

The United States is rapidly becoming very diverse linguistically and culturally. Given these demographic changes, there is an urgency to expand the definition of a high quality early childhood education to address the needs of dual language learners (DLLs). The Head Start Program is ahead of most early childhood programs in its efforts to meet their needs.

In this *Dialog Brief*, Dr. Dina Castro addresses the need to provide high quality early education for young DLLs. First, Castro reviews the variation in DLL early learning standards among federally- and state-funded early learning programs and explores how demographic, cultural, and environmental factors, the developmental characteristics of young DLLs, and early education practices affect the development of young DLLs. Second, Castro explains how research demonstrates the need to improve the quality of early learning experiences for young DLLs. Third, Castro presents a prevalent DLL classroom scenario and provides Head Start and other early learning practitioners, researchers, and policymakers with classroom-, program-, and systemic-level strategies to address the early education needs of young DLLs. Finally, Castro recommends expanding the definition of high quality education to include practices to address the needs of all children, including DLLs and explains how the Head Start Program is contributing significantly to that redefinition.

## High Quality Early Education for Young Dual Language Learners: What Can Be Done?

Dina C. Castro<sup>1</sup>

### Rising Numbers of Young Dual Language Learners

In recent years the United States has experienced a demographic transformation that is reflected in the increased linguistic, ethnic and cultural diversity among children and families served in early care and education programs. Enrollment of children whose primary language is not English is increasing dramatically in early childhood programs nationwide, a trend projected

to continue (Hernandez, Denton, & McCartney, 2007). The linguistic diversity among young children is evident in the increase of young DLLs' enrollment in Head Start programs, about 30% of children enrolled in the program nationally are DLLs. Although more than 100 languages are represented among DLLs enrolled in Head Start, about 85% of those DLLs are from families who speak Spanish as their primary language (Office of Head Start, 2007).

continued on page 2

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Dina Castro is a Senior Scientist at FPG Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The majority of DLLs enrolled in early childhood programs are children of immigrants with over 90% of them being U. S. citizens by birth (Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson, & Passel, 2004). However, not all young DLLs are children of immigrants since there are U.S.-born families that speak English and speak a language other than English at home. For instance, among U.S. born Latinos ages 18 and older, 63% speak a language other than English at home (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). Also, there are children in American Indian and Pacific Islander families who are part of the DLL population. DLL families are those who speak their indigenous languages at home (e.g., Cherokee, Hawaiian).

#### **A Mixed Bag of Early Learning Standards for DLLs**

The role of high quality early childhood practices in promoting children's later school success has been well documented in the literature (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Snow & Páez, 2004), and the federal and state governments want to ensure that their early childhood programs are of high quality and meeting rigorous standards of accountability. Interestingly though, there is a great deal of variation between how the federal government and the states have so far developed early learning standards regarding programming and services for DLLs.

At the federal level, the Office of Head Start has developed specific standards within the Head Start Program Performance Standards requiring programs to address the needs of DLLs and their families across multiple developmental and service areas. More recently, the *Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework* was released (Office of Head Start, 2010). This is a revised version of the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework, and it adds a domain on English language development that applies only to children who are DLLs.

Although many states have developed Early Learning Standards, there is no consistency among states about how to support DLLs. More recently work began on the development of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) with the purpose of ensuring that young children enrolled in early childhood programs receive high quality early care and education. A review conducted in 2008 of the then 16 existing state/territory QRIS (Colorado, District of Columbia, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Vermont) revealed that no state/territory had included in its definition of high quality early childhood settings a rating component

addressing how well programs support young DLLs and children from diverse cultures and their families (Bruner, Ray, Wright, & Copeman, 2009). For example, none of these QRISs awarded points for programs hiring teachers who speak the home languages of children in their classroom or for formal education or for program meeting professional development requirements related to dual language development and multicultural/anti-bias education.

#### **Dual Language Learners' Context of Development**

To provide early childhood care and education that responds to the needs and characteristics of the DLL population, it is necessary to have an understanding of these children's development, as well as their families' demographic characteristics, and most importantly, of their families' beliefs, values and practices related to supporting children's development and learning. As mentioned above, most young DLLs are children of immigrants, an experience that brings both risk and resilience factors that will affect DLLs' school readiness and later school achievement. Some of the risk factors that contribute to the vulnerability of DLLs include higher rates of poverty, and having parents who may have low educational levels, earn wages that are lower than those of non-immigrants, and may have limited proficiency in English (Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson, & Passel, 2004). On the other hand, there are characteristics of immigrant families that may serve as protective factors for young children's development; these protective factors tend to be overlooked when focusing only on these families' challenges. For example, most immigrant families are headed by two parent families. This fact, along with the high value that many of these families give to their children's education, and other family values, translate into family socialization practices that can promote development and learning among young DLLs (e.g., Gamble & Modry-Mandell, 2008; Zucker & Howes, 2009).

