

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Early Childhood Teachers' Use of Dual Language Digital Books

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This qualitative study investigated how dual language digital books are used by early childhood teachers working with primarily Alaska Native children and families. In particular, there was a desire to know how the teachers used the books in their classrooms and if the resources were used to foster early literacy and/or to help teach and preserve native languages. The research was situated in six preschool classrooms where the researcher observed the teachers using the books and conducted semi-structured interviews to triangulate the data. Using a qualitative approach to analysis, findings emerged that teachers used the books to introduce in a variety of group settings. Additionally, how they used the books appeared to be in direct response to their students and their needs. Implications for teachers, families, and administrators are shared.

Keywords: dual language books, early childhood teachers, Indigenous populations

Language extinction is a reality for many communities around the world and is particularly true for those in Alaska, where only 22% of Alaska Native peoples can speak their language (Olson & Alaska State Legislature, 2012). This massive loss of language is due in part to young children having few opportunities to use and become literate in their native languages. “We need to focus attention on changing the patterns of interaction and the message children receive about the value and status of their heritage languages” (Cummins, 2005, p. 590) for, “If little ones can learn the language, then the language will have a chance of surviving” (Rodriguez & Warrior, 2013).

Many people, including myself, have responded by embarking on projects that provide dual language materials in multiple languages. Our project was accomplished by collaborating with Unite for Literacy, an organization that provides an abundance of digital picture books to children, families, and teachers in over thirty languages, and talented Alaska Native partners, who helped translate and narrate the books. The project provides useful, accessible resources to local communities and sends the clear message that all languages are important.

While creating dual language digital children’s books with Unite for Literacy was intended to help revive and retain languages, the creation of books does not fully reflect the entirety of the contributions needed to perpetuate Alaska Native and other Indigenous languages.

What is truly needed is a collaboration between teachers, families, children, and communities who stress bilingualism as being a priority and teachers are in the unique position to create an environment where everyone works together to promote dual language practices.

STUDY DESCRIPTION

We focused on how the books are used by teachers with their students and families in six Head Start preschool classrooms that primarily serve Alaska Native children and families. We pursued these two research questions: How do teachers in an Alaskan community use dual language digital books in their classrooms? Do teachers use these resources to foster early literacy and/or to help teach and preserve native languages? These research questions were answered by conducting interviews and observations in a Tribal Head Start, which serves three to five-year old Alaska Native and American Indian children with a part-time program and six-week to five-year old Early Head Start children who attend a full day program. At the time of the study, the center did not promote a particular language, although the majority of Native families that speak a language other than English tend to speak Yup'ik.

The six teacher-participants had between one and twenty years of experience, varying levels of education, and were of different cultural backgrounds. Half were bilingual and the majority were women. Most participants had been introduced to the books on the Unite for Literacy website during a staff meeting, where the researcher demonstrated how to use the books, facilitated a conversation on how the books could be used, and solicited ideas about how they see language being emphasized within the school. The teachers also received a handout on how to access the primarily non-fiction books that support young readers through the use of audio buttons, which allow readers to hear narrations by native speakers. The books included predictable language, frequently used vocabulary words, and reinforced many beginning concepts with pictures that portray a rich diversity of peoples.

The observations occurred at a time convenient to the teacher. During the visits, the researcher observed the teachers formally and informally introduce the books using tablets and/or large projection screens. There was also variation in grouping strategies, with some working with the entire class, one with two to three children, and the majority with between six and ten children in a small group. Several also provided time for independent exploration. After the observations, teachers discussed the lesson. The interview included questions about how they used the dual language digital books, if using them changed their instructional practices, if they saw the children or their families using them, how they reinforced early literacy practices and home languages, and any pros or cons to using them.

The major findings were that the books were used to help introduce specific content and concepts, reinforce and teach early literacy concepts, and reinforce home languages.

RESULTS

Content/Concept-Specific Instruction. Frequently, teachers were observed using the books to introduce certain topics of inquiry or to reinforce concepts at their students' developmental levels. For example, Jeffrey, whose class was studying marine wildlife, pulled up the book, *Who is in the Ocean?* on the iPad and had his four and five-year-old students listen to it

in English and converse about the topic. This helped them access their prior knowledge and then introduced them to sea anemones and leopard sharks. He also paused to share information about the animals, elicit information from them, and reinforce strategies like making predictions and explaining phenomena.

Allison chose not to focus on a particular content area but instead to informally reinforce concepts to her two and three-year-old students as they arose, using the books during free choice time where she called children to her table and allowed them to pick a book on the iPad. The books were used as conversation starters, allowing her to make connections to skills they practiced in the classroom and to them personally.

Inclusion of Early Literacy Concepts. While teachers were observed using the books to introduce certain topics or to reinforce developmentally appropriate skills, the instruction always reinforced an early literacy concept as well. Jeffrey added phonics instruction when he modeled how to decode the word “fish,” and Allison helped her students make text-to-self connections when discussing if they liked cookies. Similar comprehension strategies were observed in other classrooms as well. When reading *Follow Your Feet* with the class using a large tablet, Tanisha prompted the children to think about what else they used their feet for; afterwards, as they explored books with partners, she continued to help them make personal connections, like when she asked them to consider an animal that looked similar but lived in Alaska. Teachers also emphasized new vocabulary. Julie did this using the book, *Who Loves Flowers?* when she introduced her students to what a gardener, florist, and botanist were by asking questions and modeling how they might figure them out.

