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Sustaining a Multitiered System of Supports for English Learners in Rural Community Elementary Schools

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Abstract

A 5-year model demonstration project designed to improve literacy instruction and special education referrals for English learners (ELs) in grades K–3 in three rural community elementary schools was completed with specific attention to sustainability 1 year after implementation. The model, which was developed and implemented through a university–school district collaborative partnership, incorporated sustainability as a critical component. Findings show that the sustainability component (a) embedded into project development, (b) periodically revisited during project implementation, and (c) personalized by participating schools developing their own sustainability plans proved to be a successful approach to maintaining select literacy best practices and improved referrals of ELs. A minimum of 80% of classroom teacher participants reported 1 year after project implementation that key aspects of the project continued to be beneficial or very beneficial for delivering their classroom instruction to ELs. Each of the five multitiered system of supports (MTSS) for EL model components was somewhat addressed, with several being mostly addressed 1 year after implementation in all three elementary schools. Also, the culturally and linguistically responsive referral was maintained. Project sustainability findings are shared and discussed along with recommendations for educators to apply in their MTSS models in rural elementary schools with high populations of ELs with and without disabilities.

Keywords

learning, disability/ies, elementary, rural special education, cultural diversity/competency

Sustainability is a critical feature of educational reform once external job-embedded professional development (PD) and program implementation have concluded, especially in rural schools given their unique challenges to secure contemporary resources and training (Maheady, Magiera, & Simmons, 2016). Sustainability becomes a central focus in transforming educational programs when "decision-makers involved in implementing an innovation must face the ultimate challenge of planning for the time when the implementation phase is completed" (Johnson, Hayes, Center, & Daley, 2004, p. 136). Drivers often associated with educational sustainability include emphasizing sustainability throughout implementation (Metz, Blase, & Bowie, 2007) while maintaining educational leadership (Harmon, Gordanier, Henry, & George, 2007).

This article provides a description and results of the sustainability efforts associated with an Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) funded 5-year model demonstration project (MDP) designed to improve literacy instruction and special education referrals for learning disabilities of English learners (ELs) in grades K–3 in three elementary schools in rural community schools in a western U.S. state. Our article includes a brief overview of the MDP through delivery of a culturally and linguistically framed response to intervention multitiered system of supports (MTSS), along with select findings to provide the reader sufficient information to appreciate the sustainability aspect. Sustainability is featured with readers being referred to the authors for additional project information. We begin with a literature review of rural education and diverse learners, MTSS and rural schools, and sustainability.

Literature Review

Rural Education and Diverse Learners

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners, especially ELs, with and without disabilities represent a fast-growing population in rural communities (Barrio, 2017;

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Conroy, 2012; Hoover & Erickson, 2015; Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005). Rural schools, however, continue to experience a variety of educational challenges that directly affect student academic progress. For example, limited cultural opportunities are often faced by educators in rural community schools (Robinson, Bursuck, & Sinclair, 2013), contemporary resources in rural areas may be scarce (Maheady et al., 2016), and the need to improve educator teaching skills in rural schools has been documented (Stockard, 2011). In specific reference to ELs in rural schools, Hoover, Sarris, and Hill (2015) wrote that "the challenge of providing contemporary professional development to acquire needed instructional practices to educate these learners characterizes a significant need in rural county schools" (p. 1).

In addition, as diversity in our student population increases so do the number of ELs with disabilities (Lo, 2013). The significant increase in diverse learners in rural schools also directly affects representation in special education programs often leading to disproportionality. The overrepresentation of CLD learners in special education is and has been a continuing concern for educators over the past few decades (see Council for Exceptional Children Policy Insider, 2016; deBettencourt, Hoover, Rude, & Taylor, 2016; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Ortiz et al., 2011). Disproportionality often becomes more acute in rural community schools should teachers lack contemporary culturally and linguistically responsive (CLR) skill sets, leading to ELs' inappropriate referrals due to misinterpreting second language acquisition and cultural differences as learning or language disabilities (Hoover & Erickson, 2015; Project ELITE, Project ESTRE2LLA, & Project REME, 2015a).

As will be presented in this article, addressing changing rural community diverse demographics and associated school instructional challenges is essential to sustaining delivery of an effective MTSS. Project results have implications for shaping ELs' positive responses to intervention by providing rural educators with contemporary (a) perspectives, (b) PD, and (c) instructional best practices within MTSS.

MTSS Challenges Within Rural Community Schools

An MTSS is the contemporary framework for educating learners through delivery of a data-based, decision-making response to intervention model, implemented at the school level via layered instruction that increases in duration and intensity based on learner progress (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Hoover, Barletta, & Klingner, 2016). The successful development and delivery of MTSS is the result of collaboration and consensus among educators across grade levels, content areas, and educational specialty (e.g., special educator, interventionist, counselor, English language development teacher). With proper structures and resources in place, a multilayered support system for diverse learners, including ELs, holds promise for improving learning outcomes and reducing special education misplacements and disproportionality (Hoover et al., 2016).

