Impact Evaluation of NExT LEVEL: *NETwork for Leading Education that Values English Learners*

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NExT LEVEL
Impact Evaluation Report

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Grant Overview

In October 2016, Winthrop University College of Education (WU COE) in South Carolina was awarded a five-year U.S. Department of Education (U.S. ED) National Professional Development (NPD) grant for the **NET**work for **L**eading **E**ducation that **V**alues **E**nglish **L**earners (NExT LEVEL) program. The grant provided introductory training in working with English Learners (ELs) for select mainstream classroom teachers and teacher candidates; continued coursework for teachers to obtain add-on ESL certification; and professional development for university teacher educators. Winthrop University COE extended professional development opportunities (endorsement and certification) to partner sites that were pursuing a true whole-school culture shift while expanding preservice initiatives to integrate EL strategies in all program area courses and to provide teacher candidates endorsement opportunities. Through NExT LEVEL, WU partnered with three South Carolina school districts – Fort Mill, Lancaster, and Rock Hill.

1.2 Project Description

NExT LEVEL leveraged the collaborative foundation of Winthrop University's school-university partnership to create successful "hubs" of research-based strategies for supporting ELs and their families. NExT LEVEL's goal was to create long-term, system-level change across the classroom, school, and district and implement effective practices to meet the needs of ELs. The program was designed using best practices from other schools, the participating districts' successful experiences with the proposed strategies, and nationally recognized evidenced-based practices. NExT LEVEL had three goals:

- Improve classroom instruction for ELs;

- Develop skills and competencies to support relationships with ELs' parents and families; and

- Expand preservice teacher preparation opportunities to support ELs.

The four primary components of the program are described in detail next.

ESOL endorsement. The first component of NExT LEVEL was graduate/advanced coursework for mainstream classroom teachers to build knowledge and skills to support ELs. Winthrop University advocated for the creation of a statewide endorsement that was approved in 2018. Through such endorsement, the SC Department of Education awarded an official credential to those completing two rigorous, three-hour, graduate level courses: READ615: Literacy for Learners with Limited English Proficiency and Other Diverse Needs and READ616: Practicum in Assessing and Teaching English Language Learners.

READ615 first established an understanding of the unique language and acculturation challenges for ELs. This knowledge is a prerequisite for successful teaching and for effective EL-sensitive assessment (Birsh & Carreker, 2018; Cummins, 2000; Cummins & Persad, 2014; De Jong & Harper, 2005; Hammadou, 2002; Kabuto, 2010; Ortega, 2010; Reiss, 2005). The course addressed the political, legal, and social background issues involved in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL), introduced essential second language acquisition principles, and overviewed research-supported teaching methodologies (Ellis, 1997, 2010; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Lightbown, 2013; Schneider & Evers, 2009).

READ616 included additional assessment and teaching strategies for use in field applications. READ616 included a component addressing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)/Response to Intervention (RtI) for ELs so that classroom teachers know how to identify specific needs through ongoing formative assessment and design individual Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions (Birsh & Carreker, 2018; Denton et al., 2008; Hoover et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2011).

In both courses, strategies focused on the explicit teaching of vocabulary, specifically a small set of academic vocabulary words in an intensely focused set of lessons with a variety of modalities and levels of linguistic interaction (August et al., 2009; August et al., 2014; Baker et al., 2014; Carlo et al., 2004; Lesaux et al., 2010; Lesaux et al., 2014; Levesque et al., 2019). Another emphasis in both courses was the importance of the mainstream (content) teacher taking responsibility for English language instruction within and through the content area material (August et al., 2009; Brown et al., 2010; Ryoo, 2009). Strategies included incorporating small group micro-lessons (interventions) in oral and written English (Vaughn et al., 2009) and providing various forms of scaffolding to build academic language proficiency. To date, 283 teachers completed coursework required for a state-level English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) endorsement.

Preservice teacher candidates at Winthrop University were exposed to EL research and practice through an initial course early in their program. NExT LEVEL provided the opportunity for candidates to engage in advanced coursework to achieve the state endorsement before graduating. READ415 and READ416 were delivered as summer offerings and the content aligned closely with the mainstream graduate coursework described above.

