

## RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

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### Four Classrooms Model How Teachers Use Spanish in Head Start

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National Head Start policy mandates incorporating Dual Language Learner (DLL) children's home language in classroom instruction. It is less clear, however, how this is actually implemented in early childhood classrooms. In four local Head Start centers in a predominantly Spanish-speaking DLL county, classroom observations helped shed light on when the home language of Spanish was used and how it may have contributed to DLL children's school readiness skills. The observations revealed that Spanish was used to promote certain academic as well as planning and recall skills; to provide emotional caregiving; and to communicate with parents as well as during daily health routines. Thus, in line with Head Start's "whole child" model, Spanish was used for academic, socio-emotional, and health development as well as to strengthen the home-school partnership.

*Keywords:* DLLs, Head Start, Spanish instruction

The population of Dual Language Learner (DLL) children in the U.S. – young children who are learning more than one language simultaneously, their home language and English (Espinosa, 2013) – is growing rapidly. Among younger children in Head Start and Early Head Start, DLLs now represent over a third of all participants, the vast majority of who come from Spanish-speaking homes (U.S. DHHS, 2014). In order to accommodate these children, national Head Start mandates pertaining to DLL children stipulate that programs must: 1) support children in the acquisition of their home language and English; 2) provide comprehensive Head Start services to families in culturally appropriate and respectful ways; and 3) improve outreach and increase enrollment and quality of services to DLL children and their families (U.S. DHHS, 2008).

Despite these lofty and commendable goals, a number of practical challenges arise for ECE educators who work with DLLs, especially with regard to teaching and practice (U.S. DHHS, 2008; Zepeda, Castro, & Cronin, 2011). Chief among these concerns is how to best promote DLL children's language acquisition in their home language and English. Importantly,

little research to date has been able to determine exactly how teachers and staff use children's home language in the classroom.

## PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of the present study was thus to explore how Spanish was supported day-to-day in Head Start classrooms. In particular, from observations in four purposely-sampled Head Start classrooms, I explored how Spanish was used in these Head Start settings, focusing on the ways Spanish may have contributed to DLL children's school readiness skills around physical, cognitive, socio-emotional development necessary for children's success in school (U.S. DHHS, Head Start Approach to School Readiness, 2011).

The local Head Start umbrella agency in this study was located in a large, urban county in the southwestern U.S., and the vast majority of participating children were Latino. The Executive Director and the Educational Director of the local Head Start agency recommended observing four specific sites throughout the county in order to observe a range of possible Spanish language classroom interactions between teachers and children. The specific recommended sites each had a substantial population of enrolled Spanish-speaking DLL children, with their families speaking English to varying degrees.

A total of 4-5 days (16-20 hours) was spent observing each classroom for a total of seventeen days observing across the four classrooms and seventy hours of detailed field notes. The observations focused on when and how teachers used Spanish for whole class instruction, small group and one-on-one instruction, emotional caregiving, play, classroom directions, and interactions with parents, as well as how children responded to such use.

## KEY FINDINGS

From the observed daily use of Spanish coupled with discussions with the teachers and center directors, one clear, overarching theme emerged: Spanish was used to promote English language skills throughout the school readiness domains central to Head Start's "whole child" model – cognitive development, socio-emotional development, health, and family functioning. Embedded throughout each of the school readiness domains, which are central to the "whole child" model, was this focus on incorporating Spanish to help promote English language skills. I detail below how Spanish was used in each domain.

### Cognitive Development

1) *Academic language and literacy activities.* All of the large group language and literacy activities like story time and songs as part of formal instruction were exclusively in English with then direct translation into Spanish. Such explicit translation provided Spanish-speaking DLL children with more opportunities to make connections to the learning material by helping them to overcome limits with English vocabulary. It also helped increase DLL children's overall conceptual understanding of the material independent of the language in which it occurred.

2) *Other academic skills.* During instruction in other academic domains, however, I observed teachers and children using English almost exclusively with little Spanish. This was particularly the case whenever I observed instruction related to letter names and sounds. During instruction in these other academic domains, teachers asked questions and prompted the children in English, and the children responded in English.

3) *Executive function skills.* An important component of the curriculum at the local Head Start umbrella agency was the executive function skills of planning and recall, particularly during center time. I observed that teachers often asked children in one language where they planned to work during center time and then translated into the other. Most children answered in English, but a few children who felt more comfortable using Spanish answered in Spanish or in a mixture of both languages. Similarly, when center time was over, teachers conducted recall activities in both languages.

## Daily Routines

The focus on the English language skills was not just limited to academic activities, as Spanish was also used regularly throughout the daily routine to help the class transition. Spanish was also used daily in all the classrooms to help support the home language during the morning routine on the carpet. During this time the teacher sang a good morning song in both English and Spanish and provided an overview of the day in both languages, including reviewing the calendar.