Developing, implementing, and sustaining an MTSS framework require the addition and/or reallocation of various resources such as PD, collaborative instructional planning time during the school day, funds for purchasing contemporary materials, or use of external expertise to reexamine how struggling learners are educated within the different tiers of instruction (i.e., Tiers 1, 2, 3). However, as discussed above, these and similar resource supports are often not readily available in many rural schools, creating instructional delivery challenges. For example, relative to MTSS, rural school concerns include (a) securing and maintaining teachers with training in MTSS; (b) locating staffing resources needed for delivering contemporary PD on the topic of MTSS, including extended follow-up mentoring and coaching; and (c) allocating financial resources necessary to support school or district acquisition of contemporary teacher and student materials. Overall, Robinson et al. (2013) suggested that many rural schools may encounter numerous challenges when implementing a multitiered model of instruction.

The MTSS challenges become even more significant when considering the educational qualities and features of ELs (e.g., cultural heritage, language, familiarity with U.S. schools). For example, in reference to multilayered instruction and CLD learners, (a) the research of Christianson (2016) showed that a rural school with smaller numbers of ELs struggled to meet federal guidelines, engage families, and assist learners to make adequate academic progress; (b) Barrio and Peak (2017) emphasized the importance of incorporating culturally responsive instruction in the MTSS framework; (c) Hoover et al. (2016) stressed the importance of differentiating learning differences from disabilities in MTSS for ELs noting the challenges of incorporating this into rural school settings; and (d) Vaughn (n.d.; https://www.ncld.org/) discussing response to intervention stressed the significance of determining ELs' abilities in first language as well as progress in the second language.

As suggested, of critical importance to rural schools is the ability to address these research-based recommendations within MTSS for ELs through appropriate allocation/reallocation of resources, delivery of contemporary PD, and acquisition and application of instructional best practices. To be effective with diverse populations, the MTSS must be shaped in ways that value diverse cultures and languages in teaching and learning (Project ELITE, Project ESTRE2LLA, & Project REME, 2015b), sustained over time such as the model described in this article.

Sustainability

Literature on school program change and sustainability identifies consideration of several essential features, including the environment, leadership, classroom structures, and ongoing evaluation (Corbett, Dawson, & Firestone, 1984; Stringfield & Teddlie, 1993; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). More specifically, Dickerson (2001) discussed several components necessary for sustainability, including (a) *School Context* which incorporates student and family backgrounds, faculty experience and stability, family engagement, and conditions for creating and sustaining change; (b) *Leadership* which includes roles that principals, teachers, parents, and community members assume in the leadership to sustain educational programs; (c) *School Culture* which emphasizes a collaborative culture of common values and norms among students, parents, teachers, and administrators reflecting a shared vision; (d) *External Factors* which stresses the value of available resources, curricular mandates, home/community teachings, and changing views of the role of school in society; and (e) C*hange Effort* which incorporates the process for initiating and implementing change necessary for reform to occur and be maintained.

Other researchers also identified important sustainability elements similar to those described above (Johnson et al., 2004), such as structure, innovation, leadership, resources, policies, and expertise. Overall, "sustainability is the ability of a staff to maintain the core beliefs and values (culture) of a program and use them to guide program adaptations over time" (RMC Research Corporation, 2013, p. 1). Based on literature reviews, project sustainability was developed and implemented through a university–school district partnership as a critical component of the model designed to transform existing multitiered instructional frameworks to become more CLR to best facilitate ELs' literacy progress, along with an improved process for special education learning disability referrals.

Overview of MTSS Model for ELs

> The purpose of model demonstration projects (MDPs) is to develop new practice, procedure, or program models on the basis of theory and/or evidence-based research. Each project then implements its model in typical settings, assesses impacts, and, if the model is associated with benefits, may go on to disseminate it or scale it up. (Shaver & Wagner, 2013, p. 2)

Within this parameter, a 5-year MDP was developed addressing three essential features: (a) university–school district partnership, (b) MTSS model components and delivery, and (c) sustainability. The project focused specifically on improving (a) general education literacy instruction for ELs, and (b) ELs' special education referral processes and tools for a learning disability by attending to relevant cultural and linguistic features. As indicated, the focus of this article is on Feature 3 (Sustainability), with Features 1 and 2 briefly summarized.

University–School District Partnership

A university–school district partnership framed the MDP, which "emphasized the notion that the defined goals (i.e., improved teacher practices; appropriate referrals) are equally important as attaining the identified outcomes (i.e., increased student achievement; culturally and linguistically responsive referral process)" (Hoover & Soltero-González, 2018, p. 194). The university–school district partnership was a collaboration among university researchers, district administrators, building principals, and school staff who actively participated in the development, implementation, evaluation, and sustainability of the MDP. The project was guided by university–school district partnership principles summarized by Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell, and Cherednichenko (2009) who wrote that "partnerships are a social practice achieved through and characterized by trust, mutuality and reciprocity among preservice teachers, teachers and other school colleagues, and teacher educators" (p. 10).

An essential topic of consideration in the development of the project was to transform the elementary schools' teaching and learning environments rather than simply "adding on" to existing practices. Specifically, the project partnership facilitated empowerment by focusing on educators' (a) underlying assumptions about learning; (b) self-reflection of existing perspectives; (c) consideration of alternatives; (c) job-embedded engaged discourse; (d) commitment to revising, as necessary, own assumptions; and (e) willingness to act on needed transformative changes (Baumgartner, 2001; Cranton, 2002, 2006; Mezirow, 1997; E. W. Taylor & Cranton, 2012). With the addition of a cultural/linguistic responsive perspective, the partnership resulted in the deeper consideration of multitiered instruction and referral for ELs with and without disabilities.

