

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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### Teacher Beliefs Regarding Dual Language Learners in Head Start

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Knowing Head Start teachers' existing beliefs can help to tailor the professional development they receive on topics surrounding dual language learners (DLLs) development and best practices. Teachers who have access to accurate information that strengthens best practices and dispels their misconceptions related to 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 were interviewed on their beliefs regarding DLLs, their development, and instructional practices for DLLs. Modified consensual qualitative analysis was completed as an inductive, multi-step analysis process to summarize the beliefs of the participating teachers. Six major themes emerged. 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:* teacher beliefs, Head Start, dual language learners, Latino, professional development

## INTRODUCTION

Head Start programs and their delegates are currently experiencing increases in the number of dual language learners (DLLs) they serve. In fact, DLLs now make up 29% of children enrolled in Head Start (ACF, 2013). DLLs are defined as “children 0-5 years of age who are exposed to and learning through two distinct languages during a critical period of development” (Castro, Garcia, & Markos, 2013, p. 2). Despite this straightforward definition, it must be noted that the DLL population is heterogeneous. There are a wide range of languages and cultural groups that make up this population, as well as great variation in children’s exposure to their two languages and their language skills across both languages (CECER-DLL, 2011a). Moreover, many children from DLL backgrounds come from lower income homes (Grantmakers for Education, 2013). Thus, Head Start programs and teachers are faced with addressing the unique language backgrounds, the disproportionate low-income status, and the educational needs of this growing population of DLLs. Because learning two languages impacts children’s language, literacy, socioemotional and cognitive development in unique ways, Head Start programs must be adequately prepared to foster high-quality educational environments for DLLs (Castro, Espinosa, & Páez, 2011). Accordingly, 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. Furthermore, Head Start teachers are expected to use evidence-based teaching practices and strategies that focus on the development of DLLs’ home language and English language skills (ACF, 2016b). 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 influence the supports teachers choose to provide to DLLs in the classroom (Pettit, 2011). Research clearly 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; Yoon, 2008).

This study draws from the work of culturally relevant pedagogy, where teachers are responsible for assisting children to become academically strong while maintaining beliefs and classroom practices that are culturally competent (Ladson-Billings, 1995). 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. This study identifies Head Start teacher beliefs towards DLLs and determines if these beliefs align with the existing literature on best practices and the current knowledge base about dual language development. 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. There is a paucity of research focused on the beliefs of preschool teachers, specifically, regarding DLLs; therefore, the review of literature that follows focuses on the beliefs identified among K-12 teachers.

## TEACHERS’ BELIEFS REGARDING DLLs

Research conducted in grades K through 12 has indicated that DLLs’ experiences in the classroom are relatively dependent on teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and practices towards culture and language

abilities (Pettit, 2011). Many teachers have positive beliefs about DLLs, specifically regarding children's willingness and determination to learn (Gandara et al., 2005). Teachers with positive attitudes tend to focus on what they could do to improve DLL children's learning (Gandara et al., 2005). In contrast, some teachers have negative attitudes towards this population. In a survey of 422 K-12 teachers, an overwhelming 70% were not interested in having DLLs in their classroom, and 14% outright objected to having DLLs placed in their classrooms (Walker et al., 2004). In addition, when Walker and colleagues interviewed teachers about these beliefs, some overtly stated that their main responsibility was to the "majority" children in their classrooms as opposed to the minority DLL children. For example, one teacher stated, "I feel my other students [not DLLs] are more important to teach to because they are the majority" (Walker et al., 2004, p. 146). Attitudes such as these would invariably affect the interactions teachers have with DLL children. It may be that teachers who hold negative beliefs about DLLs do not have updated knowledge about DLLs or suitable professional development opportunities necessary to better serve DLLs (Pettit, 2011; Vasquez-Montilla et al., 2014). In fact, most teachers in elementary mainstream classrooms lack the basic foundational knowledge regarding the development of DLLs, despite the fact that as many as 88% teach DLLs (Karabenick & Noda, 2004). Moreover, Walker and colleagues (2004) found that 87% of K-12 teachers (n=288) did not receive any training or professional development about DLLs. Consequently, many of these teachers felt unprepared when it came to instructing DLLs (Lopez, 2011; Walker, 2004), which added to teachers' negative feelings towards this population. Given this lack of knowledge and professional development, teachers often hold several misconceptions about DLL populations and their development.