## Socio-emotional Development

The language interactions emphasizing socio-emotional skills, such as when teachers provided children with emotional caregiving, were often more casual in nature as they were not part of formal classroom activities. I observed teachers first used Spanish and then loosely translated into or continued speaking in English. Thus, there were fewer direct translations from one language to another and more a conveyance of general meaning. Further, these interactions modeled for the children how to switch back and forth between languages while helping to build English vocabulary.

## Health Routines

1) *Mealtimes.* Mealtimes of breakfast and lunch were an essential part of the children's day. Given the many different types of food that the children encountered and Head Start's specific curricular focus on healthy foods, several of the language interactions that occurred during mealtimes had to do with the food itself and directly translating key vocabulary from one language to another. Yet, other times during the meals, the language interactions consisted more of casual small talk, and were similar in scope to when teachers provided emotional caregiving to children. In these cases the teacher said something in Spanish and then loosely translated into or continued speaking in English to convey general meaning.

2) *Teeth brushing.* Each child had their own toothbrush at the center that they used daily to brush their teeth after breakfast. During this time in the classrooms, I observed that the teachers often used Spanish when they began the activity with the class to help explain the routine. Once the introduction to the brushing routine was over, because teachers assisted children with teeth brushing one-on-one instead of in a group, I observed the teachers go back and forth between languages depending on the child they were assisting. Teeth brushing was therefore one of the rare activities in the classroom that teachers could specifically tailor their language choice with a child at the individual level. They spoke in English to children who were able to understand, and they spoke in Spanish to children who lacked proficiency with English and then directly translated for them.

## Family Functioning

The centers I observed made a special effort to engage parents. In each classroom, all communications and reminders to parents as well as classroom bulletin boards were in both English and Spanish, and teachers reported on children's progress to parents in both languages. The bilingualism promoted by these local Head Start centers helped foster a close parent-caregiver connection regarding the child, particularly because many of the parents did not speak English proficiently. Because the majority of the parents served by the local Head Start umbrella agency spoke only cursory English, they relied on the Spanish translations from the teachers for the bulk of their understanding. These translations not only helped teachers and parents communicate effectively, but they also simultaneously helped the parents learn key English vocabulary words.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study revealed that Spanish was used in classrooms to promote English language skills in accordance with Head Start's "whole child" model in the school readiness domains of cognitive, socio-emotional and health development, as well as family functioning. The constant incorporation of Spanish in each classroom across developmental domains seemed to help solidify DLL children's understanding of English. Therefore, classroom use of Spanish was quite deliberate in many Head Start activities, and it was tailored in ways that may promote important school readiness skills across multiple developmental domains for Spanish-speaking DLL children. By using Spanish to build English vocabulary and comprehension skills, it is possible the children at this local Head Start agency will be better prepared for kindergarten as language is one of the key building blocks of academic competence and particularly for DLL children.

The use of English for the majority of classroom academic activities highlights the effortful balance between providing adequate exposure and learning opportunities in English and fostering Spanish-speaking DLL children's home language. The difficulty ensuring this balance was expressed by many Head Start teachers nationwide as they reported struggling how to best promote DLL children's language acquisition, as well as how to best to support their transition out of the Head Start program (U.S. DHHS, 2008; Zepeda et al., 2011). Results from this study indicated that the teachers I observed navigated these same difficulties arguably with some success. Teachers used Spanish to promote English language across multiple developmental

domains in accordance with Head Start’s “whole child” model and to help nurture the home-school partnership, but they also used a great deal of English to adequately support children with the English language demands of school by helping them to overcome language barriers. Such a balance can hopefully be a model to other centers, particularly when they serve large numbers of Spanish-speaking DLLs, as programs know it is important to support the home language, but often struggle how to do so.

The results from this study have further possible significance for practice. The local Head Start umbrella agency in this study spent a considerable share of their annual budget hiring bilingual teachers. In cases where Head Start cannot hire an appropriate, highly-qualified bilingual teacher, it may behoove the program to teach the new hire key words and phrases that they can use with the DLL students in their class and pair them with an assistant who speaks the language. Hiring a monolingual English-speaking teacher, however, does not negate the importance of the teacher being able to communicate effectively with parents, which may require a deeper and more detailed knowledge of the home language. In this instance, an assistant teacher who speaks the home language can be particularly helpful. It is important that centers consider the language background of children in the community when making hiring decisions.

In sum, this study used observations to explore how Spanish was supported day-to-day in Head Start classrooms and how it may have possibly contributed to Spanish-speaking DLL children’s school readiness. The findings reveal that Spanish was quite deliberate in Head Start classrooms and was used to promote English language skills across multiple school readiness domains in line with Head Start’s “whole child” model of development. The constant incorporation of Spanish at each site across domains seemed to help solidify DLL children’s understanding of English in ways that may prepare them sufficiently for kindergarten in cognitive, health, and socio-emotional development.

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