

Building Bridges

A Cross-Case Site Study of a Curriculum for Students with Interrupted Formal Education

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Executive Summary

With the current tide of anti-immigrant and refugee sentiment, it is more important than ever for teachers and administrators to incorporate both classroom and schoolwide strategies to meet the academic, social and emotional needs of immigrant students. Particularly for English language learners, a welcoming culture is key as this population has been found to feel stigmatized and unwelcome in United States classrooms with many teachers feeling ill-prepared to support their learning needs (Lucas, et.al, 2011). This study examined how implementation of a curriculum designed for refugee and immigrant students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) affected student learning in three bilingual and multilingual secondary schools in New York State. A two-course program was designed and funded by the New York State Department of Education with the intent of explicitly teaching foundational literacy skills, academic thinking and conceptual understandings for students with developing literacy in their home language. Researchers examined student progress monitoring data in English reading skills over a year-long period and conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with teachers, administrators and students. Using a grounded theory approach to identify salient themes across sites, researchers identified promising practices in working with students, many of whom are undocumented, during their transition to U.S. schools. Results showed that students in all settings made growth in foundational literacy skills and reading comprehension in English. Moreover, the study documents the tremendous obstacles a majority of the students regularly overcame to attend and participate in the classroom.

Key Findings

Role of Factors Outside the Classroom

The unique factors in the role of life outside the classroom greatly impacted student learning and their resulting social and emotional needs in the classroom, especially for undocumented students or students who crossed the border. Factors such as gang violence in the community,

immigration status, and an economic need to work long hours while in school affected all students to varying degrees. For some, medical issues or teen pregnancy also impacted their ability to participate fully in school. Even for those interviewed who had stable home environments, some of these stressors impacted their perception of schooling. Many students also talked about negative stereotypes about immigrants as an additional factor they faced on a daily basis. Across all schools, it became apparent the need for additional counseling and the lack of fiscal resources to support hiring and training of bilingual counselors. Nevertheless, despite many of these circumstances, students demonstrated resilience and discussed the ways they learned best in the classroom and their future dreams and goals.

Progress in English Reading Skills

Across schools, despite uneven implementation in the Stand-alone classroom, students who were assessed twice during the year made an average of 1.83 to 2.07 levels of progress as indicated on the Independent Reading Level Assessment or (IRLA) (ARC, 2015). Progress can't be attributed directly to specific curriculum activities in the classroom; however, results suggested promising practices. Future research is needed to implement specific curricular interventions and measure progress on those English subskills in both reading and writing components of the curriculum.

Promising Instructional Practices

Exploratory results from classroom observations and interviews with students and teachers showed that a few key practices from both courses hold promise. In the Stand-alone ENL classroom, leveling and progress monitoring on the IRLA was discussed as a key factor in helping drive instruction and individual conferencing as a way to provide targeted feedback on student skills and attitudes in the classroom. Celebrating student progress in their reading was also important. For example, one teacher provided certificates as students progressed on their reading levels, and some of her students described this as motivating to their work. Other key strategies observed to engage students and support their learning included Guided Reading, implemented in teacher-directed centers. Although teachers and administrators mentioned all of

these promising practices, they also expressed the need for more training in how to use assessment to drive instruction and in training students in language and foundational skills.

In the Integrated ENL/ELA class, home language annotation was another strategy that students used as a part of the instructional protocol Read, Retell and Respond. Many teachers and administrators across all three sites mentioned this strategy as a helpful technique in teaching SIFE with home language literacy at the third-grade level and below—or what we have termed SIFE with Developing Literacy (SDL). Whether as part of the instructional protocol or through other classroom activities, the importance of planned, short discussions to support oral language production was observed and mentioned in interviews across the sites. Finally, the importance of key routines embedded in the curriculum were observed and mentioned as a promising practice both to support classroom culture and to nurture academic thinking. The role of both independent and collaborative work in these routines was also important to nurturing classroom learning, according to teachers and students who were interviewed. An Integrated ENL/ELA teacher noted, “I think routines are so important for this population. Knowing that they can come in and do a task and perform it is so valuable and it makes them feel good, it makes them feel secure, it makes them feel safe.”

Teacher Beliefs

According to the data collected, the majority of teachers changed beliefs about their students during the implementation period. Those who had experienced changes in beliefs described that they felt open to new possibilities to instruction. One Integrated ENL/ELA teacher said, “I now realize that SIFE are capable of using higher-order thinking skills, and that allowing students to use their home language allows students to communicate more sophisticated responses.”

Instructional Growth

Through fieldwork, observations, and corroborating interviews, we tracked growth in a variety of areas using an instructional observation protocol. In the area of classroom culture, the use of home language increased over the year in most classes. It was shown to be a way to build

relationships in class and acknowledge student identity and background, as well as be leveraged for use in learning English. We tracked growth in the area of gradual release of responsibility, which had more mixed results. Teachers described the challenges of when and how to model and how to provide the right amount of scaffolding for SDL at varying levels of home language literacy, particularly in classes where students spoke multiple languages. Administering formative assessments in consistent and meaningful ways also proved to be challenging. All teachers mentioned the need for more practice and time to become oriented to the curricular materials and writing assessments, as well as additional job-embedded coaching in leveling and conferencing.