### MISCONCEPTIONS REGARDING DLLs

There are many topics surrounding the development of DLLs about which teachers tend to have misconceptions. Three of these common topics are highlighted in the current study: (a) the use of children's home language and English language acquisition; (b) the time required to learn a second language; and, (c) distinctions between DLL status and language disabilities.

First, some teachers have misconceptions regarding the use of DLL children's home language and English language acquisition. Specifically, teachers may believe that the use of a language other than English at home and/or in the classroom will impede DLLs' English language development. The idea that children's home language somehow hinders the acquisition of English is still prevalent (Pettit, 2011; Min Shim, 2014; Reeves, 2006), despite the breadth of research strongly disproving this claim (The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, 2017). In fact, it is well-known that the process of learning two languages does not hinder or confuse DLLs' language development in English if there is high-quality and strategic exposure to both languages (Barnett, Yarosz, Thomas, Jung, & Blanco, 2007; Castro, 2014; Castro, Garcia, & Markos, 2013; Durán, Roseth, & Hoffman, 2010). Use of the home language may actually facilitate English language learning. Research with Spanish-speaking DLLs, for example, has shown that using Spanish in the classroom creates a foundation for developing language and literacy skills that can transfer to English (Cummins, 2000; Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2005). Despite the existing evidence base, Vasquez-Montilla and colleagues (2014) reported that 73% of teachers from varied grade levels believed that rapidly learning English takes precedence over supporting DLLs' home language even if that means that children lose their ability to speak their home language in the long run.

A second topic of DLLs' development that tends to lead to misconceptions among teachers is the time it requires to learn a second language. K-12 teachers frequently believe that DLLs will acquire English fluency within a year and believe this is best accomplished when DLLs are prohibited from speaking their home language (Walker et al., 2004). There is an informal belief that learning English is quick and effortless and that proficiency can be gained with little help simply through natural exposure to the target language (Genessee, 2016). Conversely, research suggests that it can take anywhere from 5 to 7 years for children to learn academic language in English (Cummins, 1981, 2000; Freeman et al., 2005; The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, 2017).

The third topic surrounding DLLs' development for which teachers tend to have misconceptions is the concept of language difference versus language disability. Language disability or disorder is a significant disparity in language skills from what is typically expected for a child's age, whereas a language difference is a "language style that deviates in some way from standard usage of the mainstream culture" (Paul, 2007, p.166). For example, children from Spanish-speaking backgrounds may not pronounce the sounds of English similar to a native English speaker; yet, this difference in pronunciation would never be classified as a speech sound disorder for which speech-language intervention would be warranted (Gildersleeve-Neumann, Kester, Davis, & Pena, 2008; Goldstein, Fabiano, & Washington, 2005). Language differences are expected for children learning two or more languages; they are not, however, indications of a language disability. Yet, educators' difficulty in distinguishing language differences from disability, especially when DLLs and children with a disability perform poorly on tasks that have high language demands in English, make DLLs vulnerable to over referral to special education (Gildersleeve-Neumann et al., 2008; Sullivan, 2011). According to Sullivan (2011), DLLs in the United States are increasingly overrepresented in special education, being 30% more likely to be identified as having a speech or language impairment than their monolingual peers.

## BEST PRACTICES FOR DLLs

To mitigate these misconceptions, teachers should have a well-informed understanding of DLLs' language development from a bilingual perspective as well as an understanding of how language and culture inform pedagogy (Jong, Harper, & Coady, 2013). Because the purpose of the study is to determine if Head Start teachers' beliefs align with current best practices for DLLs, the following section reviews two of these practices related to supporting DLLs' language and culture: using culturally- and linguistically-relevant classroom strategies and valuing DLLs' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

### Culturally- and Linguistically-relevant Strategies

Best practices for DLLs include systematically using culturally- and linguistically-relevant strategies during instruction. These include presenting culturally- and linguistically-relevant content through storybooks and materials with cultural themes that are familiar to DLL children to activate their prior knowledge and facilitate their comprehension and vocabulary development (Conrad, Gong, Sipp, & Wright, 2004). The use of culturally- and linguistically-relevant content can enhance DLLs' engagement and perception of their educational experience. For example,

