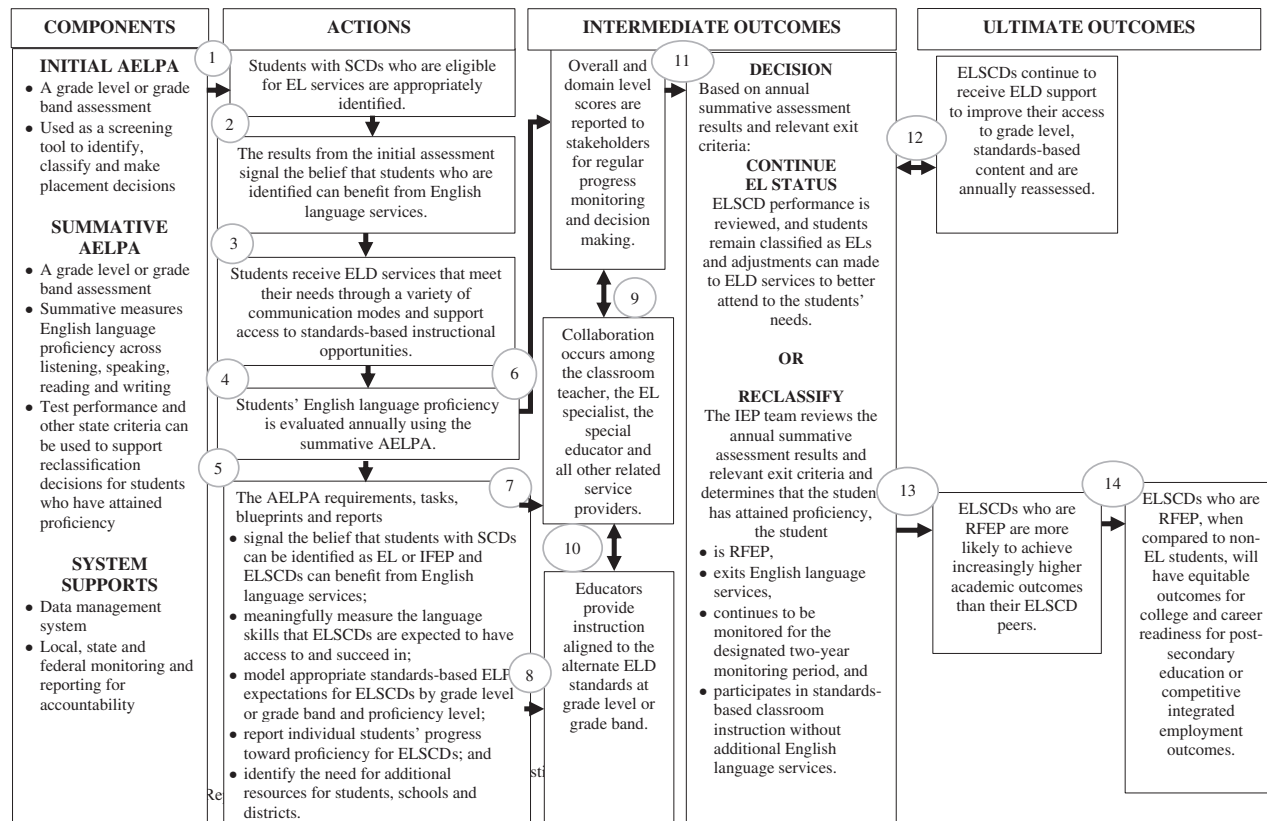


Figure 1 AELPA logic model. The numbered arrows represent claims about relationships between the system components and intermediate outcomes or between intermediate and longer term outcomes. The arrows indicate the expected progression through the program. The bi-directional arrows indicate an iterative process of feedback and actions. See the appendix for an explanation of the numbered connections. AELPA = alternate English language proficiency assessment; EL = English learner; SCD = significant cognitive disability; IFEP = initial fluent English proficient; RFEP = reclassified as fluent English proficient; ELD = English language development.

