Focus: Early Learning

Three Signs that Your Pre-K Might Need a Make Over

by Felix Montes, Ph.D.

In 2011, the city of San Antonio took a decisive step forward toward universal preschool education. The city approved the Pre-K4SA plan, with the goal to improve the quality and quantity of prekindergarten education for all 4-year-olds in San Antonio. Based on research findings demonstrating that prekindergarten investment has the most impact on overall education outcomes for a community, then Mayor Julián Castro convened a taskforce that recommended the development of a high-quality prekindergarten program servicing many of the 5,700 4-year-old children who did not participate in full-day prekindergarten education in the city at that time (Posner, 2014; Lantigua-Williams, 2016).

As the Nobel Memorial Prize winner and expert in the economics of human development, James Heckman (2011) stated: "Traditionally, equity and efficiency are viewed as competing goals. One can be fair in devising a policy, but it often happens that what is fair is not economically efficient. Conversely, what is efficient may not be fair. What is remarkable is that there are some policies that both are fair – i.e., promote equity – and promote economic efficiency. Investing in the early years of disadvantaged children's lives is one such policy."

Cunha, et al., (2010) demonstrated early investment efficiency through an econometric analysis, conjecturing that it would raise the payoff from

future investments. The San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the University of Texas at San Antonio, and IDRA produced a report that supported that conclusion locally (SAHCC, 2014). There is no question about the need and long-term effectiveness of investing in universal prekindergarten education.

The question now is one of quality. As an advocate for high-quality education for all children, IDRA is deeply concerned about this issue. This article offers some guidance in this regard, through three scenarios based on comments I heard in some of my classroom observations and teacher interviews.

Supporting Children's Development

One teacher said, "As long as no one is hurt at the end of the day, we had a good day." Even now, after everything we have learned in the literature about the importance of the early education, many still see prekindergarten classrooms as a sort of glorified child care. I have observed prekindergarten classrooms that are chaotic, where there is constant yelling, students running around, and the whole day seems to move slowly and painfully. The teacher's main emphasis is on discipline and asserting her authority over the students.

Needless to say, this is not good either for the students or the teachers. One solution is to imple-

(cont. on Page 2)

"We serve children best and most effectively when we reflect on the learning environments we create and structure them to support and respond to the characteristics of our little learners."

– Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

(Three Signs that Your Pre-K Might – Need a Make Over, continued from Page 1)

ment a student-centric, center-based, content-rich curriculum that fosters the development of children's non-cognitive and cognitive skills. In this approach, children collaborate with each other to organize their work, share resources, and prioritize and sequence activities so that non-cognitive skills (perseverance, self-regulation, forward-thinking behavior, social and emotional skills) are always at the forefront of their learning. Teachers help by mediating when there is conflict, setting the rules and providing advice.

Once the process is set in motion, children become the main actors, negotiating, hypothesizing, proposing, investigating and reporting results. Each learning situation involves both the core content (science, art, literacy, math, or music) and the social component, in which children negotiate among themselves to carry out the center-based task involved.

Valuing Language

Another teacher stated: "I'm so proud of this kid. He totally stopped speaking Spanish and now speaks only English." While such sentiments are less prevalent today, there still are educators and even systems that consider it an achievement to *turn* children away from speaking Spanish or another native language to solely speaking English. This is bad on at least two counts.

First, there is the obvious damage to the child's cultural heritage, family cohesion, and psychological development, particularly to non-cognitive skills. Second, there is the waste of a significant resource children bring to the school. Although many minority and low-income children may not yet have the English skills expected by the school, they bring to school "funds of knowledge" that, in many cases, are not valued by the school.

The solution is to implement a bilingual, bicultural curriculum. Because such a curriculum is asset-based – including culturally relevant pedagogy – students' funds of knowledge are incorporated into the learning process, thereby stimulating cognitive and non-cognitive skills development across populations.

Valuing Early Childhood Teachers

"We had a pre-service with 20 other teachers; To be honest, I had no idea what they were talking about most of the time," stated a teacher in an interview. Many schools and school districts concentrate their professional development efforts in one or a few workshops that teachers are required to attend to be ready for the upcoming year. Often, teachers get little from those workshops that address instructional delivery in the abstract. This is particularly true of prekindergarten teachers, who typically have limited education, earning just above the minimum wage.