Naqvi, McKeough, Thorne, and Pfitscher (2013) found that when kindergarten teachers explicitly focused on cultural and linguistic aspects of books, the children in their classroom saw the value of reading and the value of their first language as being a source of capital within the classroom. Fortunately, teachers are not generally resistant to including culturally- and linguistically-relevant materials in their classrooms. For example, Sawyer et al. (2016), one of the few studies that has focused on the beliefs of preschool teachers of DLLs specifically, found that most preschool teachers agreed that children benefit from learning information about other languages and cultures. Thus, these strategies should be implemented in classrooms with DLLs while taking into account their English proficiency and supporting the continued use of the home language. However, it has been found that preschool teachers infrequently use the home language during classroom instruction even when they speak the language of the DLLs in their classrooms (Sawyer et al., 2017; Sawyer et al., 2016). Identifying teachers' beliefs around language use in the classroom will be helpful in understanding why this is the case.

### Valuing DLLs' Linguistic and Cultural Background

The role of teachers working with DLLs is not simple; teachers need not only help children acquire English and academic content but they also need to value and respect the diversity and individuality that each child brings to the classroom (Barnett et al. 2007). Teachers should view DLLs' cultural and linguistic background as an asset that can enrich instruction (Wheeler, 2005). Research has shown that preschool-age DLLs whose language and culture are valued in their classrooms have higher self-esteem and motivation to succeed in the classroom (Cummins, 2000).

Not only has there been a substantial amount of research surrounding the topic of valuing and supporting DLLs' home language (The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, 2017), but professional groups have also issued position statements on this topic. The Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (2010) urges teachers to support and respect children's home language through responsive practices. In addition, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) partnered with the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists to issue a joint position statement regarding responsive and supportive programs for serving young DLLs. The overarching theme addressed in this position statement was the need to have an integrated and well-organized system of early care and education that supports the learning and development of all children regardless of poverty, home language, and disability.

### Limitations of Current Research

Despite the advances made by existing research in examining teacher beliefs, attitudes, and practices, there are several concerns that must be addressed to better support Head Start teachers of DLLs. What appears to be lacking in the extant literature is the use of robust methods that provide an in-depth understanding of teacher beliefs. Most of the existing research on teachers' beliefs about DLLs has relied on data from surveys and questionnaires almost exclusively (Flores & Smith, 2009; Gandara et al., 2005; Karabenick et al., 2004; Pettit, 2011; Sawyer et al., 2016; Vasquez-Montilla et al., 2014). Surveys and questionnaires are useful as a starting point to understanding beliefs, attitudes, and practices but are not sufficient as they generally do not allow

teachers to explain or expand upon their beliefs (Pettit, 2011). Interviewing teachers is a more robust method for gathering in-depth information on teachers' perspectives towards DLLs. One study to date completed interviews with teachers on the topic of DLLs. Walker and colleagues (2005) interviewed 6 of the 422 participants who were surveyed in their study, which allowed a closer look at the attitudes held by a small number of teachers of DLLs.

In addition, much of the research on teacher beliefs regarding DLLs has included a combination of teachers across grade levels, such as elementary, middle school, and high school (Karabenick & Noda, 2004; Min Shim, 2014; Vasquez-Montilla et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2005) and little to no research on preschool teachers. Grade-level differences in the instructional experience and needs of children and teachers in elementary grades and beyond prevent generalization of these findings to preschool populations. It is reasonable to assume that teachers in preschool hold different beliefs than their colleagues working with DLLs in other grades. This assumption is supported by research that has found a difference in attitudes towards DLLs when elementary and high school teachers are compared (Gandara et al., 2005; Karabenick et al., 2004). Therefore, the beliefs of preschool teachers should be addressed independently of teachers of other grade levels.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The current study's purpose was to focus on Head Start teachers working with DLLs to better understand their beliefs regarding dual language development and instruction of DLLs. This study also sought to determine whether Head Start teachers' beliefs align with existing literature on culturally- and linguistically-relevant best practices. We focused on Head Start specifically because 29% of children enrolled in Head Start are DLLs (ACF, 2016), whereas other preschool programs only report that 12.6% of the children in their classrooms are DLLs (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Given the substantial representation of DLLs in Head Start, Head Start teachers must be prepared to instruct DLLs with a well-informed background on DLL development and best practices for their learning. Knowing Head Start teachers' existing beliefs can help to tailor the professional development they receive on these topics. Teachers who have access to accurate information that strengthens best practices and dispels their misconceptions related to DLLs may be better equipped to provide a quality preschool experience to DLLs in their classrooms. Thus, implications and recommendations for professional development are tailored to Head Start teachers.