The logic model articulates the connections between critical system components that impact the claims that can be made from participating in the AELPA system. We acknowledge our conceptually based logic model does not address all practical issues that might impact implementation, such as staffing needs and programming opportunities; however, some potential challenges are identified in the following sections.

Supporting Literature for the Claims Within the Theory of Action

The role of the AELPA logic model is to represent the set of claims that capture measurable, attainable outcomes for ELSCDs. We can look to existing research studies to support the logic and plausibility of these claims and to identify gaps where we may wish to target initial research. It is critical to note that significant limitations are present in the published, peer-reviewed literature for AELPA systems and ELSCD (Guzman-Orth et al., 2016; Karvonen & Clark, 2019; Ware, Lye, & Kyffin, 2015). As a result, we take an interdisciplinary approach across the framework of standards-based assessment literature and peer-reviewed findings for students from special populations (ELs, students with disabilities) to conceptually generalize to our AELPA system for ELSCDs.

Identification of the Test-Taking Population

The first critical step for test development is defining the target population. ELSCDs are a subset of all students who meet alternate assessment criteria. It is important that ELs with a disability who do not meet the state's participation criteria

for an SCD are not eligible for an AELPA. Recent suggestions for exclusions for participation criteria make it clear that the student must meet the definition of an SCD and not a status such as recent arrival in U.S. schools, history of limited or interrupted formal schooling, low ELP or literacy level, ability/inability to exit from EL services, disability category, and or special education placement or service (Thurlow et al., 2018, p. 1).

Establishing a target population in a field where no formal definitions exist and are made by IEP team decisions has been a validity concern for establishing the test-taking populations for alternate assessment. Investigations for establishing target populations for alternate assessment have been done by conducting surveys of student characteristics (Kearns, Kleinert, Kleinert, & Towles-Reeves, 2006; Nash, Clark, & Karvonen, 2015). A recent survey was conducted to gather information on ELSCDs (Shyyan, Christensen, Mitchell, & Ceylan, 2018a). As more states begin administering AELPAs, we anticipate the information available for ELSCDs to increase in availability.

Eligibility for an Initial AELPA

Screening students to find those who are eligible for EL services is a common practice. This practice is supported by the HLS and the initial AELPA. The HLS is a widely used and equally widely debated screening measure for ELs (Bailey & Kelly, 2012), although reviews of the appropriateness of the HLS for ELs with disabilities, let alone for ELSCDs, have yet to be documented. The use of a traditional HLS to identify ELSCDs is a part of the referral process. In a recent study it was determined that IEP teams often do not include EL professionals as part of the team and that potential ELs are not evaluated in a way that can distinguish language-related versus disability-related ELP skills (Nehler, Wells-Moreaux, Clark, Burns, & Karvonen, 2019). If a student is identified as a potential EL based on the results of the HLS, the student is required to participate in the initial AELPA within the first 30 days of enrollment to determine formal EL designation and eligibility for EL services (Lopez, Pooler, & Linqunti, 2016). In other words, after the initial AELPA administration, the student may be considered IFEP or designated as an EL and eligible for English services (Claim 1). This process is one that must be designed thoughtfully so the accessibility considerations for ELSCD can be met and balanced with the stringent policy requirements driving the initial identification process.

English Language Services

The results from the initial assessment signal the belief that students identified as ELSCD can benefit from English language services. The use of assessment results to support English language services must be supported through an understanding of how the results support the ELD of individual students. Expectancy effects for students with SCDs have been historically plagued by low expectations (McGrew & Evans, 2004). Therefore, the development of an AELPA must consider how to support instruction for ELD and provide models of ELD for educators. Other institutional factors may impact educator beliefs, such as time for collaboration and the lack of availability of dually trained professionals. Factors that hinder individual educator beliefs of efficacy, including the belief that students can benefit from English language instruction, may influence the types of services students are provided, including a narrowing of program options and support (Claim 2; Hopkins, Lowenhaupt, & Sweet, 2015; Umansky, Thompson, & Díaz, 2017).