ESOL add-on certification. Teachers who wished to become state certified ESOL teachers continued with three additional courses beyond the initial endorsement (READ615 and 616 as previously described). These additional experiences highlighted: 1) the unique challenges experienced by ELs, specifically in the areas of grammar and syntax for oral and written tasks (Durán et al., 2016; Ramirez, 2017), 2) the specific learning needs of ELs with respect to speaking, listening, reading, and writing tasks at different language and acculturation stages (Birch, 2014; Koda, 2007; Locke, 2010; Malatesha, &

Aaron, 2006; Nunes, 1999; Singleton, 1997), and 3) application of MTSS/RtI teaching and assessment procedures across content areas (Echevarria & Hasbrouck, 2009; Hoover et al., 2016). The focus on grammar and writing skills helped mainstream classroom teachers develop strategies for explicit English language instruction within multiple content areas (August et al., 2009; Baker et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2011). A final practicum provided further supervised classroom practice in the use of effective content-area specific literacy strategies based upon the implementation of norm-referenced EL assessments commonly used in the partner districts (Birsh & Carreker, 2018; Day & Bamford, 1998; Echevarria & Graves, 2014; Kottler & Kottler, 2002; Reiss, 2005). University and school EL specialists supervised the practicum through on-site visits, electronic communication, and phone consultations, so that participants could build confidence in selecting and applying effective, evidence-based learning and assessment strategies for ELs. A total of 88 NExT LEVEL participants have completed the coursework required for full certification as ESOL teachers.

FOCUS institutes for families. To provide family education that leads to increased information about, and access to, postsecondary education, Winthrop University and its associated district partners collaborated with the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) to offer context-specific trainings for families on schooling in the U.S. and more specifically, in South Carolina. Utilizing research-based practices in school-family-community involvement (Epstein et al., 2019; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013), PIQE works to achieve economic and social equality through education of parents and families.

PIQE supported professional development through three activities:

- Extensive training at a parent engagement "boot camp" for a Parent/School/Community Advisory Group (PSC) including district and school administrators, teachers, parents, and the Winthrop University faculty-in-residence (six participants). The PSC visited PIQE schools, observed parent classes, attended facilitator meetings, met with program leaders, and talked with parent graduates. They brought information back to the school site to develop context-specific professional learning events and resources.

- PIQE sent representatives to each district to conduct a facilitator training for a 9-week Parent Institute curriculum (owned by and personalized to district context/needs) that was delivered in parents' native language.

- PSCs conducted Parent Institutes at their schools.

Professional development for Winthrop University faculty. Faculty development was expanded by bringing content and program area specialists into the foundational course to learn its content through an apprentice-like co-teaching approach. An

experienced instructor for the foundational course was paired with a program specialist as a team for an individual section of the course. After a pre-institute (providing a content overview and training in teaching methods) for the instructors and program area faculty, the pairs co-taught continuously for the entire term. This provided not only direct knowledge of the foundational content, but also engaged the program faculty directly with the required field experience component of the course (18 contact hours), resulting in hands-on, school-based work in EL instruction. After the co-teaching term, a post-institute supported program faculty in the development of EL-sensitive components for methods courses in their respective programs. The co-PI for content management engaged in reciprocal co-teaching with program area faculty as they implemented the new components in targeted instructional sessions in subsequent semesters.

The NExT LEVEL logic model (Figure 1) is shown on the next page. The underlying theory of change is that improving classroom instruction for ELs, preparing teachers to instruct EL students, and informing parents and caregivers of EL students about the education system will lead to improved pedagogy and increased family knowledge of how the education system works. These short- and intermediate-term outcomes will ultimately lead to improved academic achievement for EL students.

Figure 1. NExT LEVEL Logic Model

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	SHORT- AND MID-TERM OUTCOMES	LONG-TERM OUTCOME

INPUTS

Winthrop University Faculty-in-Residence

Professional Development Schools

Partner Schools

Winthrop University faculty

Teacher candidates

SC Department of Education

Funding

ACTIVITIES

Goal 1: Improved Classroom Instruction For English Learners
- Create mini networks of EL learning consisting of partner schools supported by a Professional Development school
- Establish Winthrop Faculty in Residence at PDS specializing in work with ELs and teacher development
- Develop and deliver on-site courses that supports State English Learner mainstream teacher endorsement
- Develop and deliver on-site courses that supports ESOL add-on certification