## METHOD

### Participants

Twenty-three female teachers working in preschool centers in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and Florida participated. All preschool centers were Head Start grantees or delegates and served children from low-income backgrounds, many of whom were DLLs of Latino/a, African, and/or Asian heritage. As reported by teachers on a standard demographic survey, the racial and ethnic distribution of teachers was: 43% Latina, 39% White, 9% African-American, and 8% Multiracial. The majority of teachers ( $n = 17$ ) had a bachelor's degree. The remainder had an

associate degree ( $n = 4$ ), master's degree ( $n = 1$ ), or high school diploma ( $n = 1$ ). Teachers' mean years of experience was 7.6 years teaching children from any background in preschool and 9.9 years teaching DLLs specifically in any grade. Three (25%) teachers were certified in Bilingual Education. Teachers reported that they had received varied amounts of professional development regarding DLLs, ranging from none ( $n = 4$ ), minimal ( $n = 10$ ), moderate ( $n = 3$ ), to a great deal ( $n = 6$ ). Twelve teachers (52%) reported that they spoke Spanish well or very well. Nine teachers (39%) described a wide range of proficiency in one or more of the following languages: Mandarin, French, Japanese, Italian, Arabic, German, Polish, Portuguese, American Sign Language, Korean, and Quechua.

## Procedure

Teachers were administered a questionnaire that included 61 multi-part questions targeting: teacher language and cultural background, teacher experience and training, teacher practices and language use with DLLs, teacher beliefs about dual language development and DLLs' learning, and classroom characteristics. Twenty-three of the questions specific to their understanding of DLLs, dual language development, DLLs' educational needs, and classroom practices served as the basis of discussion for examining teachers' beliefs. Teachers were interviewed about their responses using 10 probe questions that corresponded to these topic areas. For example, teachers first responded to a question on the questionnaire which asked them to rate their level of agreement with the statement "use of DLLs' home language in the classroom helps them to learn English" using the following scale: *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree*, *strongly agree*. Once teachers selected an answer, they were then interviewed about their response with a probe question, "what made you select your answer?" An additional example was to ask teachers to rate their level of agreement with the statement, "you or another adult do specific activities to develop the native languages of DLLs." This was followed by the probe, "please describe the activities you were thinking of."

Educational professionals who held a master's degree or higher administered the interviews. The interviews were conducted in-person with teachers in their preferred language, English ( $n = 19$ ) or Spanish ( $n = 4$ ), at the teachers' preschool. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## Analysis

Modified consensual qualitative analysis was completed as an inductive, multi-step analysis process to summarize the beliefs of the participating teachers (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). Because teachers revealed their beliefs regarding DLLs throughout the interview, all interview content was analyzed. The first two authors first read all of the interview transcripts independently in their entirety to identify an initial list of discrete codes that represented teachers' beliefs related to DLLs. The list was then refined via discussion to yield 22 non-overlapping codes. Specific code definitions were written. Next, these authors coded and compared 4 randomly-selected interviews to further refine code definitions. The 20 remaining transcripts were divided between the two authors for coding. Two authors coded each transcript, and differences were discussed and resolved by consensus. Once coding was complete for all transcripts, the frequency of codes and

their associated excerpts were examined to determine global themes. Coding and analysis were facilitated by Dedoose (Sociocultural Research Consultants, 2012).

## Findings

Six major themes emerged regarding the beliefs teachers held towards DLLs, dual language development, and DLLs' instructional practices. 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. Each theme is discussed below.

### Definition of DLL

The first theme centers on teachers' beliefs regarding how a dual language learner should be defined. Only two teachers recognized that the term "dual language learner" represents children from a wide range of language backgrounds and proficiencies. These teachers included in their definitions of DLLs both children who learn English as a second language *and* children who learn English at the same time as another language. The remaining teachers had a narrow definition of who qualified as DLLs. Most often, teachers (13/23) specified that DLLs were children who had no English exposure at home and demonstrated minimal English skills in the classroom. For example, one teacher explained that a DLL is "someone who is not confident in English and has very limited English skills, and like can't do...the classroom work on the same level as their peers because of their language skills." Similar to this teacher, many teachers did not categorize children who speak English well while also receiving regular input in another language at home as DLLs. A few teachers (2/23) believed that children had to be proficient speakers of English *and* the home language to be considered DLLs. In sum, the definitions provided by teachers as a group revealed inconsistency in the characteristics that would define children as dual language learners.