English language services must be delivered in such a way that they are maximally accessible and meaningful for ELSCDs. Students need ELD services that meet their individual communication modes and have access to standards-based instructional opportunities (Claim 3). To accomplish this goal, standards-based instruction in English across domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing should incorporate universal design for learning to promote multiple means of presentation, engagement, action, and expression (CAST, 2018). The ELD standards development process is critical to the conceptualization of the ELD construct and defining the domains for an AELPA and provides the foundational underpinnings for an AELPA system.

Summative AELPA and Decision-Making

The annual summative AELPA must be a fair, valid, and reliable assessment that can support monitoring and decision-making for reclassification (Claim 4). A number of policy and practice considerations interact with the summative AELPA administration (Wolf, Guzman-Orth, & Hauck, 2016). Annual assessment of ELP to determine a student's growth and overall proficiency in his or her English language acquisition is used in part to help determine if the student attained

proficiency or if he or she needs to continue with ELP services. The AELPA requirements, tasks, blueprints, and reports must signal the assessment meaningfully measures the language skills that are expected at the grade level or grade band as defined by the state's ELD standards and proficiency level (Claim 5). The AELPA provides a report that measures individual student progress toward proficiency. The overall domain level scores are reported to stakeholders for regular progress monitoring and decision-making (Claim 6). This decision-making should occur as a collaborative approach with numerous stakeholders and educators (Claim 7). Research has shown that educator attitude and models of practice promote higher expectations and achievement for students with disabilities (Claim 8; Klehm, 2014; Rubie-Davies, Peterson, Sibley, & Rosenthal, 2015). To ensure that ELSCDs have opportunity for access to high-quality individualized instruction aligned to the ELD standards, collaborations among teachers and related service personnel must occur (Claims 9 & 10; Nguyen, 2012).

One key decision emerging from the summative AELPA is the annual evaluation of students' language proficiency to determine if they should continue to receive EL services or if they should be RFEP (Linguanti & Cook, 2015; Wolf et al., 2016). This decision is largely dependent on how the SEA or LEA uses ELP test scores, considering single-criteria or multiple-criteria reclassification decisions (Claim 11; Wolf & Farnsworth, 2014; Wolf et al., 2008). The development of reclassification for AELPA must consider relevant exit criteria designed to allow ELSCDs who use a variety of communicative modes the opportunity to exit from the EL designation. Reclassification policies have important micro and macro effects. Developing relevant policies to establish criteria is an important area of reclassification (Carroll & Bailey, 2016; Cimpian, Thompson, & Makowski, 2017; Mavrogordato & White, 2017; Thompson, 2017).

Long-Term Outcomes

Based on annual summative assessment results and other criteria, the IEP team must decide annually if the student will continue to receive ELD support to improve his or her access to grade-level standards based content and continue to be reassessed annually (Claim 12) or be RFEP. If the student exits EL services, he or she continues to be monitored for the designated 2-year period and participate in standards-based classroom instruction without ELD services. ELSCDs who are RFEP are more likely to achieve higher academic outcomes than their ELSCD peers (Claim 13). Determining whether ELs should remain as an EL or be RFEP can potentially impact students' long-term outcomes. For some students, classification as an EL alone can have long-standing consequences, such as limiting access to academic and transition programs (Umansky, 2018). Karvonen and Clark (2019) found statistically significant group differences in a comparison of ELSCDs and their non-EL peers in academic and expressive-communication complexity levels, mean receptive-communication scores, instructional setting, and overall performance differences highlighting the critical need for further research to support equitable outcomes.