Part of the solution is to support teachers in developing personalized professional development plans. As they achieve their goals, which might include completing an associate's or bachelor's degree, their salaries tend to increase. An important issue here is that this is a long-term proposition, and many people are unwilling or unable to invest the time and money, and commitment, that such an effort entails.

Since this will not immediately improve the situation in the classroom, a complementary approach is a professional development program that emphasizes working closely with the teachers and teacher aides through collaborative planning, problem solving, mentoring, classroom demonstrations, observations and debriefings. This close collaboration has been found effective in previous settings.

For example, IDRA found that the classroom demonstration is the single most important intervention strategy in the context of a cognitive academic language learning based collaborative. A participating principal stated: "The actual demonstrations are invaluable tools that very seldom get used. It's very important to see these strategies work or not work with your own students. That makes for a good relationship between the teachers and presenters. The demos are really special." (Montes, 2002)

In summary, the goal of a prekindergarten program should be to make every child ready cognitively and non-cognitively to enter grade school. The professional development goal should be the improvement in teacher knowledge base of building foundations for preschool literacy and quality of teaching. For example, training should emphasize implementation of asset-based activities, promoting phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency, text comprehension and writing development. This is best accomplished through mentoring experiences, classroom demonstrations, and a professional learning community designed to support changes

IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity

For more information about the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or contact@idra.org.

Additional resources are available online at www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity
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Bilingual Early Childhood Education
Capitalizing on the Language and Culture of the Home and Introducing English

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., Consuelo Casas, Berta A. Medrano, Abby Gonzalez

School districts across the country are exploring ways to pull together resources to provide quality early childhood education to as many students as possible. Like many researchers, the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission has found, "Quality early education has an immediate impact on both the hard skills – language, numeracy, higher cognitive thinking – and the soft skills – social skills – that last a lifetime" (2010). And given the growing numbers of students who are learning English, the need for effective bilingual education is growing as well.

In this article, we showcase one school district that is making connections between young children learning to count on their fingers and young adults counting their course credits in college. Through IDRA's work over the years providing professional development in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) school district in south Texas, and through our work with Comunitario PTAs in the area and with the Rio Grande Valley – Equal Voice Network, IDRA has a unique vantage point to observe the transformations that have occurred in the district. Some of this was profiled in IDRA's report in 2014, *College Bound and Determined* (Bojorquez, 2014)

PSJA is working to extend services so that no child is left without receiving early childhood services, and to have a seamless connection across programs in prekindergarten through fifth grades. All of the district's elementary schools have early childhood programs and a bilingual dual language program. Some also have an Early Start bilingual program. In addition, the district is partnering with the county Head Start programs so that teachers who are appropriately prepared and certified combine with the Head Start personnel to deliver a complete, developmentally appropriate, bilingual early childhood program. And they currently have a federally-funded program through the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley to serve children from ages six weeks to 36 months. The district also has a partnership with 13 day care centers.

In the blended classrooms, the Head Start and public school resources are brought together so that the instruction is both developmentally appropriate and so that it prepares children for the more skills-based approach that will be part of their instruction in the higher grades.

The Head Start teachers are very strong in the social-emotional area and work to strengthen the child's self-concept. This is blended with the academic instruction strengths of the teachers funded by the school district. All of the adults aim to ensure the children feel confident and good about themselves, and that their the experiences are fun, rewarding and positive. Everyone is looking at the total child and making sure that success is built upon success.

The district strives to address five key elements of an effective early childhood program:

- Adults who are competent in the social-emotional aspects of child development as well as developmentally appropriate introduction of academic content;
- Respect for the language and culture of the home;
- Use of native language to support language and concept development;
- Developmentally appropriate activities; and
- Communication with and support for families.

A good teacher for the program must understand and speak both languages, and have the required pedagogical skills. He or she must have the heart and caring for the children exactly as they are.

A visitor noticed recently that all the teachers were smiling, and the children were all engaged. They clearly loved what they were doing. The classroom and school ethos were warm and invit-

Early childhood classrooms in PSJA ISD, Texas.

ing. The teachers are skilled as teachers and also have the heart for a bilingual, culturally responsive early childhood program. You can see the responses in the children who call the teacher *tio* (uncle) *papi* (daddy). Visitors observe happily engaged children. One of the program administrators was actually a Head Start student and is now a certified teacher with a master's degree in early childhood education – a full cycle of success.

