Dual Language Learners: Research Informing Policy

Who are these children?

In the 21st century, young children in the United States are growing up in increasingly diverse communities, exposed to many languages and cultures.

Millions of young children are acquiring more than one language in the home, community and early care and education (ECE) settings. These children, between the ages of 0–5 who are exposed to and use more than one language, are identified as Dual Language Learners (DLLs). Nationally, close to one third of preschoolers ages three to five in Head Start and children ages zero to three in Early Head Start live in homes where a language other than English is spoken. The overall child population speaking a non-English native language in the U.S. rose from 6 percent in 1979 to 14 percent in 2010. Significantly, the number of language minority students in PreK–12 is estimated to be over 6 million.

What Circumstances Characterize DLLs?

DLLs are young children growing up between two cultures and languages. They are more likely than monolingual English-speaking children, on average, to be assigned "risk factors" such as living in poverty and having parents with limited formal education, especially when they are children of recent immigrants. Yet, DLLs' lives include circumstances that are assets to support development, such as intact/extended family networks, more positive health and social/emotional supports, and parents and families with highly positive attitudes towards the significance of education for future integration into the broader society.

With regard to early development, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) shows vulnerabilities and assets for DLLs. Among DLLs of different national origins, at 9 and 24 months, those with an immigrant mother and exposed only to the non-English language at home have stronger results in English reading in preschool. For early cognitive development and math skills upon school entry, the use of the home language is found to be beneficial for DLL children of immigrant families. Regarding educational attainment, however, the ECLS-K indicates that DLLs scored .3 to .5 of a standard deviation lower in mathematics and reading than their monolingual peers within all five Socio-Economic Status (SES) quintiles. A separate analysis of ECLS-K data noted that these achievement differences by SES and race/ethnicity from kindergarten through first grade were attributable to processes within and outside of schools. Practices in the home and school, including language exposure and use, bear meaningful influences on DLLs' early development and learning.

How to Best Understand this Growing Population

A recent conceptual framework developed by the Center for Early Care and Education Research (CECER-DLL) suggests that understanding DLL development

♦   Means a complete reorientation from assumptions and expectations about developmental competencies rooted in monolingual perspectives and mainstream cultural practices that often equate differences in development with deficits; and

- Must include attention to the mutually constituting features that may facilitate or impede DLLs' optimal development and learning across society, community, and family contexts; individual child characteristics; and early care and learning experiences.

The CECER-DLL suggests that such a conceptual framework be used to assess not only the "vulnerability" features but also the "assets" of DLLs in ECE settings.

Research Informing Policy

Recent reviews of research conducted by CECER-DLL related to language and literacy development of DLLs, cognitive benefits of being bilingual and ECE practices offer ideas relevant to policy.

Language and Literacy Development

- Strong evidence indicates DLLs have two separate language systems from very early in life; the two languages influence each other; and DLLs are not negatively impacted from exposure to and use of two languages during the early developmental years;
- Developments of DLLs' skill levels in the two languages vary depending on when they were exposed to each language and opportunities to use both languages;
- When compared to monolinguals, DLLs' language and literacy development differs in some important ways. While DLLs' vocabularies in their individual languages are smaller than monolinguals' when conceptual vocabularies in both languages are combined, DLLs' vocabularies are equal to that of monolinguals; and
- In relation to overall literacy development, there is evidence to suggest that DLLs enter preschool with literacy skills in English that are lower than those of monolinguals but DLLs make significant progress during their preschool experience. They can reach the same level of English ability as their monolingual peers during the early grades.

Cognitive Benefits

- Developmental science, in its study of bilingualism in DLLs, strongly suggests that exposure to and acquisition of two languages in the early years has limited, if any, detrimental effects and can have important positive effects. Those positive effects can come in areas of metalinguistic awareness, cognitive flexibility and enhanced executive functions.