MTSS Model Components and Select Project Results

The MTSS model project was a 5-year project (i.e., 2012–2017) that included participation by three elementary schools in one school district located in a mountain rural community in a western state that met two primary criteria: (a) ELs represented approximately 40% of the total school population, and (b) 100 ELs collectively populated the K–3 classrooms. At the time of the project, the district served slightly more than 6,000 students, of which more than one third were ELs. The district had an overrepresentation of ELs in special education (i.e., 39% ELs in district, yet 49% of special learners were ELs). One of the elementary schools

(Pilot School 1) was a dual-language school and the other two schools (Pilot Schools 2 and 3) delivered instruction to ELs through an English as a Second Language (ESL) model. Year 1 of the project was devoted to conducting and finalizing model development, PD, needs assessment, and delivery; Years 2 to 4 were devoted to the delivery of the PD and implementation of the model; Year 5 was devoted specifically to the sustainability aspects of the project. Pilot Schools 1 and 2 began the project in Year 1, whereas Pilot School 3 was added during Year 2 as stipulated by the grant funder. However, all three pilot schools received similar training and supports.

The needs assessment included meetings with district partners in administration along with interactions with school staff to gather input regarding the most immediate needs in the literacy education of ELs and special education referrals. University researchers also completed observations/walkthroughs during literacy instruction in each of the K–3 classrooms as well as of data and referral team meetings in the three pilot schools. Observed findings indicated the need for improved classroom literacy instruction and school referral processes. Classroom instruction showed limited attention to both first and second language development and to cultural relevancy. With regard to the referral process, once cultural and linguistic factors were ruled out as primary contributors to the suspected need for special education as mandated by Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), the referral team meetings included little to no discussion or attention to cultural and linguistic features that support ELs' learning (i.e., once culture/language was ruled out as primary contributors, ELs' diverse qualities and strengths were not incorporated in referral discussions).

Therefore, two of the primary need areas that emerged shaping the purpose of the MTSS for ELs' efforts were (a) increased teacher use of ESL and bilingual literacy best practices, and (b) development of a school/district-wide CLR special education referral process for learning disabilities. Based on the needs assessment, meetings, class visits, and literature reviews, a five-component CLR MTSS model was developed with each component briefly described below:

- *Multilevel instruction*. Data-driven instruction delivered within three tiers increasing in duration and intensity as needed (Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Sun, Nam, & Vanderwood, 2007).
- *Research-based core literacy instruction.* Classroom teacher's use of literacy ESL/bilingual best practices emphasizing listening, speaking, reading, and writing (August & Shanahan, 2006; Klingner, Soltero-González, & Lesaux, 2010).
- *CLR instruction.* Building and situating instruction within students' cultures and languages by incorporating background, interest, funds of knowledge, and ways of learning (Gay, 2002; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) into MTSS.
- *Multiple forms of assessment and data sources.* Universal screening, progress monitoring, and diagnostic assessment data are gathered using multiple sources (i.e., formal, informal, authentic; Hoover & Klingner, 2011) to best inform instruction and possible referral.
- *Ecological decision making.* Consideration of environmental influences (i.e., learner, classroom, home/community) on data-driven instruction, referral, and assessment decision making (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Tharp et al., 2004).

The project educators created contemporary PD providing guidance, instruction, observations, and coaching to participants to best acquire and implement the MTSS model components. The PD was jointly planned and delivered by the partners and included attention to effective best practices (e.g., job-embedded, critical thought, instructional relevance, action planning, monitoring; see Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Merriam, 2011; Quick, Holtzman, & Chaney, 2009; Stewart, 2014).

MTSS Model Status Upon Project Completion

Throughout the project, the pilot schools incorporated aspects of each of the five model components, thereby establishing a foundation of implementation by the end of project completion at which time PD, mentoring, coaching, and other supports ceased to be provided. As each school received identical training, supports, and materials, the expectation was that similar examples of the implementation of each component would exist, with the flexibility to personalize due to unique school qualities and features (e.g., dual-language program, level of family engagement). Based on the summary observations and interviews completed near the end of Project Year 4, the three pilot schools exhibited similar features and best practices emphasized during project implementation as summarized below.

Component 1: Multilevel instruction. Upon project completion, each school had a well-established three-tiered system of instruction which was clearly defined and implemented school-wide by all the K–3 educators. Specifically, literacy instruction for ELs layered within Tiers 1 and 2 was evident, increasing in duration and intensity as necessary based on progress monitoring data. Also, as emphasized in the model, in many instances, Tier 1 and 2 literacy instruction was integrated through collaboration among classroom teachers and interventionists.

Component 2: Research-based core literacy instruction. Upon project completion, each of the K–3 educators demonstrated

regular use of critical ESL and bilingual instructional best practices necessary for providing literacy education to ELs within a multitiered system. Specifically, five best practices, not evident at project initiation, were observed regularly during and at the end of the delivery of the MTSS model project: (a) accessing and making connections to previously acquired cultural knowledge, skills, and experiences; (b) use of word walls in English and native languages (e.g., Spanish); (c) opportunities provided for incorporating learner's native language usage in teaching and learning; (d) oral language development in native and English languages supported by posted sentence stems and extended verbal exchanges; and (e) attention to academic language and associated vocabulary development by building background knowledge drawing on funds of knowledge. In addition, two of the several literacy methods shared through the PD were employed regularly with fidelity in the K–3 classrooms (i.e., theDictado and Lotta Lara; see Escamilla et al., 2014) for a description of these methods. Although other best practices were emphasized in the project and evident in the K–3 classrooms, these select items are representative of how project educators established the foundation to literacy instruction for ELs in general education, including attention to ELs at risk, as well as those receiving intensive or special education.