The ultimate outcome for ELSCDs is equitable outcomes for postsecondary education or competitive integrated employment outcomes (Claim 14). Self-contained environments and the lack of access to quality ELD services may have long-term negative consequences for ELSCD and impact their ability to achieve ELP and equitable postsecondary educational outcomes. Further, the additional impact of being both an EL and having a disability is still in the early stages of being explored empirically, so the mixed findings in the field have potential to evolve, especially considering students are gaining access to more individualized and appropriate services earlier in their educational career (Liu, Lipscomb, & Johann, 2017; Trainor, Murray, & Kim, 2016).

Overall because of the developing attention and resources for ELSCDs, the field should expect an increase in available empirical evidence to support future endeavors for ELSCDs. In this next section we use existing interdisciplinary literature to support the claims in our theory of action. Thus, we acknowledge that the AELPA system may be subject to unintended effects, articulated in the next section.

Unintended Effects

Implementing an AELPA system is a process that is in its infancy. In this report, we have outlined the need for a cohesive theory of action and shared a possible logic model to guide the conceptualization and implementation of such a system. Critically, we note that the AELPA system will not be implemented in a vacuum; we anticipate the need to revise and adjust expectations as users interact with the various system components to account for unintended effects. We articulate a preliminary set of unintended consequences to illustrate our purpose. These considerations are not mutually exclusive,

nor are they exhaustive. As the system matures, we recommend users continue monitoring these issues and evaluating the implementation of the system so that it continues to serve its intended purpose.

Examples of Positive Unintended Effects

- Other related service providers (in addition to those identified earlier in our report) may participate in collaboration and improve coherence in programming for ELSCD.
- Potential for positive washback where the implementation of an AELPA system leads to the systemic changes such as development of more inclusive model ELD programs and professional development for ELD teachers to provided improved individualized services.

Examples of Negative Unintended Effects

- Stakeholders' (teachers, parents, students) negative response to assessment requirements, testing burden, and lack of understanding of the relationship between assessment and the provision of appropriate EL services.
- Inappropriate or unclear participation criteria to support routing of EL students without SCDs to participate in the AELPA System.
- Misuse of test scores, such as using results from only one domain to determine student eligibility or exemption.
- Narrowed program options or opportunities based on AELPA participation.
- Teaching to the test blueprint and narrowing ELD into meaningless segments that lack meaning and coherence for ELSCDs' college and career readiness for postsecondary education or competitive integrated employment outcomes.

Mitigating unintended effects such as these examples will be a collaborative effort across many stakeholders spanning many years. In other words, we caution that, just like the development and implementation of an AELPA will not happen immediately, unintended consequences will also emerge over time. SEAs should be prepared to collaboratively engage to identify these unintended consequences and undertake efforts to ameliorate them to the extent possible.

Discussion

In this report, we demonstrated our novel conceptual approach to the federal requirements to establish an AELPA for ELSCDs. We posited that articulating clear purposes and goals for AELPA system components through a model like our theory of action is a step forward in addressing the federal requirements in a meaningful manner to ensure equitable and appropriate testing opportunities for ELSCDs. We illustrated the cohesiveness of our proposed AELPA system through our logic model and reiterated the importance of each step in our aspirational claims, balancing each with considerations for practicality and feasibility. Finally, we issued some cautions for the field for continued monitoring and provided guidance for additional research needed to support all stakeholders, including SEAs and LEAs, the practitioners, students, and parents in the new implementation of an AELPA system.

We acknowledge that while the mandate to establish an AELPA system for ELSCD can be a challenging task, we also call attention toward the potential. An awareness of the iterative nature of test development is critical for a validity framework that positions users of an AELPA as having potential to develop English language. This potential ranges from appropriate identification to service allocation and access to instruction and assessment to better meet individual ELSCD needs. Understandably, however, there will be growing pains, which will need to be anticipated during the development and implementation of an AELPA system. Balancing this practical consideration, we pose the following key tenants for stakeholders to consider in the development and refinement of their AELPA system.

