

## RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

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### Bilingual Teachers in Early Head Start/Head Start

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While recruitment and employment goals of Early Head Start/Head Start (EHS/HS) programs with respect to bilingual staff are clearly outlined in the program policies, nationally, little is known about their implementation on the ground, especially in programs that serve large numbers of Latino children. The present study targeted an urban EHS/HS program that serves a large number of Spanish-speaking dual language learning families. An interview with the program's Human Resources Director was conducted to gain insight into the program's recruitment and retention strategies for Latino/a staff. Additionally, via the administration of a survey to lead teachers ( $n = 109$ ), we sought to gain concrete insight into teachers' language and ethnicity characteristics and to learn whether and, if so, for which purposes teachers reported using Spanish in their classrooms. Our results suggest that the two-pronged recruitment and retention strategy employed by the program likely related to the high rates of EHS/HS teachers in the program who identified themselves as Latinas and who reported using Spanish in the classroom. Such efforts appear to be a step in the right direction given the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in today's EHS/HS classrooms.

The great majority of today's Early Head Start (EHS) and Head Start (HS) programs serve dual language learning families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008; Vogel et al., 2006)—families that represent a variety of ethnicities and language backgrounds. Within this diverse group, Latino children from Spanish-speaking homes is the largest group. In fact, more than 30% of EHS/HS children are Latino (Administration for Children and Families, 2008), and almost 1 in 4 come from households where Spanish is the primary language spoken (Hamm, 2006; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Compared to early childhood programs across the nation, these demographics are unique to EHS/HS programs.

Given these demographics, one EHS/HS policy is that programs should to strive to employ qualified bilingual staff in order to strengthen instruction for children, as well as to facilitate effective communication with parents and families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). There are some accounts that following this national program policy can be challenging— i.e., that it is difficult for programs to find, attract, and retain qualified,

bilingual staff (National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Overall, however, we know little about the on-the-ground implementation of this policy. For instance, we know very little about efforts to recruit and retain bilingual staff, and about the ethnicity and language backgrounds of EHS/HS staff, especially in programs that serve large numbers of Latino children. We also know little about whether and how Spanish is used by EHS/HS teachers in the classroom (Freedson, 2010).

## Our Study

To carry out this study, we partnered with an urban EHS/HS program that serves a large number of Spanish-speaking dual language learning families. From our visits to the program, we suspected that a substantial percentage of the lead teachers were Spanish-speaking Latina, but statistics from across the program were not available and there was little information about the extent to which Spanish was used, if at all, in the classrooms. To answer these questions, we took several approaches. We interviewed the program's Human Resources (HR) Director to gain insight into the program's recruitment and retention strategies for Latina staff. We also administered a survey to all lead teachers ( $n = 109$ ) to find out teachers' language and ethnicity characteristics, and to learn whether teachers used Spanish in their classrooms and, if so, for what purposes. We outline our key findings below.

## Key Findings

### A. Teachers' Demographic Characteristics

*1. Gender, Ethnicity, Race.* As expected based on national data, the EHS/HS teachers in our sample were nearly all females (99%). However, our sample included a substantially larger percentage of Latina teachers (53%) compared to the overall national average and national average for Head Start programs (6% each). Additionally, our participants identified themselves as Black (7%) at rates similar to the overall national average (10%), but at notably lower rates than the Head Start national average (35%).

*2. Education and Years of Experience.* Only one-quarter (24%) of teachers in our sample reported having a Bachelor's degree or higher, which is substantially lower compared to the national average and the HS average (50% and 40%, respectively). In turn, a higher percentage (29%) of teachers in the sample reported having an Associate's degree. Our sample reported more years of teaching experience than the national average (11 years vs. 6.8 years), but reported the same average number of years (7 years) of teaching in EHS/HS.

### B. Spanish Use in the Classroom

The majority of teachers (74%) reported that they spoke Spanish—and 88% of this group reported using at least some Spanish in their classroom. In fact, over half of these teachers (52%)

reported frequent or very frequent Spanish use in their classroom. We asked about their reason(s) for using Spanish in the classroom, giving them three options on our survey: 1) *for instruction/teaching and for clarification*; 2) *to give directions and to guide transitions*; 3) *to comfort and to socialize during non-teaching times*. Over two-thirds (67%) of teachers reported they used Spanish for *all* three purposes listed. In fact, only 6 teachers reported they used Spanish solely *for instruction/teaching and for clarification*, 5 reported using Spanish solely *to give directions and to guide transitions*, and 2 teachers reported using Spanish solely *to comfort and to socialize during non-teaching times*.

