

CENTER FOR EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION RESEARCH – DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

POLICY BRIEF TO NEWSMAKERS 5/14/2013

Millions of our Youngest Children do Not Speak English

In the United States, close to one third of preschoolers ages three to five in Head Start and children ages zero to three in Early Head Start live in homes where a language other than English is spoken. The overall child population speaking a non-English native language rose from 6 percent in 1979 to 14 percent in 2010; the number of language minority students in PreK-12 has been recently estimated to be over 6 million.

At the present rate of growth, Dual Language Learners (DLLs)- children ages 0-5 who are exposed to and use a language other than English, will be the majority of those attending preschool by 2020.

Circumstances that Especially Characterize DLLs

DLLs bring significant assets and challenges to early care and education (ECE) settings. DLLs' lives include circumstances that are assets to support development, such as intact/extended family networks, positive health and social/emotional supports, and parents and families with highly positive attitudes towards the significance of education for future integration into the broader society. Yet, they are also more likely than monolingual English-speaking children, on average, to be assigned "risk factors" such as living in poverty and having parents with limited formal education, especially when they are children of recent immigrants.

Alarming, with regard to educational attainment DLLs scored .3 to .5 of a standard deviation lower in mathematics and reading than their monolingual peers within all five Socio-Economic Status (SES) quintiles. However, the positive social/emotional development of DLLs is no different and in some cases more advanced than young English-only speaking children.

Time to Erode the Negative Stereotypes Surrounding Dual Language Development

Understanding DLL development

- means a complete reorientation from assumptions and expectations about developmental competencies rooted in monolingual perspectives and mainstream cultural practices that often equate differences in development with deficits; and
- must include attention to the mutually constituting features that may facilitate or impede DLLs' optimal development and learning across society,

community, and family contexts; individual child characteristics; and early care and learning experiences.

No longer can DLLs be understood by only the 'vulnerability' features associated with their development; understanding the development of DLLs must include the assets DLLs bring to ECE settings.

Findings from Developmental Science

Recent reviews of research conducted by CECER-DLL related to language and literacy development of DLLs, cognitive benefits of being bilingual and ECE practices offer ideas relevant to policy.

Language and Literacy Development:

- Strong evidence indicates DLLs have two separate language systems from very early in life; the two languages influence each other; and DLLs are not negatively impacted from exposure to and use of two languages during the early developmental years;
- Development of DLLs' skill levels in the two languages vary depending on when they were exposed to each language and opportunities to use both languages;
- DLLs' vocabularies in their individual languages are smaller than monolinguals' but when conceptual vocabularies in both languages are combined, DLLs' vocabularies are equal to that of monolinguals.

Cognitive Benefits

- Exposure to and acquisition of two languages in the early years has limited, if any, detrimental effects and can have important positive effects. Those positive effects can come in areas of cognitive flexibility such as solving problems and 'out-of-the box' thinking, as well as enhanced executive functions (controlling one's individual learning strategies).

Practices in Early Care and Education

- Features of high quality ECE are all important for DLLs—but probably not sufficient;
- The use of a DLL's home language, in addition to English, is probably the most important aspect of effective ECE for DLLs.
- Children can successfully learn two languages – they do not need to give up their home language in order to learn English if it is the formal language of the preschool setting – *but* DLLs will not exactly resemble monolingual children in language development;
- Assessments should represent the skills, knowledge and behaviors of DLLs that are important for their development and learning;
- Information on children's background characteristics must be included when making interpretations and recommendations about the academic performance and development of DLLs; and
- Those administering and interpreting assessments used with DLLs must be knowledgeable about children of diverse backgrounds so that they can make informed judgments about the appropriateness of specific tests for DLLs.

Recommendations

The above research informs the following policy recommendations related to Dual Language Learners in Early Care and Education settings.

- **Early and Accurate Identification and Assessment of DLLs**
Establish or strengthen guidelines and practices for early and accurate identification of DLL in ECE settings. To ensure appropriate instruction for DLLs, it is important to identify and accurately assess the language abilities and prior knowledge they bring to early childhood education settings, and in later years, to school.
- **Strengthen Human Capital in Early Childhood Education Programs**
Create or support special programs to prepare, hire and train individuals working in early childhood programs to acquire competencies to foster the language, literacy and overall development of DLLs. Despite the high proportion of DLLs in ECE settings, there is no strategic effort to train individuals in these competencies.
- **Enhance Coherence of Programmatic Components**
Encourage programmatic coherence across ECE and K-12 fiscal entities. Coordinate the instructional programs for language learners between early childhood and later grades, while allowing room for explicit support for DLLs to develop academically, socially, and emotionally through dual language instructional approaches in ECE programs. When plans are required for grant programs at the state and federal level this requirement should be included.
- **Explore Dual Language Programs for DLLs**
Continue to explore and expand dual-language (DL) program models through Head Start, Early Head Start and other state and federally funded programs. Young DLLs should have access to high-quality programs that teach English and home language skills through content. DL programs integrate monolingual English speakers and DLL children in the same classroom, thereby fostering linguistic and ethnic equity among students. These programs have been shown to support literacy development in English for DLLs while also supporting home language skills. When DL programs cannot be utilized, programs should support the use of DLLs' home languages for instructional purposes as much as possible.

The CECER-DLL is funded by the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in collaboration with the Office of Head Start and the Office of Child Care.

The initiative targets children who are dual language learners (birth-age 5) and their families across settings such as: early care and education center-based programs, home-based and family child care providers, and Head Start and Early Head Start Programs.

Visit us at: <http://cecerdll.fpg.unc.edu> for related references, papers and briefs, including the full paper that informed this brief, “Dual Language Learners: Research Informing Practice”