### Value of DLLs' Home Culture and Language

The second theme related to teachers' belief that the home culture and language of DLLs were valued in their classrooms. All but one teacher provided one or more examples of ways in which children's home cultures were referenced in classroom materials and activities. Examples included books with multicultural themes or characters (17/23 teachers), celebration of diverse holidays (e.g., Chinese New Year; 9/23 teachers), show-and-tell activities highlighting home cultures (7/23 teachers), exposure to ethnic foods (4/23 teachers), use of teaching materials that reflected other cultures (e.g., puzzles; 5/23 teachers), ethnic music and dance (2/23 teachers), and classroom labels written in languages other than English (1/23 teachers). Most teachers reported that these activities were important to form supportive relationships with the children and to help children and families feel comfortable in preschool. One teacher also felt that gathering information on children's home culture informed her teaching: "What I did was I read a lot of information about their countries and so I can understand how they treat the kids, how they are being raised over here... because some behaviors in the classroom are different... [it] is just because of the culture." Despite the

support for using culturally-relevant materials, the vast majority of teachers did not explicitly reference use of other culturally-responsive instructional practices in their classrooms.

Most teachers (17/23) also believed that children's home language was important and should be supported. While explaining their support of the home language, some teachers (10/23) stated that home language loss is a detriment to children. One teacher explained:

even if we want the students to learn English well, we still want to respect their home language and value it because it's such an important skill nowadays, especially, and you want them to first of all, not lose that ability, not be ashamed and think, "Oh, that- at home you could speak that language but day-to-day life? No..., you can't use that." Just want to let them know that it's a valid, very useful skill. That they should be using it [the home language] and be proud of it.

As noted in the quotation above, teachers provided varied reasons why they felt that home language loss would be problematic for DLLs. These reasons included weakening the bonds children felt towards their family and culture and/or reducing children's future advantages as speakers of two languages. Thus, more than half of teachers (15/23) reported that they encouraged children's parents to continue to speak to their children in the home language.

### Ease of Learning English

The third theme that emerged was specific to teachers' beliefs regarding how DLLs learn English. Teachers generally believed that learning English was easy for DLLs as long as they received frequent and consistent English exposure. Only two teachers stated that DLLs required specific language supports from classroom adults to acquire strong English skills. In contrast, more than half of teachers (12/23) indicated that DLLs simply needed to hear English regularly in the classroom and/or home to become proficient speakers. Relatedly, seven of these teachers believed that DLLs could successfully learn English in less than a year. One teacher discussed why she thought it was easy for DLLs to learn English:

...their brain is empty. You know what I mean? There's like a sponge. And they, whatever they take off, whatever they like. Ya know? They learn fast... it's no barriers for them to learn any language or anything that they want to learn, there's no barriers for that.

The belief that children soak up new languages like a sponge was shared by several teachers. However, four teachers thought that that DLLs needed more than a year to acquire English while three teachers felt the timeline for English acquisition varied by child due to a variety of factors. One teacher explained her perspective:

I think there's potential to catch up to English-only peers in less than a year but in other cases, it kind of depends on age and, like, how far advanced other kids are and how much exposure to English they've had in the past. There's a bunch of different factors that can go into that.

As alluded to in this excerpt, the most common factor that teachers felt influenced the speed of English acquisition was the use of English in the home. DLLs who heard English in the home

would acquire English more quickly. Relatedly, some teachers (5/23) reported that they gave parents the suggestion to speak English to their children in addition to the home language.

### Primary Classroom Language

The fourth theme that emerged was teachers' belief that English should be the primary language of the classroom. Fourteen teachers believed in prioritizing English over DLLs' home language(s) in the classroom, which may have been related to the previous theme (i.e., increased English exposure would lead to faster English acquisition). Many teachers provided a rationale to support this belief. Several teachers (6/23) felt that using primarily English in preschool would better prepare children to enter English-only classrooms in kindergarten. One teacher explained:

I'm looking at the further picture of if they don't get it, what's gonna happen to them? You know, most of the schools in the area are pretty much English-speaking teachers, even though that yes, there are bilingual schools and bilingual teachers, but it doesn't mean they're [children] always gonna get that.

