



Advancing **ALTELLA**
SNAPSHOT

Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot: Get to Know Christopher Rivera

Teacher Preparation and Working
with Families of Multilingual Learners
with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot No. 3

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Anna Rhoad-Drogalis with Christopher Rivera
advancingaltella.org

About Advancing ALTELLA Snapshots

The Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot is feature series. Advancing ALTELLA Snapshots are short, informative articles that highlight experts, educators, and topics of interest.





Dr. Christopher
Rivera:

THE FACTS

TITLE:

Associate Professor in
Special Education

AFFILIATION:

East Carolina University

AREA OF INTEREST:

teacher preparation and
working with families
of multilingual learners
with significant cognitive
disabilities

Get to know Advancing ALTELLA Expert Christopher Rivera

Dr. Christopher Rivera is an Associate Professor at East Carolina University in Special Education and is passionate about working with culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities. Before joining East Carolina University, he taught students with severe cognitive disabilities and autism. Dr. Rivera spoke with us about strategies for working with students with significant cognitive disabilities, communicating with students' families about assessments, and prioritizing cultural awareness alongside language and disability related needs.

Though experts are still learning how to best prepare teachers to work with multilingual learners who have significant cognitive disabilities, Rivera suggests using strategies from English language education and from special education.

“Understanding some of those strategies that are best practices that already exist in the field of special education, there is no reason why those can't be flipped and used to teach those specific skills that focus on language over on the EL side,” says Rivera.

Rivera emphasizes how important it is for teachers to prioritize both language needs and disability related needs for multilingual learners with significant cognitive disabilities.

“There needs to be an equal balance of maintaining that cultural identity of the student, so that language aspect, that bilingualism, which is, in my opinion is a strength, but it's often looked at as a deficit, but just as equally important is that academic—or what's needed in those academics,” he says.

When developing assessments for multilingual learners with significant cognitive disabilities, he recommends thinking carefully about the response modes and supports available to students.

“If the student is verbal, what kind of verbal response am I expecting? Am I expecting something that's very clear and articulate? Or if this student has some sort of speech impediment, what are going to be those acceptable responses for the student and for the assessment? And so, I think thinking very carefully about what those items are, and then also thinking very carefully about if I've provided supports to students the entire time that they were learning whatever the item might be, and now it's time for an assessment, I can't remove those supports, and say, 'alright now take the assessment'. I've got to keep those supports in there, especially if I've taught the student to use supports in order to be successful,” he says.

“Teachers need to familiarize themselves with alternative language assessments and verify what accommodations can be used and compare those to accommodations that are currently being used in the classroom. There’s a possibility that some accommodations used in the classroom, may not be permitted during a language assessment. If teachers know what the rules are, ahead of time, they can plan better. They can look over supports and see which ones might overlap and prepare to implement alternative supports that students may need for assessment purposes,” he recommends.

Rivera emphasizes the importance of teachers developing their cultural awareness and learning to partner with culturally and linguistically diverse families.

“Just imagine if you were a kiddo with a significant cognitive disability, who’s also linguistically diverse, communicationally diverse, and you happen to be a minority. I don’t think we truly understand how that impacts families and those students. And again, that mindset that teachers may have in continuing kind of a deficit way of thinking—and that’s not to pigeonhole that all teachers think like this because I don’t believe that—but there has to be some push into how do we use those strengths that these students have and bend them in the classroom,” says Rivera.

When it comes to developing IEP goals for multilingual learners with significant disabilities, Rivera suggests engaging the family to individualize the plan for each student, particularly when thinking about transitioning out of the K-12 system.

“Kids who have disabilities end up not getting jobs, like their typically developing peers. Their living situations are often very, very different. So then, what—and this is me with my high school teacher thinking cap on—to me it matters that they have the language skills that are necessary, not just to access the academics, but also to be able to be a contributing member in their community,” he says.

Rivera also points to a need for teachers to talk with families about the purpose and use of assessments in

the classroom.

“We don’t care where your kiddo is at, we just want to know where so we can begin moving forward. And it’s through the assessments that we can figure out what we need to do to improve our teaching, to improve what strategies we might use. And the more information we get about your kid, the better we are at meeting his or her needs,” says Rivera.

In closing, he emphasizes the need for continued advocacy on behalf of multilingual learners with significant cognitive disabilities.

“I think if I were to make any other comment, it’s just to plead with people to continue to advocate for these kids., to continue to advocate for the parents, and to continue to advocate for their teachers. Because I know oftentimes, individually, many times they feel alone, especially when they get those roadblocks, when they’re feeling like they’re not getting the support that they need all across the spectrum. And so, I think the more we advocate, the more we bring this to light, the more we have these discussions like this, I think it bodes well for everyone to know that, for parents and teachers to know that, there are organizations like this that are taking the times to really sift through all of this and to try and pave the way for researchers to have more information,” he says.

Learn more: Christopher Rivera’s suggested resources

- **Evidence-based practices for students with severe disabilities:** https://cedar.education.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/IC-3_FINAL_03-03-15.pdf
- **The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students:** https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269101664_The_Role_of_Primary_Language_Development_in_Promoting_Educational_Success_for_Language_Minority_Students
- **A literature review of evidence-based literacy assessment and instruction practices for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities:** <https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/OnlinePubs/Report422/default.html>

Christopher Rivera's recommendations for working with multilingual learners with significant cognitive disabilities

- When developing assessments, the response modes and supports that students use in the assessment need to align with the response modes and supports available to students in classroom instruction.
- Teachers should work to prioritize both language needs and disability related needs of multilingual learners with significant cognitive disabilities, along with supporting students' home language and cultural identity.
- It is important for teachers to partner with families to use the strengths that students bring to the classroom. Families are also a valuable resource for developing IEP goals that will help the student become a contributing member in their community.



- **Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms.** https://education.ucsc.edu/ellisa/pdfs/Moll_Amanti_1992_Funds_of_Knowledge.pdf
- **Multimedia shared stories: Teaching literacy skills to diverse learners:** https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286936641_Multimedia_Shared_Stories_Teaching_Literacy_Skills_to_Diverse_Learners
- **A culturally and linguistically responsive framework for improving academic and postsecondary outcomes of students with moderate or severe intellectual disability:** <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1125251.pdf>
- **Enhancing instruction for English learners in response to intervention systems: The PLUSS model:** https://www.esc12.net/upload/page/0073/Enhancing_Instruction_for_English_Learners_in_Response_to_Interv.pdf
- **Affirming disability: Strengths-based portraits of culturally diverse families:** <https://www.tcpress.com/affirming-disability-9780807763292>

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Advancing **ALTELLA**

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