Goal 2: Improved Preparation For English Learner Teachers
- Develop and deliver enhanced training to Winthrop faculty to advance pedagogical practices related to ELL foundational course (EDCO 201)
- Integrate learning modules on cultural responsiveness into 15 existing program areas of teacher preparation
- Develop and deliver EL-focused field experiences and internships
- Develop and deliver advanced coursework to teacher candidates to advance content knowledge and pedagogical practices related to English Learners

Goal 3: Enhanced Skills And Competencies To Support Relationships With English Learners' Parents And Families
- Deliver professional development sessions on cultural responsiveness to teachers and school leaders

SHORT- AND MID-TERM OUTCOMES

Improved Classroom Instruction for English Learners:
- Increase in teachers' awareness surrounding the challenges faced by EL students and their families;
- Enhanced teachers' pedagogical competency
- Enhance teachers support structures for delivering quality EL instruction

Enhanced Support for English Learners and their Families:
- Increase in EL students and parents reporting increased support from teaching professionals

LONG-TERM OUTCOME

Increased Student Achievement:
- Increased English Learner student achievement scores on South Carolina milestones for grades PreK-12

2.   THE NExT LEVEL IMPACT STUDY

2.1   Study Overview

The impact evaluation was guided by the two questions in Table 1:

Table 1. NExT LEVEL Impact Study Research Questions

Question	Outcome Variable
What is the impact of NExT LEVEL on the mathematics achievement of EL students taught by a NExT LEVEL teacher compared to EL students who were not taught by a NExT LEVEL teacher?	SC READY Mathematics Test Scores
What is the impact of NExT LEVEL on the ELA achievement of EL students taught by a NExT LEVEL teacher compared to EL students who were not taught by a NExT LEVEL teacher?	SC READY ELA Test Scores

This study assessed the impact of the NExT LEVEL program (completion of the EL endorsement and/or certification courses) on student outcomes using a rigorous, longitudinal, quasi-experimental design (QED) with student-level, multiple-cohort comparisons. EL students who had a NExT LEVEL teacher for at least one class during the study period were compared to well-matched students in the same districts who did not have a NExT LEVEL teacher at any time during the study period. The two groups were assessed for differences in achievement outcomes on measures of standardized math and ELA after one year and after three years.

2.2   Samples

The research design for the NExT LEVEL evaluation used matched treatment and comparison groups to contrast outcomes between EL students taught by NExT LEVEL teachers for at least one class during the study period (treatment students) to EL students from the same school district not taught by NExT LEVEL teachers during the study period (comparison students). Using 1:1 propensity score matching, treatment and comparison students were matched on baseline mathematics and ELA achievement. Table 2 shows the sample sizes for the four analyses.

Table 2. Sample Sizes for Impact Studies

Study	Number of Treatment Students	Number of Comparison Students
One-Year ELA	219	219
Three-Year ELA	99	99
One-Year Mathematics	124	124
Three-Year Mathematics	90	90

2.3 Data Collection

Table 3 summarizes the outcome data that were collected to answer the research questions. Data were collected for three school years; baseline data were collected in 2017-18 and outcome data were collected in 2018-19 for the one-year effect analyses and 2020-21 for the three-year effect analyses. Data were not available for the 2019-20 school year due to testing being cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, two-year impacts could not be assessed. To account for the various grade levels in the analysis (Grades 3-8), percentile scores on the SC READY tests were used as baseline and outcome measures for all analyses.

Table 3. NExT LEVEL Impact Study Outcome Measures

Impact Study	Measure	Type	Source
One-Year ELA	SC READY ELA Test percentile scores	Continuous	School district
Three-Year ELA			
One-Year Mathematics	SC READY Mathematics Test percentile scores	Continuous	School district
Three-year Mathematics			

Table 4 describes the covariates included in each of the confirmatory analyses.