Validity

Validity is a critical component of assessment design. In developing an AELPA, the process of defining the construct of ELP is critical. Academic English proficiency may be best thought of as “language ability across relevant modalities [reading, writing, speaking, and listening] used at sufficient levels of sophistication to successfully perform language-related school tasks required of students at a specific grade level (given adequate exposure and time to acquire the second language)”

(Bailey & Heritage, 2010, p. 3). Coherence for the AELPA comes in part from the use of the alternate ELD standards and key practices that both inform development of and reporting for each component. For this population, the level of English proficiency to achieve reclassification must be based on the English required for students to access the content of the alternate content standards at grade level commensurate with their non-EL peers with SCDs.

Defining Language Domains

Test development for AELPA must consider that traditional definitions of language often used in general ELP assessments may limit access and participation for ELSCDs. For example, oral language when defined as an exchange of ideas, information, and message through spoken words would limit access for students who use alternative forms of speaking (e.g., assistive technology and or severe speech impairment). Written language defined as an interchange of message, opinions, and information in written or printed form would restrict access and participation for students with SCDs (e.g., students who respond by eye gaze or AAC). In some cases, AAC may be required for individuals demonstrating impairments in gestural, spoken, and/or written modalities (American Speech-Language Hearing Association, 1993). To that end, developers of an AELPA must consider full range of access for ELSCDs.

Proficiency for ELSCD

In the few studies that have examined the relationships between state English language arts (ELA) and ELP assessments, reading and writing scores from ELP assessments have been shown to be significant predictors of performance on ELA assessments (Bailey & Butler, 2007; Cook, Hicks, Lee, & Freshwater, 2009). Such studies are important in establishing appropriate exit criteria to ensure that proficient students are being exited appropriately to minimize students remaining as ELs (e.g., long-term ELs, or LTELs) or students being exited too early.

Future Recommendations

We recognize that the potential for ELSCDs is unmeasured today, but historically, when provided with accurate supports, students with SCDs have consistently risen to meet and exceed the expectations set before them (Quenemoen & Thurlow, 2015). The AELPA system is a new addition for SEAs to implement to meet federal accountability requirements. As a result, the field is further behind in establishing policies and empirically based practices for ELSCDs and supporting those educators who serve them. We anticipate, however, that as the program develops and matures, specific evidence should be collected to validate the SEAs' implementations of their AELPA theory of action.

This theory of action is intended to promote a meaningful opportunity to support English language acquisition for culturally diverse ELSCDs who need support for both language and disability (Christensen et al., 2018). Because an AELPA represents a new frontier of test development geared toward a unique testing population, a strong adherence to technical quality is important at each step of design, implementation, and evaluation of the program. This theory of action recognizes that the development of an AELPA requires a systematic process for design, evaluation, and evolution of the assessment program. To that end, we provide some recommendations for policymakers, researchers, and test developers.

Recommendation 1: States should create an AELPA system that provides guidance but also allows for local control, particularly with the IEP teams.

We consider the importance of the accountability assessment needs but likewise recognize the critical importance of the role of the IEP team. IEP teams are responsible for making assessment decisions for individual students (Ortiz et al., 2011; Ortiz, Wilkinson, Robertson-Courtney, & Kushner, 2006). Models for clarifying the roles of the IEP team members for collaboration may need to be developed (Pellegrino, Weiss, & Regan, 2015). No models currently address the considerations for provision of services for students who are eligible for an AELPA. Depending on the model of combined support services (e.g., English language and special education), students should be provided appropriate services or may be unnecessarily tracked into ability-based groups or instructional settings that are not inclusive or not appropriate for the students' age or grade, which could impact their opportunity to learn and reduce opportunities to interact with English-speaking peers (Serpa, 2011; Umansky, 2016). While models can provide guidance for decision-making, the ultimate decisions are made by the IEP team, whose members best know the language, culture, communication, and cognitive abilities of the student (Tran, Patton, & Brohammer, 2018).