Component 3: CLR instruction. Upon project completion, clear evidence was found establishing ways in which the K–3 classroom teachers and pilot schools' staff in general valued diversity in teaching and learning. Many examples were observed, with a few shared in this article including (a) consideration of ELs' progress in multitiered instruction attending to learner's language development in both native language and English, (b) projects/papers exhibited on school walls contained examples of students' home cultures/languages, (c) classroom walls contained illustrations and vocabulary reflecting both native and English languages, (d) many ESL and bilingual best practices were incorporated into literacy instruction, (e) attention to use of appropriate assessments and progress monitoring to explain ELs' achievement toward benchmarks occurred, and (f) materials used were supportive of diverse cultures.

In addition, a 10-item CLR referral tool was developed, piloted, and implemented (Hoover & Erickson, 2015). The tool and process incorporated various features important to best understand the referral for learning disabilities of a diverse learner, including (a) confirmation and description of the English language development program, (b) delivery of CLR Tier 1 instruction, (c) classroom teachers' support for and facilitation of ELs' native language usage during literacy instruction, and (d) evidence that Tier 2 instruction included use of interventions appropriate for and validated with ELs. These and six other related cultural and linguistic responsive educational features, not previously considered in the district referral process for ELs, were included on the tool. Upon completion of the tool's development and piloting during the project, the district adopted the CLR referral tool and items, thereby expecting all schools to attend to the 10 features during the special education referral process for ELs. In summary, each of the pilot schools and K–3 classrooms exhibited multiple ways that CLR instructional and referral best practices emphasized in the project were incorporated.

Component 4: Multiple forms of assessment and data sources. Upon project completion, each of the pilot school's data, MTSS, and referral teams implemented procedures to ensure that three or more assessments (e.g., classroom curriculum-based measurements [CBMs], work sample analysis, benchmark monitoring, district/state testing) were included along with documentation of several data scores or points when considering an EL's (a) academic progress to inform instructional adjustments and improve learning in Tier 1, (b) need for Tier 2 or more intensive interventions, and (c) potential for referral for special education for learning disabilities. Application of multiple forms of assessment and data scores is essential for a CLR data-based decision-making process, with each school adopting clear procedures to meet this expectation. Also, evidence exists supporting data used to (a) compare results with true peers, (b) conduct gap analysis, and (c) examine expected rate of progress based on language proficiency and grade level.

Component 5: Ecological decision making. Along with multiple assessments, consideration of the obtained data requires attention to an EL's broader learning and living environment to make certain family and community influences and teachings are addressed. Upon project completion, each school's data and decision-making teams established structures to ensure that as a condition to making instructional and referral decisions, the integrated influences of the learner, family–community, and school environments are considered.

The status of implementation of each of the five components as observed upon project completion served as the baseline for the follow-up sustainability efforts. That is, follow-up visits, interviews, observations, and tool completions assisted to determine the extent to which each school continued implementation of the five components 1 year after project completion similar to the practices observed near the end of project implementation as described above.

Sustainability Components and Procedures

Unfortunately, an effective innovative educational program or model implemented within a school is often not sustained beyond the implementation phase. Sustainability is characterized in various ways, with our project adhering to a more

general perspective given the many different ways a multilevel model may be structured in rural community schools. Specifically, for purposes of our project, sustainability referred to "the maintenance of a reform program over time (Coburn, 2003)" (Sanders, 2012, p. 846). The reform in our project was the development of a CLR MTSS model building on each school's existing response to intervention model. Attending to one research question, the sustainability component of the model focused on the extent that each of the three pilot schools maintained the five model components: What evidence exists confirming that the pilot schools sustain each of the five MTSS for ELs model components 1 year after implementation? The focus on sustainability began during project development and continued throughout implementation, PD, mentoring, and follow-up supports. The sustainability process incorporated into the MTSS for ELs project included three primary components discussed below.

Sustainability Component 1: Introduction

Initial project planning with a focus on maintaining the model beyond delivery requires attention to sustainability as an integral part of the planning and implementation process, as well as clarity as to what is to be sustained (J. E. Taylor, 2005). Intentionally planned and delivered job-embedded PD (Cavazos, Linan-Thompson, & Ortiz, 2018) coupled with mentoring and coaching (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005) establishes a solid foundation for educational reform—a foundation necessary for the sustainability of the reform efforts. During the initial project development, sustainability of the model beyond delivery and implementation was introduced as a central focus shaping the university–school district partnership. Specifically, the topic of sustainability was addressed in the development phase of the project in several ways, including being incorporated as (a) a feature in the presentations made to the district administration and school staff in their consideration of participation, (b) an essential feature for educators to consider as they apply practices acquired through the ongoing PD process, and (c) an important feature framing progress monitoring and data-based decision-making team structures. As a result, upon development of the project and throughout the PD, the school staff and district administration committed to sustaining their acquired project learning and skills, in concert with university researchers committing to assisting in building on and maintaining the established sustainability foundation.

Sustainability Component 2: School Plans and Tool Development

Three tasks were undertaken near completion of implementation of the MTSS for ELs model establishing a framework for measuring sustainability in the three pilot schools.