### C. Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategies

So how did program leaders report recruiting and retaining teachers who share the cultural and linguistic background of the children and families they serve? They told us about what is really a two-pronged strategy—creating a pipeline in the community, and focusing on professional development for current staff.

1. *Creating a Pipeline in the Community.* The program made themselves visible to the college community by sitting on boards and advisory committees, allowing them to influence college curricula focused on early childhood development. In this way, they ensure that current trends and issues (e.g., diversity) are addressed and that graduates' skills and knowledge reflect the program's needs. The program also visits and partners with local high schools to create a community pipeline. One location the program targets is a local alternative high school that is designed for high-risk youth who may not persist in a traditional academic setting. The program includes an ECE program and the Director and HR Director sit on the ECE program advisory committee.

2. *Professional Development for Current Staff.* The program also focuses on advancing the education levels of the adults already within the organization. Specifically, they offer regular internal professional development, incentives for staff to continue to pursue formal education, and work on securing federal grants to provide evening educational services for the staff.

Despite the program's efforts to attract and retain teachers who share the linguistic background of the children and families they serve, capacity issues do not allow for this occur all of the time. Recognizing the need to ensure that parents and staff are able to communicate, the program took several concrete steps to minimize language barriers between parents and teachers. For instance, the program ensures that, independent of whether the lead teacher speaks Spanish, Spanish-speaking teachers are readily on site to interface with Spanish-speaking families. Additionally, aside from offering ESL classes to parents, the program was in the midst of creating a conversational Spanish class for teachers and staff. This approach further demonstrates their commitment to fostering effective parent-teacher communication, and offers a feasible strategy for the field, generally.

## Summary and Recommendations

Aside from this EHS/HS program's ability to recruit and retain teachers who share the cultural background of the children and families they serve—an important step for program quality—many of these teachers also share the children's linguistic background. Not only did most teachers report that they spoke Spanish, but nearly all of the Spanish-speaking teachers indicated frequent use of Spanish in the classroom. In fact, teachers reported that Spanish was used for a variety of reasons, from using it for non-academic purposes such as to socialize with children during non-teaching times to using it specifically to instruct. The cultural and linguistic match we found in this study between EHS/HS teachers and families is precisely one of the key recommendations put forth by the National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics (2007), and thus represents a step in the right direction. These statistics are likely related to the two-pronged recruitment and retention strategy employed by the program; namely, creating a teacher pipeline in the community and focusing on professional development for current staff.

Taken together, these findings suggest there is reason to believe the cultural and linguistic classroom context in which these predominantly Latino children are served—and the efforts to bridge language barriers across staff and families—ought to result in positive educational outcomes. However, the limited amount of research that has focused on EHS/HS dual language learning families does not allow for even tentative conclusions about the link between shared teacher-family language and culture and student achievement outcomes. While the foundation is in place for improved teaching and learning as a function of cultural and linguistic cohesion across staff and families, an important next step in this area of research is to explore these potential associations with child outcomes both intentionally and deliberately. Additionally, future research should document the extent to which teachers' language use reports, including their reported reasons for using Spanish, are in line with what might be observed day-to-day in the classroom context. We also need to know more about specific program expectations regarding the use of students' native languages in the classroom. In a similar vein, future research focused on teachers' rationale for opting to use Spanish would provide valuable information about the extent to which teachers are purposefully electing to use one language over the other (e.g., Spanish or English), informing our understanding of teachers' knowledge related to second language learning. Such work is sorely needed as research finds that teachers and staff often do not know how best to support their dual language learning students. Indeed, the National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics (2007) reports that, at all levels of early childhood education, there is a shortage of teachers who are specialists in second language acquisition. More recently, Whitebook and colleagues (2011) report considerable variation in the extent to which graduates of a B.A. program focused on ECE were equipped to address the needs of dual language learners. In fact, the authors note that college instructors themselves might benefit from professional development (PD) in this critically important area. It is likely that PD opportunities for lead teachers and program staff who work directly with children and families would be beneficial, especially those focused on the process of second language acquisition.

In conclusion, as with all studies, the findings reported here must be interpreted in the context in which the study was conducted. Studies that include larger samples from numerous programs in regions across the country would further inform our understanding about the extent to which ECE programs that serve large numbers of dual language learners—like the one

studied here—are able to recruit and retain bilingual, bicultural staff. Our results suggest that targeted strategies for the recruitment and retention of Latino/a early childhood educators, such as creating a pipeline of teachers at the high school and community college level while supporting the educational advancement of those already part of the system, are effective ones. Such efforts evidence a program’s dedication toward promoting and responding to issues of biculturalism and bridging language differences and appear to be a step in the right direction given the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in today’s EHS/HS classrooms.

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