The bilingual early childhood classrooms exhibit all the elements of an excellent early childhood classroom. Most of the talking is being done by the children and not the teacher. Children work together to solve problems. Classrooms have a variety of theme-based centers with ample hands-on materials for the children. The bilingual early childhood classrooms are immersed in what the research points out as effective early childhood approaches – and all in both languages, Spanish and English.

They don't erase the Spanish for the children to learn English. Both languages will be fully developed, and the children embrace their home culture while also acquiring English. They are being very consistent with using the simultaneous bilingualism to prepare students for a seamless transition to the school district's dual language program.

The newest program is already receiving praise from Spanish-speaking parents who are happy that their children are singing songs in Spanish learned in the center. Most of our families are Spanish speaking and economically disadvantaged, and their children are developing their language in their home language, which is seen as an asset. Because primary language development is very important, they are capitalizing on the language spoken at home to develop literacy and then add English, the second language.

The district's experience counters the much-publicized research about families not communicating enough with their children. There is a profusion of communication and culture transmitted within the families and with the children. The early childhood programs draw on all those assets and the "funds of knowledge." They draw on the language and assets of the home to construct the curriculum and to inform teaching.

They assess where children are even at the earliest stages and use an "Ages and Stages" framework

to have families tell them about their children. These are asset-based ways to document what is and to know where to go with the children. The information from the home enables them to know what is appropriate for each stage of development of the child. The stages of development are universal so that whatever the language and culture of the home, within that context, the child's behavior indicates the stage.

Every year, school leaders take stock in the early childhood programs to see what the strengths are and where there are areas of need. They use the data to modify the program and instruction to make sure that what they are doing is in fact having positive results with the children. Much of the data reflect the instruction in the classroom and therefore the changes that have to happen in curriculum and instruction.

The leadership models both languages in public meetings, and demonstrates complete respect for the language and culture of the communities we serve. People across the district show pride in the students graduating fully biliterate with honors. Just as they have students who are taking high school content courses in Spanish, they are working at their end to ensure that their youngest children are beginning their path through the school system with full respect and development of their home language while also becoming fully proficient in English.

Resources

Bojorquez, H. *College Bound and Determined* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2014).

Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission. Economists, Business Leaders, Gubernatorial Candidates Agree – Early Education Needs to be a Priority Investment for Pennsylvania (Harrisburg, Penn.: PELIC, 2010).

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Technology in Early Childhood

Editor's note: This article is reprinted from IDRA's Semillitas de Aprendizaje Teacher Guide (Manual de Maestro). This teacher guide contains 10 units in 196 pages to support early childhood bilingual literacy development. It is designed to correspond to the set of 10 Semillitas de Aprendizaje bilingual Big Books and Storybooks, the Cartitas series (letters home) and the 15 books in the Preschool Math Set. More information is online http://www. semillitasdeaprendizaje.com.

As the 21st century advances, technology is becoming ingrained in the social fabric of our society. Computers have become more powerful tools and are being used by greater numbers of people. In order for the people of tomorrow to be able to use this technology they must be introduced to the technology today. Many agree that this introduction to technology, and particularly to computers, should take place in the school and at an early age.

In their book, *The Computer as a Paintbrush*, Janice Beaty & Hugh Tucker explain that teachers who are using computers in the preschool classroom give an "enthusiastic description of the learning and developmental benefits their children are deriving from their interaction with this unique learning tool" (1987). Certain terms crop up in teachers' conversations like: social skills, problem-solving skills, new vocabulary, creativity and equal opportunity for disadvantaged students. Beaty & Tucker state, "Young children's brains were naturally designed to absorb new ideas and relationships in the way that computer programs present them" (1987).

Some of the benefits of computer use by students include the following:

- Computer use stimulates cooperative behavior and promotes self-esteem. It provides opportunities for success when children can go through all the exercises and when they can teach other students.

- Computer use provides an early understanding of technology. Because the computer is a patient instructor, students can work on programs for as long as they want.

- Computer use promotes self-control. For example, children learn that the computer keys need to be pressed one at a time to be able to get results.

