

Crossing the Language Divide

A veteran pre-K teacher builds positive relationships with her Latino students and promotes literacy development



ALMOST A QUARTER (22.6%) of all children under the age of five is Hispanic.

Yet, only 15% of four-year and 13% of two-year early childhood teacher preparation programs require a class in working with bilingual children.

Compounding the problem is a shortage of bilingual early childhood teachers.

That leaves mostly English-speaking teachers with the challenge of successfully integrating Spanish-speaking children into the classroom. This integration is essential for English language learners to reap the school readiness benefits of a preschool experience.

A case study published in the August 2007 issue of the *Early Childhood Education Journal* by FPG investigator Cristina Gillanders demonstrates how English-speaking teachers can cross the language barrier to build positive relationships with English language learners.

The study focuses on a veteran prekindergarten teacher with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and a state certification for teaching kindergarten through third grade. The teacher was identified by the school district as an effective teacher of Latino children. She worked in North Carolina, where the Latino population has increased by 394% since 1990. In this district, approximately 9% of the students are Latino.

At the time of the study, the teacher's class had 16 students, all four years of age. They included 11 African American, one Asian, and four Latino children—Alex, Wayne, Yazmin, and Juan.

The researcher's initial questions were:

- 1) How does the teacher communicate with her Spanish-speaking students?
- 2) How does she support the children's native language?
- 3) What strategies does she use to teach English to Latino students and to promote literacy development?



Collecting Data

Data was collected over a one year period. The researcher visited the classroom 51 times, spending from 30 minutes to three hours with the class. The Latino children were assessed in Spanish and English at the beginning and end of the study to determine progress, using the *Test de Vocabulario en Imágenes Peabody* (TVIP) to measure the vocabulary of Spanish-speaking and bilingual students, and the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test—3RD edition* (PPVT-III) to measure English vocabulary.

Teacher-Child Interactions

The teacher placed a high value on communication. She wanted to form a trusting relationship with the children in her class. Since she did not know many words in Spanish, she found other ways of reaching out to the Latino children. She would hold their hands and give them hugs. She used small group instruction, giving her more time to talk with students. And she used a consistent classroom routine.

Perhaps the most effective strategy for developing a positive relationship with the Latino children in her class was to begin incorporating Spanish words and materials into the classroom. She played bilingual music. She consulted the Spanish-speaking students about correct Spanish words. As a result, she created an atmosphere where speaking Spanish was a desirable skill. The English-speaking children considered knowledge of Spanish a valuable commodity, thereby increasing the social status of the Spanish-speaking children.

Child-Child Interactions

At the beginning of the year, there was little interaction between the English-speaking and Latino children. However, as the year progressed that changed. The English-speaking children emulated the teacher's relationship with the Latino children. Close friendships formed between both groups of children despite the language barrier. Activities like the housekeeping center provided opportunities for pretend play that did not heavily rely on language ability. These opportunities promoted the acquisition of English for the Spanish-speaking children.

The Children

- **Juan:** Juan spoke only Spanish in the classroom. At mid-year he began to use more English. His PPVT score went from 53 to 62 and his TVIP score went from 75 to 96.

- **Yazmin:** At the beginning of the year, Yazmin understood directions when they were in one or two word phrases. Her PPVT score was 89 at the beginning and 101 at the end of the year. Her TVIP score went from 96 to 105.
- **Alex:** Alex began the year with some English proficiency. At the start of the year, he primarily played with another Latino child. However, as the year progressed, he interacted with more children. His scores on the Spanish measure increased from 85 to 99. His scores on the English measure decreased from 72 to 69, but remained higher than the mean of 64.9 for Spanish-speaking children in other studies.
- **Wayne:** Wayne spoke both Spanish and English. He was described by his mother as very shy and quiet. He established a close friendship with an English-speaking student. He refused to complete the PPVT at the beginning of the year. At the end of the year, he scored 86, above the mean for other Spanish-speaking children in other studies with this population of children. His TVIP score went from 72 to 57, most likely because he used English in the classroom and at home.

Conclusion

This case suggests that teachers who are sensitive to children's emotional needs might be able to transcend the language environment. For English language learners in a classroom where most children do not speak Spanish, a teacher's emphasis on building positive relationships can help all children succeed. ■

To Learn More

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- Howes, C., & Ritchie, S. (2002). *A matter of trust*. 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: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute.
- U. S. Census Bureau. 2006 Census Data.



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