# RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Teacher Beliefs and Misconceptions Regarding Dual Language Learners in Head Start: An Opportunity for Enhancing Professional Development

Rica Ramírez

*University of Texas at San Antonio*

Lauren M. Cycyk
*University of Oregon*

Shelley E. Scarpino
*Bloomsburg University*

Lisa M. López
*University of South Florida*

Carol Scheffner Hammer
*Teachers College Columbia University*

Teachers who have access to accurate information that strengthen their practices and dispels their misconceptions related to dual language learners (DLLs) may be better equipped to provide a quality preschool experience to DLLs in their classrooms. Twenty-three female teachers working in Head Start preschool centers serving DLLs were interviewed on their beliefs regarding DLLs, DLLs' language development, and appropriate instructional practices for DLLs. Six major themes emerged through summarizing the beliefs of the teachers using modified consensual qualitative analysis. These themes included: (1) definition of DLL; (2) value of DLLs' home culture and language; (3) ease of learning English; (4) primary classroom language; (5) home language use in the classroom; and, (6) language difference versus language delay or disorder. Implications and recommendations for professional development are discussed.

*Keywords*: dual language learners, professional development, Head Start, early childhood development

The Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) Head Start Program Performance Standards (2016a) require that programs deliver developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate learning experiences to DLLs. A variety of strategies are available to Head Start teachers and programs to enhance the educational quality for DLLs and meet these performance standards (ACF, 2016b); however, the beliefs that teachers hold regarding DLLs likely influences the supports teachers choose to provide to DLLs in the classroom (Pettit, 2011). Research indicates that teachers' beliefs regarding DLLs not only influence teaching practices but also DLL children's attitudes, motivation, and performance in the classroom (Flores & Smith, 2009; Pettit, 2011). Preschool teachers' beliefs should be inclusive of DLLs' diverse needs, specifically attending to their language differences and the use of children's home language in the classroom. Yet, the beliefs of preschool teachers in Head Start working with DLLs are not yet well known.

## THE CURRENT STUDY

Addressing teachers' beliefs can inform the professional development that teachers are provided so that the increasing numbers of DLL children in Head Start have quality educational opportunities and achieve academic success. The research question that guided the present study is: What are Head Start teachers' beliefs regarding dual language development and instruction of DLLs? By exploring teachers' beliefs, we are able to discuss how these beliefs align with existing literature on culturally- and linguistically-relevant practices. Implications and recommendations for professional development are tailored to Head Start teachers.

Twenty-three female Head Start teachers were administered a questionnaire covering various topics such as, teacher language and cultural background, teacher experience and training, teacher practices and language use with DLLs, teachers' beliefs about dual language development and DLLs' learning, and classroom characteristics. They were interviewed about their responses. These interviews were analyzed using rigorous qualitative methods to determine themes (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997).

## FINDINGS

Six major themes emerged regarding the beliefs teachers held towards DLLs, dual language development, and DLLs' instructional practices. The findings inform recommendations for professional development on the topic of DLLs for Head Start teachers that may contribute to an enhanced educational experience for young children from DLL backgrounds.

### Definition of DLLs

Many teachers in this study were unclear as to how to define a DLL. Generally, teachers did not recognize that the term DLL included children with varying proficiencies in their home language and in English. This inconsistency creates a legitimate concern with regard to the ways in which teachers identify who their DLL children are and how to best serve their needs. In order to provide quality instruction to an increasing DLL child population, teachers must have the appropriate

theoretical, pedagogical, and cultural knowledge surrounding the definition of DLLs (Flores et al., 2009). The Office of Head Start defines a dual language learner as a child "learning two (or more) languages at the same time, or a child learning a second language while continuing to develop their first (or home) language" (ACF, 2013).  The results of this study provide evidence that Head Start teachers should be provided with this definition in their professional development materials so as to have a consistent and accurate definition of DLLs.

## Value of DLLs' Home Culture and Language

Importantly, teachers generally valued DLLs' home language, cultural diversity, and efforts to become bilingual. Teachers held positive beliefs about bilingualism, and they believed that families should speak their heritage language at home. Teachers' encouraging perceptions of DLLs' home language, cultural diversity, and bilingualism can be used as a starting point for professional development in best practices by capitalizing on the positive beliefs teachers already hold. Valuing and emphasizing children's home language in the classroom, for example, aligns with recommendations provided by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine (2017) for education of young DLLs.