School sustainability plan. Each pilot school's leadership team (e.g., master teachers, principal/assistant principal, interventionists) developed its own sustainability plan describing how its staff anticipated continuation of the model components building on the existing MTSS for ELs model implementation established during the project. In preparation for plan development, the university researchers provided each school with electronic and hard copy versions of all the project PD, mentoring, and coaching materials (e.g., research-based PowerPoints, tools, guides, media) and related resources used during the project. In addition, a template for creating the sustainability plan was provided to guide the school staff's conversations, leading to narrative descriptions detailing how they planned to continue implementation of each of the five MTSS model components. Brief narratives, with specific examples, were generated for each of the five MTSS model components, incorporating ideas related to school policy, use of resources, and training of new staff. This task proved to be highly valuable in that each school's staff established ownership and commitment in a personalized way to its continuation of the model based on unique school features (e.g., dual-language structure, ESL instructional delivery model, teacher turnover). School staff developed their plans in early spring of the 2015–2016 school year during Project Year 4. Plan implementation began during mid-spring of that same school year and continued during the 2016–2017 school year, thereby providing each school sufficient opportunity to implement its plan prior to sustainability evidence collection. (Note: Sustainability PD or support was not provided to the schools during plan implementation.)

School sustainability tool. Once the school sustainability plans were completed, the university researchers developed an objective tool based on the information provided by the school staff. The tool included a checklist of items derived from the school plans, with a separate tool being developed for each school. An iteration of each tool was reviewed by the school's leadership staff, with any needed revisions made based on feedback. Once finalized, this tool became a checklist of items reflecting the school staff's narrative sustainability plan. Each tool included a 0 to 3 rating scale for its items (0 = *not addressed*, 1 = *somewhat addressed*, 2 = *mostly addressed*, 3 = *fully addressed*). Table 1 provides a representative sample of checklist items generated for each pilot school's tool for the five MTSS model components.

As shown, specific items address various topical areas or practices across the five model components, reflecting aspects associated with policy, resources, and training. In total, the tools included 64, 49, and 35 items for Pilot Schools 1, 2, and 3, respectively, reflecting the individualized nature of the plans in which some leadership teams provided more examples than others.

Table 1. Sampling of Pilot Schools' Sustainability Tool Checklist Items.

MTSS Model Component 1: Multilevel instruction	
Pilot School 1	Identifies hiring of teachers who are highly qualified in the area of language instruction
Pilot School 2	Identifies Tier 1 instruction will be modified to ensure success of at least 80% of ELs
Pilot School 3	Identifies students' language needs and provides them with appropriate instruction to meet their cultural and linguistic needs
MTSS Model Component 2: Research-based core literacy	
Pilot School 1	Establishes that teachers will be given the CEIP, theDictado and Lotta Lara literacy tool checklists during the PLC
Pilot School 2	Identifies use of research-based practices such as theDictado, Lotta Lara, and CSR
Pilot School 3	Identifies procedures for training new teachers on research-based culturally and linguistically responsive core literacy instruction from mentor and master teachers
MTSS Model Component 3: Culturally and linguistically responsive instruction	
Pilot School 1	PD on culturally responsive techniques is provided as part of weekly learning communities with all staff
Pilot School 2	Establishes plans to incorporate the reading of research papers and a professional book club
Pilot School 3	Identifies teachers' regular discussion of how to build upon students' backgrounds, interests, and experiences
MTSS Model Component 4: Multiple forms of assessment and data sources	
Pilot School 1	Identifies using a reading assessment in both languages for additional progress monitoring
Pilot School 2	Identifies teachers and administrators will use the cultural/linguistic referral guide to make sure information is collected from multiple assessments and data sources
Pilot School 3	Examines assessment body of evidence using multiple sources to assist teachers in planning and instruction for ELs
MTSS Model Component 5: Ecological decision making	
Pilot School 1	Establishes process for new teachers to receive PD on understanding learner, classroom, and home/community factors that contribute to students' learning profiles
Pilot School 2	Identifies that authentic assessment, work samples, parent input, and examination of formal assessment must look at cultural and linguistic diversity
Pilot School 3	Educators discuss new knowledge about EL students' strengths and needs in weekly meetings

Note. MTSS = multitiered system of supports; ELs = English learners; CEIP = core ESL instructional practices; CSR = collaborative strategic reading; PLC = professional learning community; PD = professional development.

Teacher sustainability tool. A second tool was developed by the university researchers designed to measure K–3 classroom teachers' perspectives about the project's long-term impact on their teaching and learning for ELs with and without disabilities. Items included input about the impact of key project features such as core literacy instructional practices, decision making, PD, and current school supports provided to sustain project learning. An initial iteration of the tool's content items was reviewed, with feedback provided by several university researchers familiar with the model prior to final development and distribution.

Sustainability Component 3: Evidence Collection

Sustainability evidence collection included school K–3 staff and leadership team self-reporting, K–3 classroom observations/walk-throughs, observations of data team meetings, and interviews conducted with school leadership. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence was collected from late fall through the mid-spring term during the 2016–2017 school year in Project Year 5. This 5-month time frame provided researchers and school staff members multiple opportunities to document/observe sustainability evidence over a defined period of time, which provides more accurate and complete information. School schedules, mandated state testing, and vacation times also influenced the need to collect evidence over time. Three tasks were undertaken to examine model sustainability in each of the three pilot schools as described below.