Research studies provide evidence of the influence of specific contextual factors on young DLLs' development. For instance, a recent secondary data analysis of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) found that for young DLLs, having an immigrant mother was associated with better cognitive outcomes and fewer behavior problems compared to DLLs with U.S. born mothers. Furthermore, for children whose mothers were born in the U.S., ratings of problem behaviors were higher for non-DLLs than DLLs (CECER-DLL, 2011a).

**continued on page 3**

These findings are similar to those of other studies reporting that DLLs tend to begin kindergarten with more social-emotional competencies than their non-DLL peers (Halle et al., 2009).

### Developmental Characteristics of Young DLLs

The bilingual and bicultural nature of children's development is a critical condition to consider when identifying early care and education practices that will effectively support these children's development and learning. DLLs' development may differ from that of monolingual children in certain domains or specific aspects of a developmental domain, whereas, they may be similar in others. For example, a recent critical review of the literature on DLLs' language and literacy development conducted by the Center for Early Care and Education Research-Dual Language Learners (CECER-DLL) (2011b) found that when bilingual infants' vocabularies in their respective languages were compared to monolingual infants' vocabularies, bilingual children tended to have smaller vocabularies. However, bilingual infants and toddlers' conceptual vocabularies were comparable to those of monolinguals. The CECER-DLL review also found differences between bilingual and monolingual children's grammatical development. Regarding phonological development, the review found that differences were evident during infancy, but children catch up with monolinguals during the preschool years.

Children who are DLLs experience each of the critical dimensions of development in the context of learning two languages, which increases the complexity of the developmental processes. Children who begin learning a second language when they go to preschool will need to develop a variety of receptive and expressive language skills, such as "...familiarity with the phonology of the [second language], its vocabulary (both everyday vocabulary and more academic vocabulary), its morphology, and grammar." (Geva, 2006). Furthermore, to become literate in a second language, it is important to have an adequate level of oral proficiency in that language (Bialystock, 2007). Research studies on DLLs have shown that oral language and literacy skills in the first language contribute to the development of those skills in the second language. For example, phonological awareness skills in the first language have been found to predict phonological awareness and word recognition in the second language (Chiappe & Siegel, 1999; Durgunoğlu, 1998). Additional research is needed to advance our understanding about the way in which DLLs develop literacy skills in preschool classrooms. There is, however, some knowledge that can guide the

development of interventions for this population, and it will be discussed in the next sections.

### Early Education Practices Must Be Developed to Address the Needs of Young DLLs

An important factor, contributing to DLLs as a vulnerable population at risk of school failure, is that early education practices have not been designed to address their linguistic and broader developmental and educational needs. "Thus, instructional practices need to be modified or changed, and measures need to capture if those modifications or changes are being implemented." (Castro, Espinosa, & Páez, 2011).

High quality early childhood education – as currently defined – may be a necessary but not sufficient condition to successfully educate young DLLs. These children lag behind their peers when they enter kindergarten and the gap in academic achievement appears to widen as children grow older. For example, findings from national studies (e.g., Reardon & Galindo, 2006) indicate that Spanish-speaking children attending preschool programs make gains in some language and literacy skills but their performance is below that of their English speaking peers and below the national norm. These research findings as well as findings from other studies (Shanahan and Beck, 2006) suggest that what works to support learning among monolingual English speaking children may not be sufficient to obtain the same level of outcomes in DLLs.

There is great variability among young DLLs with regard to the rate and the manner in which they learn a second language, with several factors influencing the process of second language learning, such as child factors (e.g., age, motivation, personality, first language proficiency), program/school factors (e.g., instructional approaches, teacher preparation), and socio-cultural factors (e.g., poverty, familial stress, incongruence between home and school environments). All of these factors should be taken into account when designing adjustments and accommodations to support young DLLs.<sup>2</sup> Castro, Espinosa, & Páez (2011) explain,

It is necessary to take into consideration that "program characteristics, early childhood program staffing, educator qualifications and characteristics, as well as certain instructional and assessment practices that are best suited for DLLs may vary from those identified as significant for monolingual English-speaking populations.

continued on page 4

In particular, dimensions of environmental and structural quality (e.g., physical and material environment, child–staff ratios, staff qualifications, collaboration with parents), as well as dimensions of curriculum and teaching (e.g., language of interactions and instruction, support of primary language of child, assessment practices, individualization of instruction) will need to be adapted.