In addition, two teachers specified that English should be prioritized because it is the language of the United States. Four teachers believed that the use of DLLs' home language in the classroom was disadvantageous for English language learning or, at a minimum, had no impact on learning English. Regardless of their rationale (or lack thereof), teachers generally believed that using mostly or all English during classroom instruction was the preferred approach.

### Home Language Use in the Classroom

The fifth theme revealed by teachers' responses related to when and why DLLs' home language should be used in the classroom. Despite the general emphasis on English exposure, all teachers expressed the belief that use of children's home language was beneficial in the classroom at times. Most often, teachers (16/23) felt the home language should be used to facilitate children's understanding of classroom directions when English was not effective. This belief was held by teachers who were monolingual English speakers as well as those who spoke the language(s) of the DLLs in their classrooms. For example, one teacher stated, "I kinda do try really hard to start out with English, but I always make sure that [if] they really don't get it, then okay, then I will use the home language." Similar to this teacher, many teachers reported speaking in English first, and then following up with a translation in the home language. Another teacher described her approach:

I always start in English, and I usually have pictures or manipulatives for them to see, so there's the visual aspect. And if there's any clarification necessary, then I go into Mandarin. Or, if they speak to me in Mandarin, maybe to get more information from them, then I speak to them in Mandarin. So that when I'm teaching, I teach in English. We wanna immerse them.

Teachers promoted the use of the home language for behavior management, in part, because some believed that the use of the home language facilitated children's attention to tasks. The home language was thought to be linked to compliance with authority. For example:

I always use English and Spanish when I'm getting their attention and when I'm organizing them, like in transition to lunch or outside or whatever. I think they have a big respect for the language... I get their attention faster when I talk in Spanish... like they really listen. I don't know if it reminds them of home or what it is, but when I speak Spanish it's like... okay she means business.

More than half of teachers (12/23) also believed that use of DLLs' home languages strengthened children's acquisition of instructional content and vocabulary. Four of these teachers also explicitly stated that use of the home language benefited English language acquisition. The academic targets that teachers reportedly reinforced in the home language were colors, letters, and numbers or simple, high-frequency vocabulary. One teacher provided the following example: "I do some things in Spanish during the lesson but it's – I mean, I count, maybe I just go over the days of the week, you know, the numbers, the colors, I might get them a new word like, 'leche, what is leche?'" Teachers infrequently reported use of DLLs' home languages to reinforce the academic content delivered during more complex lessons and did not discuss providing entire lessons in the home language.

In addition, teachers believed in using the home language(s) in other ways in the classroom. The vast majority of teachers (20/23) reported that DLLs were read to in their home language(s) during individual or small group literacy activities. Use of the home language was also reported for social conversations with adults, such as those taking place during classroom greetings and snack time (6/23 teachers), as well as for singing classroom songs (7/23 teachers). Teachers (8/23) also felt that DLLs would naturally use the home language when interacting with peers who also spoke that language. Furthermore, nine teachers were pleased that volunteers visiting the classroom would often use DLLs' home language(s).

Importantly, the majority of teachers (16/23) reported that their decision for use of the home language was predominantly based on DLLs' English language proficiency. DLLs who spoke English well were not thought to need the support of their home language in the classroom. DLLs who spoke less English, however, were believed to benefit from the use of the home language. One teacher described her decision regarding home language use for instruction:

If I'm working in a small group on any kind of activity a math activity, a science activity, if there are children in my group that are only speaking a little bit of English then I'm gonna try to throw some Spanish in there to help them understand a little better and to see if they're getting an understanding. But if I have a group that speak more English then I just stick with the English.

Related to home language use, some teachers also decided to use DLLs' home language(s) to help children feel comfortable in the classroom environment. One teacher said:

So, it's like, you know, if, if you can't give them a little bit of their own language to make them feel secure, they really, what are they gonna learn? Because you're not making them feel comfortable. You're not making them feel welcome, to say, 'okay, yes we do speak English, but I can also tell you in Spanish to do that.'

## Language Differences Versus Language Delay Or Disorder

The final theme was specific to how teachers believed children's status as dual language learners converged with language delays or disorders and the process of differentiating between language difference and disorder. Most teachers (19/23) believed that DLLs were not at a greater risk for language and/or learning disabilities than children who only spoke one language. One teacher explained, "having a predominant first language and learning a second language doesn't categorize you as having a disability... It doesn't mean that you have a disability because you're learning the English language". Two teachers who held this belief also believed learning two languages to be an advantage to DLLs' cognitive and language development.