Evidence Collection Task 1: Teacher sustainability tool completion. The K–3 classroom teacher survey was completed near the end of the fall 2016 term after the school sustainability plans had been implemented for several months across two school years (i.e., spring, fall). The tool items asked participants to provide feedback about the project and its impact on their teaching 1 year after project implementation.

Evidence Collection Task 2: Site visits. The university researchers completed two rounds of the following tasks in each of the three pilot schools during the 5-month evidence collection period: (a) onsite classroom observations/walk-throughs, (b) school leadership team observations and interviews, and (c) grade or school data team meeting observations. Every attempt was made to complete these tasks in pairs, although some required completion individually by the two researchers based on school and classroom schedules. While completing these tasks, the two university

researchers attended specifically to evidence of K–3 classroom teachers' use of project ESL and bilingual literacy best practices, and ways in which grade-level and school-wide teams engaged in culturally and linguistically (a) responsive assessment, (b) decision making, (c) multitiered instruction, and (d) referral of ELs suspected of having a learning disability. Upon completion of these tasks using their accumulated anecdotal notes, the university researchers completed each school's sustainability checklist rating tool, that is, both school leadership staff and university researchers completed the same sustainability rating tool developed from each school's sustainability plan.

Evidence Collection Task 3: School sustainability checklist tool completion. Two to four leadership professionals (e.g., principal, assistant principal, master teacher, leadership team member) in each school completed the tool once or twice during the sustainability data collection period. Based on school preference, the tool was completed individually or collectively by the school leadership staff. Individual or collective completion of the tool was acceptable to the project staff as all scores were combined in the analysis. In addition, university researchers completed the tool, reflecting on the evidence gathered from the site visits.

Findings and Discussion

K–3 Classroom Teachers

All 24 K–3 participants completed and submitted the online teacher sustainability survey. The tool items were rated as *beneficial* or *highly beneficial* 1 year after project implementation by more than 80% of respondents: (a) PD (workshops, lesson demonstrations in classrooms, etc.), (b) coaching and feedback, and (c) project-related resources such as checklist and best practices tools. In addition, most K–3 participants rated as *helpful* or *very helpful* their project learning in meeting the instructional needs of (a) ELs (83%), (b) ELs with a disability (87%), (c) ELs who are struggling with learning (91%), and (d) non-ELs (78%). These results provide additional supporting evidence of the impact of the project on teachers of ELs 1 year after project implementation.

A most critical finding for the important practice of trained educators supporting new educators is that more than two thirds of the K–3 participants indicated that they continue to (a) discuss project material in professional learning community (PLC) meetings, and (b) collaborate with colleagues about project ESL and bilingual instructional best practices. Some also indicated that coaching relative to project practices continued though not as frequent as during the project. Regarding other continuation examples, the K–3 project participants were asked to share a couple of successes resulting from project participation they still employ in their teaching and learning. Collectively, the participants provided nearly two dozen examples of successes found in classroom instruction and decision making, including (a) regular use of the best practices of the-Dictado, Lotta Lara, and the CLR referral tool; (b) teacher's consideration of ELs' language and literacy learning needs occurring within the multilevel model; (c) integration of the multitiered process into daily instruction as ESL and bilingual best practices are used in the classroom; (d) enhanced home–school communication through family projects; (e) making connections between languages; (f) improved writing skills and greater use of academic language; and (g) more systematic differentiation in classroom instruction. These and similar comments shared by teachers across the three pilot schools further illustrate the sustainability of MTSS model components 1 year after project implementation. These project sustainability findings directly support the advancement of rural education for ELs who are either at risk or currently receive special education through teachers' continued usage of contemporary bilingual and ESL best practices learned in the MTSS MDP.

Site Visits

As discussed above, site visits were completed, with observers looking for evidence of project ESL and bilingual best practices, data-based decision making, and overall CLP education in the K–3 classrooms and school-wide. Table 2 illustrates select examples of project practices and areas of emphasis associated with the five MTSS for ELs model components observed during site visits to the three pilot schools relative to (a) literacy instruction, (b) leadership team meetings, and (c) data team meetings.

As shown, evidence collected by the university researchers during the sustainability site visits supports the conclusion that project features were being sustained 1 year following project implementation for each of the five MTSS for ELs model demonstration components.

School Sustainability Checklist: Leadership Team and University Researcher Findings

Leadership team and university researcher completion of the school sustainability checklists provides valuable information that complements the sustainability site visits and K–3 teacher evidence. Table 3 illustrates composite scores for each pilot school for each MTSS model component. The composite scores combine those from leadership team self-reporting with those of the university researchers to reflect a more accurate and complete set of findings.

As shown, each model component in each school was *somewhat* addressed with several being *mostly addressed*. A most important takeaway from our sustainability efforts is that each component in the MTSS model was sustained to

Table 2. Site Visit Evidence of Sustainability 1 Year Following Project Implementation.