#### Elements of High Quality ECE for Young DLLs

Here is a frequent DLL classroom scenario:

Ms. Smith is the director of a Head Start center. During the last three years, the enrollment of children who are DLLs has increased in her center. These children now make up 40% of all children enrolled. At least five children in each classroom are DLLs with some classrooms having up to 10 young DLLs. The teachers are not bilingual, and only a few of them have bilingual teacher assistants. Ms. Smith is concerned because the young DLLs are not performing well academically and socially. She has observed that these children are disengaged in classroom activities, some seem shy and do not interact with peers much, and others act out and get into fights with the other children. Families of the DLLs do not respond to notes and materials sent home by the teachers, although teachers are making an effort to translate them into the family’s home language, with help from the bilingual teacher assistants. Teachers have expressed some frustration and need for support. They are using the best of their knowledge and abilities (all of them have bachelor degrees in early education) but are still experiencing challenges when teaching DLLs.

This scenario describes a frequent situation in early childhood programs around the country. What would Ms. Smith need to do to address these challenges? The answer to this question involves changes in practices and policies at the classroom-, program-, and system-levels. Although researchers have begun to study classroom practices to promote development and learning among young DLLs, the research literature is still limited because most DLL research has been conducted with older children. However, a review of this emergent body of

research indicates that the following features of quality early care and education practices seem to be important for young DLLs:

- **Conduct ongoing and frequent assessments to monitor young DLLs’ progress in English language acquisition, other developmental domains and content knowledge.** Assessments should be used to inform instruction by helping teachers plan how to use specific instructional strategies, such as the use of extra support in small group instruction. Assessments should be conducted in children’s home language and English to gather complete information about children’s knowledge and abilities.
- **Conduct focused small-group activities.** These activities must provide young DLLs with multiple opportunities to be exposed to instructional content, ask and respond to questions, and to receive explicit instruction in vocabulary and phonological awareness, two fundamental abilities related to promoting children’s language and literacy development. Use of the home language in these activities is important to ensure comprehension of task instructions and acquisition of content knowledge.
- **Provide explicit vocabulary instruction to teach the meanings of everyday words, phrases, and expressions not yet learned in the context of play.** This is important because DLLs will not benefit from incidental vocabulary learning as much as their monolingual English speaking peers, since they are in the process of learning English. This could partly explain why young DLLs in Ms. Smith’s center are not engaged in classroom activities. If children do not understand what is being said they will not be able to follow instructions or learn new concepts. Identifying target vocabulary words that can be taught through storybook reading (Gillanders & Castro, 2011), and be followed up with small group activities, using the home language strategically, can facilitate vocabulary learning among DLLs.
- **Ensure the development of formal or academic English.** To ensure their success in school, DLLs need to develop the specialized academic language that differs from conversational skills. Therefore, instruction for DLLs should incorporate opportunities to provide explicit instruction of the academic language related to basic mathematics concepts and skills (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer,

continued on page 5

& Rivera, 2006). Even when DLLs demonstrate knowledge of mathematical concepts (e.g., using manipulatives), they need to be able to explain those concepts using formal language.

- **Promote socio-emotional development through effective teacher–child and peer relationships.** Being intentional to create positive teacher-child relationships is particularly important for young DLLs to facilitate their inclusion in the classroom community (Gillanders, 2007). Positive teacher-child relationships are promoted when they are involved in learning with children, are consistent and firm, and support children’s positive behaviors (Howes & Ritchie, 2002). Equally important is to promote positive peer relationships between young DLLs and their English speaking peers with the double purpose of promoting positive social relationships as well as providing opportunities for exposure to English.
- **Promote family-school partnerships.** Building family–school partnerships becomes especially critical when working with young DLLs, since the family can provide information about family context as well as support to develop and maintain their home language. Learning about family beliefs and practices and sharing with families learning materials in their home language and ideas to reinforce learning at home can be an approach to promote partnerships with families of DLLs.

To enable classroom teachers to implement the practices described above, they need to develop an understanding of how bilingualism influences young DLLs’ development and learning, the relationship between language and culture and its linkage to DLLs’ development, and how to create the conditions in the early childhood setting to facilitate the learning of the English language and the conceptual knowledge that helps prepare young children to be successful in school (Zepeda, Castro, & Cronin, 2011). As is the case with teachers in Ms. Smith’s Head Start center, having obtained a bachelors degree in early education does not necessarily mean that teachers are prepared to serve young DLLs. Unfortunately, only very few early childhood teacher preparation programs nationwide offer courses and practicum experiences focused on working with children who are DLLs (Maxwell, Lim, & Early, 2006).