States must develop clear guidance and policies for identification and decision-making as well as auditing and monitoring to maintain quality decision-making (Bailey & Kelly, 2012). Practical guidance is needed to identify characteristics for familiar test examiners when the student is taking the initial assessment in his or her first 30 days of enrollment as well as validity evidence to understand how these students orient and respond to the initial AELPA. Reclassification decisions for ELSCDs should be made with a knowledgeable IEP team that addresses cultural and linguistic considerations through multiple pieces of data to support AELPA score interpretation. Additional policies include a test–retest policy if students are identified with an SCD after their initial ELP assessment to ensure that students' classifications from one assessment system to the other do not persist and to allow students to test again to determine EL eligibility on the AELPA.

To this end, SEAs and LEAs must establish general participation criteria to provide guidance to IEP teams and testing coordinators to determine which students are eligible for the AELPA (Thurlow et al., 2017). States may need to evaluate the questions and response options in use for the current HLS to make sure that students with SCDs are being appropriately flagged as eligible to take the initial AELPA. Further restructuring may be needed to ensure that the HLS is appropriate for ELSCDs who use a variety of communicative modes that may or may not include verbal speech (Brady et al., 2016; Snell et al., 2010).

Recommendation 2: The standards and content measured in the AELPA system should hold students to high expectations and meaningfully measure ELP while providing a range of performance expectations to meet the needs of all students participating in the AELPA.

The need to raise expectations for students on alternate assessments has been well documented (Cameto et al., 2010; McGrew & Evans, 2004). A state's ELD standards should reflect research on the process of language acquisition and the elements needed for EL students to acquire English language skills necessary to meet academic content standards. The proficient level of the ELP standard should correspond to the proficient level of the corresponding grade-level content or the grade-level alternate academic achievement standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 16). Alternate ELP standards must reflect the language demands of each content area.

While we believe that ELSCDs must be held to high expectations, we similarly believe it is important for content in the AELPA to be maximally accessible for students to demonstrate their range of performance across each of the domains. Evidence-based practices promoting standards-based programs are established for learners with SCDs (Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtade, Gibbs, & Flowers, 2008; Browder, Wood, Thompson, & Ribuffo, 2014; Courtade et al., 2012). The AELPA must establish ways the ELD standards support ELP across a range of languages, cultures, and forms of communication. Documentation of the range is important for establishing appropriate expectations for ELSCDs across a continuum. The best source of identifying appropriate ranges is development and review of the ELD standards and alternate academic achievement standards by educators who serve these students (Michaels et al., 2018). The use of individual student characteristic surveys in early stages of assessment development may establish initial ranges of performance across the domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing as defined by the ELD standards.

Recommendation 3: The AELPA test development must provide an equitable testing opportunity for ELSCDs. It must be accessible, fair, and valid. It must be enhanced by meaningful iterative processes, ongoing collection of validity evidence, and appropriate technical documentation.

Equitable access for the assessment relies on principles of universal design. Universal design principles include considerations of accessibility and accommodation features in order to provide access for the target population. The test design and assessment delivery system must provide a variety of opportunities for the target population. Access challenges must consider the diversity of the target population to support fairness and reduce the need for domain exemptions. Flexibility is an important aspect of alternate assessments. This kind of flexibility must be considered in the test design and supported within the test specifications, item/task development, and administrative conditions (Winter, Karvonen, & Christensen, 2018). Technical documentation should include considerations for balancing standardization and support the need for flexibility.

Validity evidence is needed to support claims that the student performance on the AELPA is related to the student's English language skills and is not due to his or her disability. The conceptualization of the validity argument and development of study designs must consider the low incidence population and strategies to appropriately elicit information from ELSCD test takers. The ongoing collection of validity evidence is supported by the development of a research agenda for studying the impact of the assessment system and support improvement of the program. The theory of action supports

the evaluation plan and informs program improvements (Sireci, 2015). An AELPA theory of action will serve as a way to document the system's evolution as an assessment program and a continuous improvement model. Ongoing validity evidence must be collected from multiple sources to support the claims of the AELPA system. The evidence must result in actionable recommendations that also balance the practicality and feasibility constraints that are commonplace in public school systems.