	Observed evidence
	Pilot School 1
Literacy instruction (MTSS Model Components 1, 2, 3)	Several research-based literacy instructional practices introduced to educators through the project have been sustained, particularly strategies to support oral language development and the use of language supports (e.g., sentence frames, social interaction structures, explicit attention to vocabulary acquisition, and use), strategies for bridging Spanish and English language and literacy development, and sound methods for reading and writing for ELs that integrate all language domains.
Leadership team meetings (MTSS Model Components 3, 4, 5)	School leadership team reported that they were able to provide training (through PLC meetings) and coaching around the research-based practices observed in the K–3 literacy instruction. The school leadership team also reported improvements in assessment and data interpretation, including the intentional use of a variety of valid assessments for bilingual learners in the two languages, teachers' commitment to ongoing data collection, collaborative data interpretation, and student progress monitoring to inform instructional decision making.
Data team meetings (MTSS Model Components 4, 5)	Observations of data team meetings and interviews with team members indicated that the school adopted a holistic picture of the child during data discussions and before the special education referral process is considered. A leadership team member said that they are "intentional about using the culturally/linguistically responsive decision-making guide on a weekly basis" to ensure they are comparing student results with "true peers." These findings provide additional evidence that Pilot School 1's data team decision making reflects the sustainability of the project's CLR tools and procedures.
	Pilot School 2
Literacy instruction (MTSS Model Components 1, 2, 3)	Several research-based literacy instructional practices were observed being sustained, including increased vocabulary instruction (using visuals, explicit teaching, real-life examples and children's experiences to contextualize new vocabulary, repetition) and use of language supports (e.g., Total Physical Response to demonstrate concepts, word walls, sentence starters). Also, implementation of select methods introduced in the project was observed (e.g., theDictado, reading fluency/comprehension methods), and a balance between whole group instruction and collaborative learning in small groups with student accountability.
Leadership team meetings (MTSS Model Components 3, 4, 5)	Evidence was collected confirming that the project increased Pilot School 2 staff's overall awareness of how to work with ELs. Leadership team members more clearly have come to see students' native language as a welcoming asset in learning. The school leadership team also reported during an interview that parental involvement had shifted dramatically. They have made a conscious effort to increase collaboration with families through family nights, celebrations and demonstrations, and invitations for all parents to partner with teachers on a daily basis and in school events. At a PLC meeting, we observed it was evident that the school staff had established the goal of considering parental input in discussions concerning struggling learners, with teachers identifying ways to engage parents and model for them how to work with their children. Also, a greater sense of community was evident during classroom visits (e.g., teacher–student rapport, children helping each other, newer students writing in native language).
Data team meetings (MTSS Model Components 4, 5)	Evidence indicated that Pilot School 2 staff sustained the practice of using multiple interventions and corresponding assessments consistent with monitoring students' learning. We also observed the use of a variety of literacy assessment tools (formal and informal), a practice emphasized within the project. For language assessment, the principal admitted that there is room for improvement as they still primarily assess content only and need to improve assessment of language development. Also sustained among school staff, was a commitment to using an ecological decision-making process in which student, school, home factors are considered when analyzing/interpreting data to make instructional or referral decisions. Use of work samples, authentic assessments, parent input, and examination of formal assessment that consider cultural/linguistic diversity was occurring 1 year after implementation in School 2.
	Pilot School 3
Literacy instruction (MTSS Model Components 1, 2, 3)	A variety of project evidence-based literacy instructional practices continued to be sustained based on classroom observations/walk-throughs. Among the effective literacy practices observed are the explicit teaching of vocabulary, recognizing cognates, using language supports such as sentence frames/word walls, providing peer supports to maximize learning, supporting oral language development, and implementing other related project strategies.
Leadership team meetings (MTSS Model Components 3, 4. 5)	During our site visit observations and interviews, evidence existed confirming that the school leadership team held increased awareness of CLR practices as part of MTSS. The principal indicated that they had made it a goal to concentrate on the implementation of CLR practices as a core component of MTSS. During the site visits, we observed support from mentor teachers to implement CLR practices in the classroom, including projects to engage families, which was a key practice emphasized and learned in the project. Family engagement and making school–home connections were evident. For example, several teachers have a community meeting in the morning to bring in family values. Select home visits are also completed, further supporting the leadership team's efforts to sustain project best practices.
Data team meetings (MTSS Model Components 4, 5)	Observations of ELs' progress using data for instructional decision making indicated that teachers were more cognizant of how to distinguish a learning disability from the second language acquisition process, which was foundational to project learning. Also, use of multiple sources of information when selecting instructional strategies to meet students' unique needs, including ELs' language learning needs, was evident. During a data team PLC meeting, teachers and interventionists examined a body of evidence that included multiple sources and used these data to assist teachers in planning instruction for ELs. They also considered a comparison of a specific struggling learner with "like peers," further supporting the conclusion that Pilot School 3 is sustaining various features acquired through the project 1 year after project implementation.

Note. MTSS = multitiered system of supports; EL = English learners; CLR = culturally and linguistically responsive; PLC = professional learning community.

Table 3. Mean Scores Reflecting Schools' Implementation of Model Components.

	Model component					
School	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	All
Pilot 1	2.11	1.97	1.60	2.36	1.58	1.96
Pilot 2	1.50	1.42	1.52	1.33	1.90	1.52
Pilot 3	2.17	1.50	2.00	1.73	2.31	1.99
All schools	1.89	1.77	1.73	1.96	1.96	1.87

Note. Scale represents 0 to 3 scoring: 0 = *not addressed*; 1 = *somewhat addressed*; 2 = *mostly addressed*; 3 = *fully addressed*. C1= multilevel instruction; C2 = research-based core literacy instruction; C3 = culturally and linguistically responsive instruction; C4 = multiple forms of assessment and data sources; C5 = ecological decision making.

some level in each pilot school 1 year after project completion (i.e., no model component in any of the schools had a 0 = *not addressed rating*). However, greater efforts are needed to more fully sustain each model component. Further analysis indicates that two of the schools are collectively sustaining the model components near the *mostly addressed* level, with one school still in process of being mostly addressed. One possible explanation for the lower ratings in Pilot School 2 is a change in principal. Although the new principal was in total support of the project, the change in leadership may have required additional time to more fully implement project learning.