- Computer use serves as an equalizer: The earlier girls have positive experiences with this medium the better, because girls are not threatened by the use of technology when they are this young.

A barrier appears when teachers are uncomfortable with the technology. Teachers can consequently project their discomfort to the students. In their article, "The Computer as a Doorstop: Technology as a Disempowerment," Thomas Callaster Jr., & Faith Dunne state: "Machines are tools, valuable only when a human intelligence organizes their use in a productive way. In the classroom, that human is the teacher who controls the nature of the environment and what happens there. Good classroom tools extend the teacher's power to create a rich learning environment. If the teacher does not know what to make of the tool or fears it or misconstrues its uses, it will be used badly or not at all. If the teacher perceives the machine as a master, not a servant, its potential will never be realized" (1993).

Once teachers feel comfortable with the computer, it is important to establish an environment that is conducive to children's learning. Before this can be accomplished, certain notions have to be dispelled.

For instance, **don't be afraid to let children touch the computer for fear of them breaking it.** Computers are sturdy instruments. Once ground rules are established, children tend to monitor themselves.

Learn more about IDRA's Semillitas de Aprendizaje™ Teacher Guide (Manual de Maestro) and other materials at http://www.semillitasdeaprendizaje.com

Don't worry that the computer software might be too difficult for the children. Research has found that children know much more than they are given credit for, and they tend to adapt quickly to stimulating exercises.

Don't be tempted to require students to work alone on the computer. Because of the characteristic of the computer screen, it can be easily seen by a number of children at once who can then provide feedback to each other. It is important for children to work at least in pairs so that they can give each other valuable feedback and instruction.

Don't believe another common misconception that students should work in silence on the computer. Dr. Chris Green comments: "Students, especially young children and others still acquiring language, need extensive listening and speaking practice in order to acquire a strong oral language foundation. Just as you will see young children talking to themselves as they play, if they are truly engaged with a book or computer program you should see them 'talking to' the book or computer. Including others in the conversation – teachers, other adults, peers – can enhance this natural language development process." (Yañez-Pérez, 1996)

Dr. Green recommends that teachers look for software programs that provide listening practice.

Don't believe that once students have a good software program in front of them and are interacting, the students no longer need the assistance of the teacher. This is incorrect. Although there are certain occasions when it is beneficial for students to work without supervision, Dr. Green states: "All educational materials benefit from the interventions of a good teacher. You wouldn't just hand students a book and expect them to learn all they need from it by themselves. The graphics, stories and activities students encounter via software can be the vehicle for rich discussions just as a book, movie or object can. They can describe what they see, predict what will come next, make suggestions for answers and other responses, explain why the group should follow their suggestions." (Yañez-Pérez, 1996)

Don't be concerned that students do not know how to spell or type. Children tend to "hunt and peck and use invented spelling at the early stages of learning to write via computers."

There is some literature available that addresses how to choose software programs that are developmentally appropriate for early childhood. However, there is less literature on linguistically appropriate software. This is an important issue because, while the value of using technology in early childhood is being hailed, there is a population of students whose needs are not being met. Language-minority children may miss out on the opportunity to develop their computer skills and reap the benefits that other children will enjoy, because – as often happens – their differences are either forgotten or ignored. While the computer is a universal tool, it is necessary for people to ensure that it is multilingual – capable of communicating with the user in a language that he or she understands and is comfortable using. In the school setting, providing linguistically diverse software will help meet the needs of language-minority students, and it can also provide challenging opportunities for other students to expand upon or acquire new language skills.

Resources

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DOWNLOAD See a list of resources on using technology in the early childhood classrooms
http://budurl.com/IDRAeceTech

Meet Felix Montes
IDRA Education Associate

This year, the IDRA Newsletter is highlighting our staff's varied and diverse talents and backgrounds. Felix Montes, Ph.D., is an IDRA education associate. His story starts more than 3,000 miles away. He was born in Venezuela and grew up in one of its most southern cities, Ciudad Bolivar, close to the Amazon jungle, by the Orinoco River, one of the largest in South America. This closeness to the majesty of nature gave him a special perspective about the place and relationship we have with the universe. He also learned to appreciate the value of education very early. As a rebellious teen, he dropped out of school and spent a year in various occupations, including auto mechanics, brick laying and shoe repairing. He observed and experienced the kind of lives people in those jobs were living. Wanting other options, he went back to school, embraced reading and learning, and completed his education. As the current director of the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, Dr. Montes empathizes deeply with the students the program is engaging because of this personal experience. As part of his commitment to public service and education, Dr. Montes was a member of the board of Project Learn to Read, and a guest speaker at the City of San Antonio Commission on Literacy to help policymakers improve adult literacy in the city.