Recommendation 4: The implementation of an AELPA system should motivate the need for expert educators with dual special education and language development expertise.

Not only must teacher candidates have access to curriculum and practicums to provide exposure to teaching ELSCDs, but current teachers also must have access to ongoing high-quality professional development to meet the wide range of needs from their ELSCDs participating in the AELPA system (Shyyan, Gholson, & Christensen, 2018b). The creation of programs focusing on dual language learners with SCDs must be shared with expert teachers, teacher trainers, and mid- and early career teachers (Tran et al., 2018).

Programs models should emphasize how teams support and develop collaborative practices across EL, special education, and general education teachers and related service providers such as speech language pathologists. Speech language pathologists are IEP team members who may have received training in language development, communication disorders, disability, and cultural and linguistic services (American Speech-Language Hearing Association, 2016). Although they may have relevant expertise, they may not be trained in collaborative teaming.

Recommendation 5: The AELPA system should be designed in such a way that it will maintain coherence within the state assessment framework.

The AELPA system should be coherent within a state's assessment program. In a search for coherence, the AELPA must attend to an examination of instructional support practices that should be considered during test design. Students should be expected to perform on assessments in consistent ways. Test developers should also consider how students are expected to perform on other required alternate assessments. To the extent possible, task types that are familiar to students should be used. New or innovative task types should not be considered based on novelty but after careful decision directly related to the construct being assessed. For example, reading and writing task types from existing alternate content assessments could be used, whereas speaking and listening task types are unfamiliar areas for students in this population and must be appropriately developed. The close examination of speaking and listening in the instructional practices should inform the task types. Task types used in a general ELP assessment may not fit with instructional practices for this population and are most likely unfamiliar to the population.

The AELPA system should be coherent in test administration and monitoring practices. A state data system must provide a structure that allows users to link or dually tag across systems. Educators need the ability to securely access reports to support appropriate level ELD instruction and make program decisions. The ELP total score or subscores on the summative may provide a general sense of a student's strengths or weaknesses; however, a system that captures longitudinal student data would be optimal.

Conclusion

In this report, we have articulated a model of an AELPA system to identify and measure ELP for ELSCDs. Ensuring that ELSCDs have equitable access to high-quality educational opportunities including instruction and assessment is an ongoing endeavor. As more attention turns to ELSCDs, policymakers and educators must collaborate to determine how to most appropriately identify, educate, and support these students. Historically, ELSCDs are traditionally marginalized and underrepresented in K–12 education. With the shift in policy requirements, the field has an opportunity to reset beliefs and set high expectations for ELSCDs to achieve. We believe, despite the initial growing pains, that this unprecedented attention will ultimately be in the best interest of ELSCDs and their educators so that teachers and students can finally get the support to have equitable educational opportunities.

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Notes

- 1 The term, *most significant cognitive disabilities*, is recognized within the regulations, and throughout the report, we use the phrase, *English learners with significant cognitive disabilities*, and its abbreviation, *ELSCD*, to be interchangeable.
- 2 Regulatory guidance by the U.S. Department of Education (2005) recognizes definitions of SCDs is a state responsibility, however guidance does acknowledge students with the SCDs (a) are within one or more of the existing categories of disability under the IDEA (e.g., autism, multiple disabilities, traumatic brain injury, etc.) and (b) have cognitive impairments that may prevent them from attaining grade-level achievement standards, even with the very best instruction.