Table 4. NExT LEVEL Impact Study Covariates

Variable	Description	Type of Measure	Data Source
Baseline SC READY percentile scores for mathematics and ELA	SC READY percentile scores from spring 2018	Continuous	School district

Variable	Description	Type of Measure	Data Source
Treatment	Identified whether a student was a NExT LEVEL student or a comparison student	Binary 0 = Comparison 1 = Treatment (NExT LEVEL)	School district records
Gender	Identified the student's gender	Binary 0 = male 1 = female	School district records
Minority Status	Identified whether a student was a racial/ethnic minority	Binary 0 = white 1 = non-white	School district records
Grade	Identified the grade of the student at baseline	Discrete, ordinal	School district records

3. ANALYSIS

The linear model used for conducting the analyses is shown below:

$$Y_i = \alpha + BaselineScore_i\beta_1 + Treatment_i\beta_2 + Gender_i\beta_3 + MinorityStatus_i\beta_4 + Grade_i\beta_5 + \varepsilon_i$$

Where:

Y_i = the outcome for student i

α = the intercept

$BaselineScore_i\beta_1$ = parameter estimate for the effect of the student baseline score

$Treatment_i\beta_2$ = covariate adjusted difference in the mean student outcome for treatment group students minus the mean student outcome for comparison group students (1 = treatment and 0 = comparison)

$Gender_i\beta_3$ = effect of student gender (1 = female and 0 = male)

$MinorityStatus_i\beta_4$ = effect of student minority status (0 = white and 1 = non-white)

$Grade_i\beta_6$ = effect of student grade level

$\Sigma\varepsilon_i$ = a random error term for student i

Analyses examined one-year and three-year effects on mathematics and ELA achievement by comparing NExT LEVEL students' mean percentile scores to comparison students' mean percentile scores, controlling for baseline characteristics. It was not possible to assess impacts on other measures of student achievement due to lack of data.

The one-year analyses included students from all three participating districts. The three-year analyses included students from Fort Mill and Rock Hill only, because 2020-21 SC READY data were not available for Lancaster students.

4. RESULTS

4.1 One-Year Effect on ELA

Results indicated a statistically significant difference between the NExT LEVEL treatment students and the comparison students on the ELA one-year outcome but in the opposite direction of what was expected (see Table 5). The average SC READY ELA percentile score at the 2018-19 administration for the treatment group was 43.3 while the average percentile score for the comparison group was 50.2.

In addition to significant differences in outcome SC READY ELA scores between treatment and comparison students, significant differences were found for student minority status, with minority students scoring, on average, 9.6 points lower than white students. The effect for gender was also significant, with female students scoring, on average, 5.39 points higher than male students.

In terms of the significant effects for the baseline SC READY ELA percentile score, this reflects the fact that the best predictor of future academic performance is prior performance and is an expected result. The R-squared for the overall model was 0.27.

Table 5. NExT LEVEL One-Year ELA Analysis

Variable	Estimate	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Intercept	36.76	5.92	6.21	<0.001
ELA Baseline	0.51	0.04	11.91	< 0.001
Treatment	-7.63	2.40	-3.18	< 0.01
Gender	5.39	2.37	2.28	0.02
Minority Status	-9.61	4.82	-1.99	< 0.04
Grade	-0.40	0.51	-0.79	0.43

4.2 Three-Year Effect on ELA

Results indicated no statistically significant difference between the NExT LEVEL treatment students and the comparison students on the ELA three-year outcome (see Table 6). The average SC READY ELA percentile score at the 2020-21 administration for

the treatment group was 46.0 while the average percentile score for the comparison group was 45.0.

Significant differences were found for student minority status, with minority students scoring on average 12.36 points lower than white students. In terms of the significant effects for the baseline SC READY ELA percentile score, this reflects the fact that the best predictor of future academic performance is prior performance and is an expected result. Table 6 includes the regression model output. The R-squared for the overall model was 0.24.

Table 6. NExT LEVEL Three-Year ELA Analysis

Variable	Estimate	Standard Error	*t*-value	*p*-value
Intercept	43.25	7.16	6.04	<0.001
ELA Baseline	0.42	0.06	6.57	< 0.001
Treatment	-1.61	3.41	-0.47	0.63
Gender	5.29	3.39	1.56	0.12
Minority Status	-12.36	5.31	-2.33	0.02
Grade	-1.28	0.81	-1.58	0.11

4.3   One-Year Effect on Mathematics

Results indicated a statistically significant difference between the NExT LEVEL treatment students and the comparison students on the mathematics one-year outcome but in the opposite direction of what was expected (see Table 7). The average SC READY mathematics percentile score at the 2018-19 administration for the treatment group was 45.3 while the average percentile score for the comparison group was 50.4.

In terms of the significant effects for the baseline SC READY mathematics percentile score, this reflects the fact that the best predictor of future academic performance is prior performance and is an expected result. Table 7 includes the regression model output. The R-squared for the overall model was 0.70.