Practices in ECE Settings: Environment, Instruction, and Assessment

- Features of high quality ECE (e.g., intentional teaching and integrated learning, positive teacher-child and home-school relationships, play as a context for learning, qualified teachers, appropriate child-teacher ratios, frequent assessment that documents progress and informs instruction, parent engagement) are all important for DLLs—but probably not sufficient;
- The use of a DLL's home language, in addition to English, is probably the most important aspect of effective ECE settings for DLLs. DLLs are learning through two languages therefore both languages must be supported through intentional instruction, specific language interactions, frequent assessments of children's progress in both languages, and culturally sensitive engagement with families;
- Children can successfully learn two languages – they do not need to give up their home language in order to learn English if it is the formal language of the preschool setting—*but* DLLs will not exactly resemble monolingual children in language development;
- All children need assessments that are fair, equitable, and well constructed. The results should represent the skills, knowledge and behaviors of DLLs that are important for their development and later school success; and
- Information on the background characteristics of study participants must be included when making interpretations and recommendations about the academic performance and development of DLLs.

Recommendations

The above research informs the following policy recommendations related to Dual Language Learners in Early Care and Education settings.

♦ **Early and Accurate Identification and Assessment of DLLs**

Guidelines and practices for early and accurate identification of DLLs in ECE settings rarely exist. To ensure appropriate instruction for DLLs, it is important to identify the language abilities and prior knowledge they bring to early childhood education settings, and in later years, to school. State and federal statues and guidance should reflect such language and direction. Additionally, assessments used with DLLs must be well designed, valid, reliable, and linguistically appropriate for this population; assessment tools, procedures, and purposes must consider the unique aspects of linguistic and cognitive development associated with growing up with two languages as well as the social and cultural contexts that influence overall development. Accordingly, those administering and interpreting assessments used with DLLs must be knowledgeable about children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds so that they can make informed judgments about the appropriateness of specific assessment instruments for DLLs.

♦ **Strengthen Human Capital in Early Childhood Education Programs**

Despite the high proportion of DLLs in ECE settings, there is no strategic effort to prepare, hire and train individuals working in early childhood programs to acquire competencies to foster the language, literacy and overall development of DLLs. Strengthening the human capital in ECE settings is complicated because the recruitment, hiring, and training of individuals working with young children is severely fragmented between county, private and school district programs. States and the federal government should create or support special programs to train individuals in these competencies and bring together resources that can assist in recruitment, hiring and

training. Also, there should be a state teacher certification for someone who works in this area.

♦ **Enhance Coherence of Programmatic Components**

Public education PreK–12 systems typically lack coordination of the instructional programs for language learners between early childhood and later grades. Policy and practice at the local and state level must encourage programmatic coherence across fiscal entities, while allowing room for explicit support for DLLs to develop academically, socially, and emotionally through dual language instructional approaches in ECE programs. When plans are required for grant programs at the state and federal level this requirement should be included.

♦ **Continue to Explore Dual Language Programs for DLLs**

Young DLLs should have access to high-quality programs that explicitly support their home language and English. Dual Language programs used in Head start and Early Head Start have shown promising results in this approach. Dual Language programs teach English and home language skills through content. These programs integrate monolingual English speaking and dual language learners in the same classroom, thereby fostering linguistic and ethnic equity among children. Dual Language programs have been shown to support literacy development in English for DLLs while also supporting home language skills. When Dual Language programs cannot be utilized, programs should support the use of DLLs' home languages for instructional purposes as much as possible.

♦ **Create Databases to Monitor and Assess DLL Performance**

Expand the scope of the national, state and local databases (e.g., ECLS-B, ECLS-K) developed to assess children's development and academic performance to allow for more extensive and accurate analyses of DLLs by national origin, SES (e.g., parent education), nativity, immigrant generation status, and language exposure and use in various contexts (i.e., home, ECE program). Information currently avail-

able has limited usability given the heterogeneity and diversity of experiences among DLLs. All of this requires developing and accepting a common definition of dual language learners at all policy levels.

These research findings should inform and help shape the policies and programs to be created as part of the President's Preschool for All proposal found in his FY 2014 budget or any other high quality early learning opportunities that are funded at the federal or state levels, such as the Quality Improvement Rating Systems. In particular, programs associated with promoting child development and reducing the school readiness gap should follow the above mentioned policy recommendations.

Given that the details of the Preschool for All proposal have not been finalized, we recommend that experts who conduct research in the area of DLLs be asked to testify, participate in the conversations that shape and draft legislation, and be consulted when programs are being organized and implemented, as well as when regulations and guidance are being written. Furthermore, states should be taking similar steps as they develop and implement state-based early care and education programs and initiatives. ■

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