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Appendix

Claims for an AELPA

1. When an initial AELPA (screener) is administered to determine EL identification, classification, and make placement decisions, then students with SCDs who are eligible for English language services are appropriately identified.
2. When students with SCDs who are eligible for English language services are appropriately identified, then the results from the initial assessment signal the belief that students who are identified can benefit from English language services.
3. When the results from the initial assessment signal the belief that students who are identified can benefit from English language services, then students receive ELD services that meet their needs through a variety of communicative modes and support access to standards-based instructional opportunities.
4. When students receive ELD services that meet their needs through a variety of communicative modes and support access to standards-based instructional opportunities, then students' ELP is evaluated annually using the summative AELPA.
5. When students' ELP is evaluated annually using the summative AELPA, then the AELPA requirements, tasks, blueprints, and reports
 - signal the belief that students with SCDs can be identified as EL or IFEP, and ELSCDs can benefit from English language services;
 - meaningfully measure the language skills that ELSCDs are expected to have access to and succeed in;
 - model appropriate standards-based ELP expectations for ELSCDs by grade level or grade band and proficiency level;
 - report individual student progress toward proficiency for ELSCD; and
 - identify the need for additional resources for students, schools, and districts.
6. When students' ELP is evaluated annually using the summative AELPA, then their overall and domain level scores are reported to stakeholders for regular progress monitoring and decision-making.
7. When AELPA requirements, tasks, blueprints and reports are utilized, they
 - signal the belief that students with SCDs can be identified as EL or IFEP, and ELSCDs can benefit from English language services;
 - meaningfully measure the language skills that ELSCDs are expected to have access to and succeed in;
 - model appropriate standards-based ELP expectations for ELSCDs by grade level or grade band and proficiency level;
 - report individual student progress toward proficiency for ELSCD; and
 - identify the need for additional resources for students, schools, and districts; then collaboration among the classroom teacher, the English language specialist, the IEP team, and all other related service personnel occurs.
8. When AELPA requirements, tasks, blueprints and reports are utilized, they
 - signal the belief that students with SCDs can be identified as EL or IFEP, and ELSCDs can benefit from English language services;

- meaningfully measure the language skills that ELSCDs are expected to have access to and succeed in;
 - model appropriate standards-based ELP expectations for ELSCDs by grade level or grade band and proficiency level;
 - report individual student progress toward proficiency for ELSCD; and
 - identify the need for additional resources for students, schools, and districts; then educators provide instruction aligned to the alternate ELD standards at grade level or grade band.
9. When overall and domain level scores are reported to stakeholders for regular progress monitoring and decision-making, then collaboration occurs among the classroom teacher, the English language specialist, the special educator, and all other related service providers, which in turn facilitates individualized progress monitoring and decision-making processes for ELSCD.
 10. When collaboration occurs among the classroom teacher, the English language specialist, the special educator, and all other related service providers occurs, then educators provide instruction aligned to the alternate ELD standards at grade level or grade band, which in turn facilitates enhanced collaboration across educators (classroom teacher, English language specialist, IEP team) and all other related service providers.
 11. When overall and domain level scores are reported to stakeholders for regular progress monitoring and decision-making then a decision is made. Based on annual summative assessment results and relevant exit criteria, a decision is made to
 - continue EL status: ELSCD performance is reviewed, and students remain classified as ELs and adjustments can be made to ELD services to better attend to the students' needs, or
 - reclassify: ELSCDs who have attained proficiency are RFEP, exit English language services, and will continue to be monitored for the designated 2-year monitoring period as they participate in standards-based classroom instruction without additional English language services.
 12. When the decision is made to continue EL status, then ELSCDs continue to receive ELD support to improve their access to grade-level, standards-based content and are annually reassessed. Then, EL status is re-evaluated based on the overall and domain level scores that are annually reported to stakeholders (see Claim 11).
 13. When the IEP team reviews the annual summative assessment results and relevant exit criteria and determines that the student has attained proficiency, the student
 - is RFEP,
 - exits English language services,
 - continues to be monitored for the designated 2-year monitoring period and,
 - participates in standards-based classroom instruction without additional English language services; then ELSCDs who are RFEP are more likely to achieve increasingly higher academic outcomes than their ELSCD peers.
 14. When ELSCDs who are RFEP are more likely to achieve higher academic outcomes than their ELSCD peers, then ELSCDs who are RFEP, when compared to non-EL students, will have equitable outcomes for college and career readiness for postsecondary education or competitive integrated employment outcomes.

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