School-Based Collaborative Practices

As with other programs and contexts, educator collaboration matters in implementing this curriculum. Particularly in the area of intake and assessment, appropriate identification of students was shown to be a deciding factor in whether students were placed correctly in the sheltered ELA classes. In addition, monitoring social and emotional needs was also informed by collaborative practice. Communication between teachers of the two courses, or in one case, teacher teams across subject areas, was shown to be important in providing the right additional school supports for students and also for moving a student out of the sheltered class when he or she was ready. One school set up an enrollment team to help foster these practices and parent communication. Teachers and administrators at this school cited this practice as effective in not only in supporting the implementation of the curriculum, but also in meeting individual student needs more effectively.

Recommendations for Further Research and Practice

Below are a few recommendations for future research, as well as future training, coaching and resource development for practitioners who support this population of students. Some recommendations are at the policy level, but most are at the level of the implementation team and the stakeholders they serve.

- Increased counseling services where possible at the school level, and increased funding for school counselors at the policy level
- Interviews and data collection with counselors and their administrators to better understand the needs of students and the types of services required to meet the needs of students
- Increased training and support for teachers in the prescribed reading assessment to drive instruction at the centers in Stand-alone ENL
- Increased training and supports for learning, implementation and analysis of curriculum-embedded assessment to drive instruction in Integrated ENL/ELA classroom
- Increased training, explicit implementation of language strategies and use of oral language in classrooms
- Development and implementation of trauma-informed classrooms and school-wide strategies to better support school interventions and more effectively support and complement academic learning
- Once students exit the sheltered environment of Bridges into the following year, further inquiry through classroom observation, interviews with second-year students and their teachers to better identify 1) what the exit criteria from the Bridges classroom should be; 2) what structures should be put in place to better facilitate the transition; and 3) what practices in the second year either transfer from the Bridges classroom or complement these strategies to promote academic and social success of specific students

Study Introduction and Rationale

Bridges to Academic Success, a project of the Graduate Center, the City University of New York (CUNY), began in 2013 with the support of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) and the New York State Education Department (NYSED) as a curricular intervention to support SDL. The project was initiated in part by CUNY researchers who explored the needs of SIFE by conducting studies to determine the characteristics of SIFE that distinguish them from English language learners (ELLs), and what competencies they bring when they enter U.S. schools (Klein,

E. C. & Martohardjono, G., 2006, 2009, 2015). Since the onset of the project, CUNY practitioners who supported this investigation and inquiry developed a Common Core/NYS-aligned ELA and partial Math and Science curriculum designed to best address this population, preferably as part of a sheltered program for one year.

During the 2015-2016 school year, the curriculum was finalized and rolled out to teachers throughout New York State in the summer of 2016. As part of this rollout, two schools were designated as lab sites, not only to implement the revised curriculum, but also to provide teachers with coaching and support from Bridges team members.

There are two key, concurrently delivered courses in ELA. Whereas Integrated ENL/ELA, focuses on development of academic and conceptual thinking—with whole-group stretch texts to guide the class—Stand-alone ENL focuses on building independent reading and writing skills to build student identities as readers and writers, as well as develop their foundational literacy and comprehension skills.

Course	Part 1: Integrated ENL/ELA	Part 2: Stand-alone ENL
Key Focus	Academic Concepts, Thinking, Language & Literacy	Differentiated Language & Literacy Centers
Foundational Language Support	Foundational language skills integrated for new-to-print SDL	

Figure 1: SIFE with Developing Literacy (SDL) Curriculum Representation

Research Goals and Questions

The goal of this exploratory study was to understand how the Bridges ELA curriculum was implemented in schools and classrooms and to what degree students progressed in terms of specific literacy skills and academic behaviors in a year-long period. In addition to further understanding the implementation of the curriculum and student response, we were interested

in exploring how the teachers and the Bridges classroom community supported the development of non-cognitive factors of Bridges students and engaged them in social and emotional learning.

In addition to contributing to our own team learning, we hope that the schools can utilize this research as part of their own inquiry approach to understanding the impact of the Bridges curriculum and methods on both their students and their own practices. Finally, we hope to capture and identify specific strategies in the curriculum as potential best practices for later impact studies. Below, we outline our key research question and additional research questions for a cross-case study across three individual lab site schools.

Key Research Question

To what extent is the Bridges/SIFE curriculum and classroom responsive to the academic and social and emotional needs of the targeted students?

Additional Questions

Are there indicators of student progress in foundational literacy and reading comprehension through implementation of Integrated ENL/ELA and Stand-alone ENL?

What are possible factors that may hinder or accelerate reading progress for SDL in the classroom?

What features of the SIFE curriculum may have an influence on reading development in L2?

How do students perceive the Bridges classroom?

What do students view as helpful for their reading development in L2?

How do key non-cognitive factors contribute to student acceleration in academic achievement?

What factors in the school context or learning environment affect the implementation of the SIFE curriculum?

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