Recognition and Reinforcement of Diverse Languages. While many teachers included vocabulary in their lessons, about half of them intentionally introduced vocabulary in a language other than English. For example, Mary started her whole group lesson by asking if anyone had heard another language. After the class identified a student with a Vietnamese mother and another with an Indigenous grandparent, Mary chose a book where she switched between English, Inupiaq, and Vietnamese. Another teacher, Amelia, introduced the word “cold” in Inupiaq using the book, *Is it Cold Outside?*, choosing a language that reflected her own background. Using hand motions, the children practiced it repeatedly.

The children’s connections and fascinations with the various languages seemed to have an impact on the teachers, inspiring them to further recognize or reinforce multiple languages. For example, after listening to the book in Inupiaq, several children asked Amelia to play the book in Spanish, which she did by changing the narration language on the SmartBoard, prompting the children to repeat the words in the new language. Responding to their excitement even further, Amelia extended the book exploration afterwards. The children were quick to respond, prompting the adults to press the Inupiaq buttons, shouting, “Do it again!”

In sum, the teachers used the dual language digital books to reinforce content and concepts, emphasize emergent literacy concepts, and recognize and reinforce multiple diverse languages. While in most cases the books did not fundamentally alter the teachers’ instruction, the teachers were responsive and intentional in how they used them to engage the children.

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

The main research questions in this study were how teachers use dual language digital books in their classrooms and if teachers use these resources to foster early literacy and/or to help teach and preserve native languages. Based on the observations of the six teachers, we found that one-third of the teachers used the books to introduce certain topics of inquiry or to reinforce popular concepts appropriate to their students' developmental levels. Two-thirds of the teachers used the books to recognize and reinforce diverse home languages; and all six of the teachers taught or reinforced early literacy skills. These skills were taught and reinforced in a variety of settings, including whole and small group and independent exploration choice time.

While not in response to an explicit research question, an underlying theme present in the findings was the teachers made many of their instructional decisions in response to the children. In the case of those who used the books to reinforce certain content or concepts, the teacher with older students was able to engage in higher-level conversations around things like sea urchins while the teacher with much younger students responded by sharing more simple books that reinforced counting. This also played a part in the instructional settings they used. For example, Allison, who had the youngest students, incorporated the dual language digital books into her choice time whereas Julie had slightly older children who could sit in a group and listen.

This process of responding to students also surfaced throughout the instances when diverse languages were reinforced. For example, Amelia and Julie spent more time listening to the books in different languages, but they and their children seemed to have a natural interest in this. In sum, the teachers used the books in a fashion that responded to their children's needs.

While the results were telling, commentary around what was not seen is also important. In this study, while teachers did reinforce multiple languages, they did not appear concerned about the vulnerable state of the Alaska Native languages. Although they mentioned that it was good to use and share the books and their center focuses specifically on serving Indigenous populations, promoting different languages was not at the forefront. This may be because few of their children speak an Indigenous language, and the teachers were focused on responding to the children's immediate needs. However, if teachers do not intentionally use dual language books and promote Indigenous languages amongst the youngest of learners, who will?

These results have several implications for teachers, families, and administrators. Therefore we recommend **teachers**: (a) Consider how they might incorporate children's home languages in meaningful ways that improve children's literacy skills and reinforce their cultural identities. We recommend moving beyond having the children listen to the words and repeat them. For, if teachers prompt their students to use the expressive vocabulary of their home language, the students can learn and use these words with greater frequency, which could lead to long-term language revitalization efforts. (b) Allow the students to lead the way using their biliterate skills (Delbridge & Helman, 2016). Evidence-based strategies for teachers who do not use bilingual instruction but have students who are include collaborative writing of life events, authoring dual language texts, creating vocabulary bridges, considering identity during reading, and hosting family literacy nights. (c) Model how to use the dual language digital books with their families to introduce content and concepts being attended to in class, teach early literacy skills, and reinforce multiple languages. Even better, it would be advantageous to integrate the family's language and culture and collaborate with families to construct programs that do so, a strategy that has emerged as being effective when considering literacy and language programs that have long-term impacts on dual language learners (Lewis & Ginsburg-Block, 2014).

We recommend **families**: (a) Be encouraged to develop the native languages that are spoken in their home without fear of hindering the academic development of their child in school. (b) Read dual language digital books like those available on Unite for Literacy with their children so the children are exposed to the native languages. (c) Use their children's teachers as models to increase the quality of the interactions during shared book reading. In this study, the teachers wove in questions that emphasized comprehension, vocabulary, and phonemic awareness. This could be done through a scaffolded program within a family literacy night where families receive dual language books and assistance in using dialogic reading strategies.

We recommend **school administrators** consider: (a) How they might obtain dual-language materials. While Unite for Literacy's site was used by these teachers, it is not the only tool that supports dual language learners. (b) How they will assist their teachers in incorporating multiple languages into the classroom. When teachers of dual language learners participate in professional development that is content-specific, incorporates coaching, and uses assessment in progress monitoring, "teachers made significant gains in the quality of their language and literacy practices and general classroom environment" (Hoisington, Young, Anastasopoulos, Washburn, 2015, p.25). Also, when teachers gain knowledge about dialogic reading, their teaching improves, boosting students' engagement (Matera, Armas, & Lavadenz, 2016).

CONCLUSION

By having access to dual language digital books, communities across Alaska are finding themselves with more resources that have the potential to help encourage early literacy development and to promote native languages, and they are receiving the message that their language and culture matter. However, the real value is when: (a) TEACHERS make the decision to use these books intentionally, using them to teach content and concepts, reinforce early literacy skills, and systematically teach Indigenous languages. (b) TEACHERS show families their language and culture are important by demonstrating a willingness to include them within the classroom, inspiring families to become more involved in their children's lives. (c) TEACHERS help children learn and use their native languages so they experience the many advantages of becoming biliterate. For while dual language digital books are important, it is the teachers' use of them that ultimately makes the difference.

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