Given this lack of preparation, early childhood educators need to have access to professional development on this topic. The type and quality of the professional

development offered is an important issue to consider. The limited research-based evidence suggests that to be effective in increasing teacher’s knowledge and to change instructional practices, professional development for teachers should provide them with long-term support, explicitly link knowledge with practice, offer modeling and feedback on practice implementation, and provide opportunities for critical reflection in the context of collaboration with peers, parents or advisers, among other characteristics (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

At the program level, in addition to hiring bilingual and bicultural staff to work with children and families, and providing the staff with high quality professional development, it is essential for programs to have a language policy that explicitly supports the development and maintenance of the young DLLs home language. Such a policy should guide program hiring decisions, curricular activities, and allocation of resources, as well as activities to promote partnerships with families of DLLs.

From a system-level perspective, “early learning standards, and program policies should include provisions that promote and enhance dual language learning, including teacher preparation, family support, and availability of resources” (Castro, Páez, Dickinson, & Frede, 2010). Some examples of policies that would promote high quality early education for young DLLs are presented:

- Teacher licensure regulations and teacher education accreditation criteria should require coursework and practicum experience that prepares teachers to work effectively with DLLs.
- States should establish early childhood learning standards that include specific outcomes for young children acquiring two languages that are articulated with K-12 standards.
- Teachers must be qualified to implement these learning standards and receive on-going support, including systematic compliance efforts (monitoring and evaluation) to ensure that teachers use effective strategies that foster DLLs’ development and learning.
- Provisions linked to classroom instruction should be in place to assist families in supporting DLLs first language development and maintenance.

continued on page 6

### Conclusions

The definition of high-quality early education currently being used in the early childhood education field should be revised to include practices that address the needs of ALL children, including young DLLs. For example, adult-child ratios may need to be smaller to provide educators with time to conduct small group activities with DLLs. To implement classroom activities and assessments using the children’s primary language, programs will need to hire and /or increase the number of bilingual qualified staff. Meanwhile, policies at the program and system levels should be in place to ensure that teachers are prepared to serve young DLLs and families, that accountability systems include provisions to monitor whether young DLLs are making adequate progress developmentally and academically, and that families of DLLs are supported to help them to raise their children to be successful bilingual and bicultural adults, if that is their desire.

The Head Start Program is leading the nation by providing a policy framework, including regulations and requirements, and resources for programs to implement culturally and linguistically responsive early care and education for all children. Current efforts by the Office of Head Start to support the implementation of cultural and linguistically responsive practices include funding of the National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness, and the CECER-DLL, in collaboration with the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation and the Office of Child Care within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Office of Head Start’s strong policy framework along with states’ early learning policies that purposefully addresses the needs of young DLLs, the development of the DLL knowledge base, and increased access to adequate resources should create the conditions for implementing high quality early childhood practices that will help young DLLs reach their full potential.

### References

Bialystok, E. (2007). Acquisition of literacy in bilingual children: A framework for research. *Language Learning*, 57, 45-77.

Bruner, C., Ray, A., Wright, M. S., & Copeman, A. (2009). *Quality Rating & Improvement Systems for a Multi-Ethnic Society*. A BUILD Brief on Diversity and Equity.

Bowman, B. T., Donovan, M. S., & Burns, M. S. (Eds.). (2001). *Eager to learn: Educating out preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Capps, R., Fix, M., Ost, J., Reardon-Anderson, J., & Passel, J. S. (2004). *The Health and Well-Being of Young Children of Immigrants*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Castro, D. C., Espinosa, L., & Páez, M. (2011). Defining and measuring quality early childhood practices that promote dual language learners' development and learning. In Zaslow, M., Martinez-Beck, I., Tout, K., & Halle, T. (Eds.). *Quality Measurement in Early Childhood Settings* (pp. 257-280). Baltimore: Brookes Publishing.

Castro, D. C., Páez, M., Dickinson, D., & Frede, E. (2011). Promoting language and literacy in dual language learners: Research, practice and policy. *Child Development Perspectives*, 5, 15-21.

Center for Early Care and Education Research—Dual Language Learners (CECER-DLL). (2011a). *Research brief #8: Factors associated with development of dual language learners: Results from a secondary analysis of the ECLS-B*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute, Author.

Center for Early Care and Education Research—Dual Language Learners (CECER-DLL). (2011b). *Research brief #6: Language and literacy development in dual language learners: A critical review of the research*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute, Author.