## Ease of Learning English

Teachers did not have an accurate understanding of how a second language develops or how to best support DLLs' English language and literacy acquisition in the classroom. It can be assumed that preschool teachers who hold inaccurate beliefs are less likely to support DLLs through the language learning process that is particularly crucial in children's early years of development. A strong body of evidence suggests that DLLs acquire academic language in their second language within five to seven years *with proper support* (Genesee, 2016). This range for learning English is much longer and more effortful than preschool teachers believe it to be. DLLs need planned and systematic support in acquiring a second language, which focuses on language for academic and social purposes as well as fostering their home language (Genesee, 2016). Therefore, providing Head Start teachers with professional development that highlights second language acquisition theory and practices to promote English language acquisition will help in addressing this misconception.

## Home Language Use in the Classroom

Head Start teachers believed that the home language should be used in the home; however, they had varying beliefs about how and when it should be used in the preschool classroom. The majority of Head Start teachers believed that learning English should be prioritized and should be the primary language of the classroom. The use of the home language in the classroom depended on the language proficiency of the individual child and whether the child needed explicit instructions. Best practices dictate the strategic use of the home language in the preschool classroom as a tool to support learning because of the shared infrastructure across languages, as substantiated in the literature (Castro, 2014). Opportunities for DLLs to develop academic language proficiency are

missed when teachers focus on the home language only for social conversation and behavior management.

## Language Difference versus Language Delay or Disorder

These Head Start teachers also believed that a child who is exposed to more than one language could not be considered as having a language delay or disorder simply based on DLL status. This belief is encouraging because DLLs in K-12 are overrepresented in having some sort of language delay/disorder (Sullivan, 2011). Overrepresentation may arise from the lack of professional development teachers receive in linguistic differences, the paucity of practitioners who are themselves bilingual, and the lack of valid assessments. Therefore, having Head Start teachers express that learning two languages does not cause a delay or disorder is encouraging.

# IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This study advances the current research by providing a robust and nuanced understanding of Head Start teachers' beliefs surrounding the development and education of DLLs. The findings of this study have implications for training Head Start teachers who work with preschool-aged DLLs. Professional development should address the specific misconceptions revealed in this study and provide instruction on how teachers can support dual language development in the classroom. Based on our findings, the misconceptions that should be specifically addressed are those related to the definition of DLLs, the ease with which DLLs learn English, the use of English and other languages in the classroom, and the availability and use of appropriate assessments for DLLs. Teacher coaching and mentoring models can provide intensive, direct instruction to build teachers' existing and accurate knowledge of DLLs and facilitate a supportive environment in which to learn more about the development and instruction of DLLs. In order for this professional development to be effective, it should be ongoing and intensive so that teachers are able to process the information received and then incorporate what they have learned into their teaching practices (Wasik & Hindman, 2011). Through professional development, teachers will be able to more effectively teach DLLs in their classrooms, thus improving the education of an ever-growing population in the United States.

# REFERENCES

Administration for Children and Families. (2013). Report to Congress on dual language learners in Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Retrieved from
http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/dll_report_to_congress_executive_summary.pdf
Administration for Children and Families. (2016a). Head Start program performance standards. Retrieved from
https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/hspps-appendix.pdf
Administration for Children and Families. (2016b). Head Start program facts: Fiscal year 2016. Retrieved from
https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/article/head-start-program-facts-fiscal-year-2016

Castro, D. C. (2014). The development and early care and education of dual language learners: Examining the state of knowledge. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 29,* 693-698. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2014.08.003

Flores, B. B., & Smith, H. L. (2009). Teachers' characteristics and attitudinal beliefs about linguistic and cultural diversity. *Bilingual Research Journal: The Journal of the National Association for Bilingual Education*, *31*, 323-358. doi: 10.1080/15235880802640789

Genesee, F. (2016). North America: Rethinking early childhood education for English language learners: The role of language. In V. A. Murphy & M. Evangelou (Eds.), *Early childhood education in English for speakers of other languages.* (pp. 21-42). London: British Council.

Hill, C. E., Thompson, B. J., & William, E. N. (1997). A guide to conducting consensual qualitative research. *The Counseling Psychologist, 25,* 517-572. doi: 10.1177/0011000097254001

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine. (2017). *Consensus Study Report: Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English.* Washington, DC:  Ruby Takanishi & Suzanne Le Menestrel.

Pettit, S. K. (2011). Teachers' beliefs about English language learners in the mainstream classroom: A review of the literature. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, *5,* 123-147. doi: 10.1080/19313152.2011.594357

Sullivan, A. L. (2011). Disproportionality in special education identification and placement of English language learners. *Exceptional Children, 77,* 317-334. doi: 10.1177/001440291107700304

U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. (2016). *A first look: Key data highlights on equity and opportunity gaps in our nation's public schools. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf*

Wasik, B. A., & Hindman, A. H. (2011). Improving vocabulary and pre-literacy skills of at-risk preschoolers through teacher professional development. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 103,* 455-469. doi: 10.1037/a0023067