When Dr. Montes went to the University of Arizona in Tucson to do graduate studies, one place he visited whenever he had a break was the Grand Canyon. During his first visit, the canyon was painted white with snow in a spectacular display of nature. Recently, President Obama designated three new national monuments in California. National Public Radio featured a book that proposes setting aside 50 percent of the planet for conservation (Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life by Edward O. Wilson). Dr. Montes hopes that such plan comes to pass for the sake of the planet and its inhabitants. He enjoys going to parks around the city of San Antonio, including Enchanted Rock, Friedrich Park and Woodlawn Lake Park. Dr. Montes likes doing yoga, Thai Chi, and meditation or just walking in any of those parks.

The Power of Possibility: How IDRA and Our Partners are Transforming Public Education – IDRA Annual Report Released

IDRA's 2015 Annual Report, *The Power of Possibility: How IDRA and Our Partners are Transforming Public Education* highlights the ways in which 2015 was a pivotal year for children both in terms of progress and deepening disparities. It shows how IDRA and our partners are valuing children of all backgrounds by keeping a sharp focus on educational quality and equity. We are producing research and analyses that matter and putting in place effective programs, strategies, policies and solutions to secure public education that works for all children.

Our 2015 Annual Report is organized around IDRA's empirically-based Quality Schools Action Framework, providing concrete examples of how IDRA's work responds to the four guiding questions at the heart of the framework: What

is needed? How do we make change happen? What fundamentals must be secured? Where do we focus change?

"It is our collaboration with schools, families, youth, community partners, and funders that make results like these possible," said María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., IDRA President & CEO. "We are grateful to be able work together for the day that All Means All – and we can assure quality educational opportunity for every child."

We are grateful to the funders who partnered with IDRA in 2015 to make this body of work possible and to family, community, school and students for their leadership and partnership with us. Thank you for your commitment to our young

people. We look forward to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all children to access and succeed in college.

The annual report is available for viewing online at http://budurl.com/IDRAar15is.
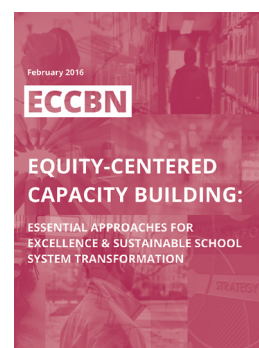

Essential Approaches for Excellence & Sustainable School System Transformation – New Publication Showcases Strategies that Deepen School Improvement

In a field where so many attempts at school reform are isolated, fragmented and short-lived, *Essential Approaches for Excellence & Sustainable School System Transformation* is a new resource for education leaders to build capacity for systemic change for equity and excellence for all students. The publication was developed by the Equity-Centered Capacity Building Network (ECCBN), a network of 11 expert organizations from across the country. The network was formed to unite their work to increase the impact of capacity-building approaches that promote deep and sustainable school and systems change.

Dr. Bradley Scott, retired director of IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity, wrote about the history, impact, current state of and possibilities

with regional equity assistance centers around the country, in the chapter, "The Regional Equity Assistance Centers – Fifty Years And Counting: Forging Civil-Rights-Based Technical Assistance to Serve All Students by Building Equity-Centered Capacity in Public Schools."

Essential Approaches for Excellence & Sustainable School System Transformation is available free online at: http://capacitybuildingnetwork.org. Additional resources will be added over time.

Focus: Early Learning

in teacher practices.

To sustain this process, IDRA has developed a curriculum, *Semillitas de Aprendizaje,* which includes a 10-unit guide to facilitate early childhood bilingual literacy development (English-Spanish). Each unit has a set of classroom activities that include a morning song, storytelling, literacy connection with STEM explorations, center activities, phonemic awareness, writing and alphabet knowledge, English transition, family connections and informal assessment. With the appropriate professional development approach and curricular support, your prekindergarten can achieve its goal of improving all children's school readiness.

Resources

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