Overall, however, all the schools reported and demonstrated evidence of acceptable sustainability of project implementation 1 year following the conclusion of PD and related supports, with particular emphasis on the three model components of multilevel instruction (C1), multiple assessments and data sources (C4), and ecological decision making (C5). The two components of delivering various ESL and bilingual best practices (C2) and overall CLR instruction (C3) required the most growth in each of the three schools based on preproject needs assessments. Thus, although these were rated slightly lower than the other three components, adequate progress was made in the delivery of CLR instruction and MTSS during and beyond project implementation. In summary, the combined ratings from the school leadership teams and university researchers show that after 1 year beyond project implementation, the model components are being sustained to some degree, although additional efforts are needed to more fully achieve sustainability particularly in Pilot School 2 and for Model Components 2 and 3 in each school. In addition, these project sustainability findings directly support the advancement of rural education for ELs who are either at risk or currently receive special education through continued delivery of PD by school staff, thereby providing new teachers with contemporary knowledge and skills specific to the CLR MTSS framework in this MDP.

Recommendations and Limitations

One primary goal of our MDP was to assist staff in rural elementary schools to transform their existing MTSS models from one of generically addressing the education of ELs to one of foundationally incorporating and sustaining CLR education, so addressing the unique qualities of ELs occurs in integral ways within classroom and school-wide teaching and learning. However, some limitations exist and need to be considered when interpreting the results of our project. Select features that limit the project include the fact that the MTSS model was implemented in one rural mountain community school district, with only three elementary schools focusing on grades K–3 only, as required by the funder. Other rural communities with different demographics or situations that might include all K–5 classrooms in an elementary school project may find different results.

In addition, although many examples were evident demonstrating that each of the five model components has been sustained, other project supports and best practices could and should be emphasized to improve the sustainability of the model in more comprehensive ways such as (a) greater emphasis placed on use of ELs' native language especially in the schools that teach through an ESL model, (b) increased attention to family and community values and teachings in referral and instructional decision making, (c) increased attention by data teams to the interactions between instruction in Tiers 1 and 2 to best inform instructional adjustments, and (d) increased examples of school-wide cultural and linguistic responsiveness extending beyond bulletin board displays of student learning.

Within these limitations, however, sufficient evidence exists to support the conclusion that the sustainability process and structure adhered to in this MTSS for ELs model were successful in assisting the schools to maintain the model 1 year after project implementation. The following recommendations are provided for educators to consider in their efforts to sustain a CLR MTSS for ELs model in rural elementary schools: (a) emphasize model sustainability during initial project planning and periodically throughout project implementation and PD; (b) develop a university–school district partnership to adequately define project goals, determine PD topics, deliver follow-up mentoring, and provide ongoing coaching, all of which lead to effective sustainability; (c) allow schools to generate their own sustainability plans within the parameters of the project implementation, model development, and PD to support the importance of buy-in and motivation for sustainability to best occur; (d) educator sustainability self-reporting requires confirmation through observations and interviews; (e) collection of both qualitative and quantitative sustainability evidence provides educators with a more complete and rich perspective about the long-term impact of innovation in rural schools; and (f) emphasizing the importance of trained educators supporting

new educators in the school to understand and implement the model represents a critical sustainability practice.

The inclusion of a sustainability component within an MTSS model embedded into project development, periodically revisited during project implementation, and personalized by participating schools through development of own plans proved to be a successful approach to (a) sustaining literacy ESL and bilingual best practices, and (b) developing ELs' CLR referrals for learning disabilities in rural elementary schools.

Conclusion: Advancing Rural Special Education for ELs

Positive sustainability results provide promising evidence in the delivery of MTSS for ELs in rural elementary schools who (a) struggle and are at risk of special education referral, or (b) receive special education within the school-wide multitiered framework by addressing three recurring challenges discussed in this article and in the broader literature (i.e., PD, acquisition and use of instructional best practices, reducing disproportionality). First, sustainability results showed that school teams continued their preparation of new teachers in the project model, thereby addressing the challenge of providing contemporary PD. Second, sustainability evidence confirmed the continued use of select project-supported bilingual and ESL best practices in ELs' literacy instruction, thereby addressing the challenge of ensuring delivery of contemporary best practices in the classroom. Third, usage of the developed CLR referral items was sustained over time, thereby providing evidence of continued efforts to reduce the disproportionality of ELs in special education. Overall, the project PD, guides and tools, mentoring, and follow-up supports collectively contributed to the sustainability of the model components, which directly contribute to meeting select rural instructional challenges by delivering a CLR multitiered response to intervention framework for educating ELs with and without disabilities in elementary schools.

Author's Note

During project implementation and sustainability, some staff turnover existed as found in many rural school settings. However, a critical feature of effective sustainability is making certain that both existing and new staff implement the model with new staff receiving supports, tools, and guidance from existing school staff and leadership. Therefore, our results incorporate collective responses from all educators who participated throughout the project implementation, including those who joined the project after it began or during sustainability.

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