Center for Early Care and Education Research—Dual Language Learners (CECER-DLL). (2011c). *Research brief #4. Evaluating early care and education practices for dual language learners: A critical review of the research*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute, Author.

Chiappe, P., & Siegel, L. S. (1999). Phonological awareness and reading acquisition in English and Punjabi-speaking Canadian children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 91, 20-28.

Durgunoglu, A. Y. (1998). Acquiring literacy in English and Spanish in the United States. In A. Y. Durgunoglu & L. Verhoeven (Eds.), *Literacy Development in a Multilingual Context: Cross-cultural Perspectives* (pp. 135-145), Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Francis, D. J., Rivera, M., Lesaux, N., Kiefer, M., & Rivera, H. (2006). *Practical guidelines for the education of English language learners: Research-based recommendations for instruction and academic intervention*. Retrieved from <http://www.centeroninstruction.org/files/ELL1-Interventions.pdf>.

Gamble, W. C., & Modry-Mandell, K. (2008). Family relations and the adjustment of young children of Mexican descent: Do family cultural values moderate these associations? *Social Development, 17*, 358-379.

Geva, E. (2006). Learning to read in a second language: Research, implications, and recommendations for services. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*. Retrieved from [http://www.enfant-encyclopedie.com/pages/PDF/second\\_language.pdf](http://www.enfant-encyclopedie.com/pages/PDF/second_language.pdf).

Gillanders, C. (2007) An English-speaking prekindergarten teacher for young Latino children: Implications for the teacher-child relationship on second language learning. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 35*, 47-54.

Gillanders, C., & Castro, D. C. (2011, January). Storybook reading for young English language learners. *Young Children, January*, 91-95.

Goldenberg, C. (2008, Summer). Teaching English language learners. What the research does –and does not –say. *American Educator, 8-44*.

Halle, T., Fory, N., Hair, E., Perper, K., Wandner, L., & Vick, J. (2009). *Disparities in early learning and development: Lessons from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B)*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.

Hernandez, D., J., Denton, N. A., & McCartney, S. E. (2007). Children in immigrant families –The U. S. and 50 states: National origins, language and early education. *Children in America's Newcomer Families*. Child Trends & the Center for Social and Demographic Analysis, University at Albany, SUNY: 2007 Research Brief Series.

Howes, C., & Ritchie, S. (2002). *A matter of trust: Connecting teachers and learners in the early childhood curriculum*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Maxwell, K. L., Lim, C.-I., & Early, D. M. (2006). *Early childhood teacher preparation programs in the United States: National report*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute.

Office of Head Start (2007). *Dual language learning: What does it take?* Washington, DC:

Office of Head Start (2010). *The Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework. Promoting Positive Outcomes in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children 3-5 Years Old*. Washington, DC: Administration for Children and Families, U. S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Pew Hispanic Center. (2009). *Statistical portrait of Hispanics in the United States, 2007*. Washington, DC: Author.

Reardon S. F., & Galindo, C. (2006). Patterns of Hispanic students' math and English literacy test scores. *Report to the National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics*.

Shanahan, T., & Beck, I. L. (2006). Effective literacy teaching for English –language learners. In D. August & T. Shanahan (Eds.), *Developing literacy in second-language learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth* (pp. 415-488). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Snow, C. E., & Pérez, M. M. (2004). The Head Start classroom as an oral language environment. What should the performance standards be? In E. Zigler & S. J. Styfco (Eds.), *The Head Start Debates* (pp. 113-128). Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing Co.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service. (2010). *Toward the identification of features of effective professional development for early childhood educators, Literature review*. Washington, DC. Author.

Zepeda, M., Castro, D. C., & Cronin, S. (2011). Preparing teachers to work with young English language learners. *Child Development Perspectives, 5*, 10-14.

Zucker, E., & Howes, C. (2009). Respectful relationships: Socialization goals and practices among Mexican mothers. *Infant Mental Health Journal, 30*, 501-522.



NATIONAL HEAD START ASSOCIATION

1651 Prince Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314

## NHSA DIALOG *Briefs*

Fall 2011

Public Policy and Research Department  
National Head Start Association  
1651 Prince Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
Phone: (703) 739-7559  
Fax: (703) 739-0878

Yasmina Vinci, Executive Director  
Ron Herndon, Chairman of the Board  
Ben Allen, Director, Public Policy and Research

University of North Carolina at Charlotte  
Richard Lambert, Editor

The National Head Start Association, an independent organization, advocates on behalf of the entire Head Start community and provides training and resources to Head Start programs nationwide.

© 2011 National Head Start Association. All rights reserved.

ISSN 1535-5594

# DIALOG

## *Briefs*