Table 7. NExT LEVEL One-Year Mathematics Analysis

Variable	Estimate	Standard Error	*t*-value	*p*-value
Intercept	10.26	5.47	1.88	0.06
Mathematics Baseline	0.89	0.04	23.44	< 0.001

Variable	Estimate	Standard Error	*t*-value	*p*-value
Treatment	-5.25	2.02	-2.60	0.01
Gender	1.85	2.03	0.91	0.36
Minority Status	1.75	4.34	0.40	0.68
Grade	-0.10	0.47	-0.21	0.83

4.4   Three-Year Effect on Mathematics

Results indicated no statistically significant difference between the NExT LEVEL treatment students and the comparison students on the mathematics three-year outcome (see Table 8). The average SC READY mathematics percentile score at the 2020-21 administration for the treatment group was 46.7 while the average percentile score for the comparison group was 46.9.

Significant differences were found for student gender, with female students scoring, on average, 6.21 points higher than male students. In terms of the significant effects for the baseline SC READY mathematics percentile score, this reflects the fact that the best predictor of future academic performance is prior performance and is an expected result. Table 8 includes the regression model output. The R-squared for the overall model was 0.53.

Table 8. NExT LEVEL Three-Year Mathematics Analysis

Variable	Estimate	Standard Error	*t*-value	*p*-value
Intercept	19.78	6.46	3.06	<0.01
Mathematics Baseline	0.76	0.06	13.41	< 0.001
Treatment	-0.24	2.23	-0.01	0.99
Gender	6.21	2.81	2.21	0.28
Minority Status	-3.63	4.37	-0.83	0.40
Grade	-0.22	0.65	-0.34	0.73

5.   DISCUSSION

Through NExT LEVEL, Winthrop University, in partnership with three South Carolina school districts, sought to increase teachers' knowledge and skills in working with ELs. NExT LEVEL focused on improving classroom instruction for ELs, improving teacher

preparation for EL teachers, and providing support for ELs and their families and caregivers. Teachers who completed graduate-level coursework received a state endorsement or certification in teaching ELs. This study tracked one- and three-year academic achievement outcomes for EL students taught by NExT LEVEL teachers compared to EL students from the same school district who were not taught by a NExT LEVEL teacher during the study period.

In terms of ELA outcomes, there was a significant effect of NExT LEVEL after one year; however, the effect was in the opposite direction from what was expected. Comparison students had significantly higher one-year ELA achievement than the NExT LEVEL students. Minority students had significantly lower one-year ELA scores than non-minorities, while female students had significantly higher scores than male students. At three years, there was no significant effect of the treatment on three-year ELA outcomes. As with the one-year analysis, minority students performed lower than non-minority students at the three-year mark. Results were similar for mathematics outcomes. The one-year effect on mathematics was statistically significant, but with comparison students outperforming their NExT LEVEL counterparts. There was no significant impact on three-year mathematics performance. These findings suggest that NExT LEVEL did not improve academic achievement in ELA or mathematics for students taught by NExT LEVEL teachers.

Interpreting these results is difficult, given the disruption of learning that occurred in school years 2019-20 and 2020-21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We were not able to determine the impact of COVID school closures on the ELs included in this study, including impacts on access to digital learning devices, access to internet connectivity, and at-home family support of online learning. Further, we have no data on the effectiveness of the teachers included in this study to implement online learning, which would have a direct impact on student learning. Since we lacked data on these issues, we cannot be sure how treatment and comparison students may have been differentially impacted and could not take these factors into account.

Several limitations impacted this study. First, performance on year-end standardized tests may not be the best measure of impact for this program. In the future, outcomes of interest could be expanded to include more proximal measures of student success as opposed to focusing only on performance on end-of-grade standardized tests. For example, formative and summative assessments in mathematics and ELA classes may be a better barometer of the impact of NExT LEVEL training on student performance. Second, future analyses should examine impacts on different subgroups of students (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, economically disadvantaged). Third, future studies should parse the data to take into account how many classes a student took with a NExT LEVEL teacher. Finally, we had no data on the extent to which NExT LEVEL teachers implemented the EL instructional strategies they learned in the graduate courses in their classrooms. Therefore, we do not know if the findings from this study might be due to lack

of implementation. Future research on similar programs should address the limitations outlined here.

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