However, three teachers believed that DLLs were at a greater risk of being misidentified for language and learning challenges as compared to their monolingual peers: "they are in risk if they don't have someone who is bilingual to understand what is going on." Relatedly, three teachers felt that differentiating delay or disorder from the normal processes of dual language development was difficult and required bilingual assessors. One teacher explained, "it's very difficult to assess children's progress if you can't do it in a language that they're comfortable with, and so I think for assessment purposes there's at least a need for more translators and people who are capable of doing these assessments in the children's home languages." Yet, this belief was not widely reported.

## DISCUSSION

The present study provides in-depth information on Head Start teachers' beliefs towards children from dual language learning backgrounds to address the lack of previous attention paid to preschool teachers working with DLLs. 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. Similar to the findings of Sawyer et al. (2016), teachers held positive beliefs about bilingualism, and they believed that families should speak their heritage language at home. Preschool teachers who are responsive to children's culture and language have been shown to positively impact children's academic outcomes in the area of school readiness, including language, mathematics, and literacy (Barnett et al, 2007; The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, 2017). Teachers' perception 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).

## 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. According to Genesee (2016), teachers expect young children to acquire native-like English proficiency effortlessly and largely without instruction. It can be assumed that preschool teachers that hold this belief 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* (Castro, Garcia, & Markos, 2013; Cummins 1981; 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 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. This approach is contrary to what research says about the benefits of using children's home language to learn a second language (López, 2012; Paéz, Tabors, & López, 2007). Therefore, 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 (Bunch, 2013; Castro, 2014; Winsler, et al., 2014; Zepeda, Castro, & Cronin, 2011).

Opportunities for DLLs to develop academic language proficiency are missed when teachers focus on the home language only for social conversation and behavior management.

Again, this finding suggests the importance of teachers possessing an understanding of how language is acquired in preschool DLLs through high-quality professional development. Explicit language and literacy instructional strategies in DLLs' home language are recommended to strengthen their acquisition of English and academic skills (CECER-DLL, 2011b). Some examples of strategies to explicitly teach language and literacy instruction in the home language include: using visual cues and props, teaching content specific vocabulary instruction, book reading in the home language, and teaching in small groups (Buysse, Castro, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2010; Goldenberg, 2008). In addition, providing children with ample opportunities to use language through language-focused activities that include sustained conversations, open-ended questioning, and rich, complex vocabulary are all ways in which to foster language and literacy skills in both English and children's home language(s) (Wasik & Hindman, 2011b).

### 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. Similarly, Sawyer and colleagues (2016) found that preschool teachers believed DLLs were not more likely than their peers to need special education. This belief is encouraging because DLLs in K-12 are overrepresented in having some sort of language delay/disorder (Abedi, 2006; Sullivan, 2011). This overrepresentation relates to the lack of knowledge regarding cultural and linguistic differences and not the presence of a disability (Abedi, 2006). 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. This is particularly important because assessment results can influence teachers' beliefs about DLLs' abilities and therefore, the type and quality of instruction that is afforded them (Spinellie, 2008). Therefore, having Head Start teachers express that learning two languages does not cause a delay or disorder is encouraging. However, it is clear that Head Start teachers also need access to appropriate assessments that account for DLLs' abilities in both languages and help to differentiate difference from delay/disorder.

### LIMITATIONS

Despite the value that this study adds to understanding the perspectives of Head Start teachers of DLLs, a few limitations of the current study require mention. These limitations provide avenues for future research on this topic. First, this study had a fairly small sample size, and all participants resided in the eastern United States. As a result, the themes revealed may be specific to particular populations of teachers working with particular populations of DLLs. Thus, future studies should consider examining the beliefs of larger groups of Head Start teachers from different geographic areas and DLL populations. Second, there were no direct observations conducted with teachers in this study, which would have allowed for the consideration of how teachers' beliefs aligned with their observed classroom practices. Although prior research suggests that teachers' beliefs are connected to the educational experience of children in their classrooms, it was not possible to

examine this link with the use of qualitative interviews alone. Thus, a study that includes simultaneous observations and interviews should be conducted in order to continue to inform issues of professional development for educating DLLs.

## 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, 2011a). 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.

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