

Why It Matters in Early Education

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Over the last two decades, a rising number of families with preschool age children speak a language other than English at home (Espinosa, 2010). Known as Dual Language Learners, or DLLs, they are likely to enter kindergarten already academically behind. This gap persists throughout high school, resulting in vastly different academic and life outcomes between DLLs and their peers (Beltran, 2016; Espinosa, 2013; Gandara et al., 2003). The early years present a pivotal time to interrupt this achievement gap. The research described below shines light on the potential of culturally and linguistically responsive practices and meaningful family engagement as powerful levers to enhance quality early learning experiences for DLLs.

Incorporating Family Language and Culture in Early Learning Experiences

Children learn better when program practices and environments respect and include the values, expectations, experiences, and languages that shape children's lives at home (NAEYC, 1995, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2011). Language development, communication, sense of competence, and even early math skills are heightened when grounded in children's familiar social and cultural context (NAEYC, 2009; Zentella, 2005).

There are also long-term benefits to including children's home languages and cultures in early learning experiences. Maintaining their home culture helps DLLs to develop strong identities and self-concept, which can become important protective factors as children get older. It also leads to closer relationships with their caregivers and peers (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Bialystok, 2001). In contrast, when home and school cultures grow disconnected, students may see themselves as "bad learners" or lose self-esteem (Souto-Manning, 2013). When students do not see their race, ethnicity, or culture recognized and understood in the classroom,

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they may become isolated or alienated (Hepburn, 2004).

Yet school and classroom environments often reflect the dominant culture. A myth persists among many families and educators that quickly assimilating DLLs to the dominant language and culture is crucial for future academic success (Espinosa, 2013). Few teachers receive adequate training in teaching DLLs in their teacher preparation programs (Espinosa, 2013; Freedson, 2010; Pianta & Hadden, 2008). Even so, many teachers express interest in improving their skills and abilities to teach diverse children and families (Daniel & Friedman, 2005). Teachers skilled in culturally and linguistically responsive practices can support important developmental and academic outcomes for young DLLs.

ENGAGING FAMILIES

Meaningful Engagement of Families in the Early Years

Research outlines many developmental and academic benefits when families are involved in their children's learning in the early years. These benefits include outcomes like cognitive development, vocabulary growth, literacy skills, expressive language, and math skills (Caspe, Lopez, & Wolos, 2007; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2007). Additionally, families' engagement in their children's learning can foster young children's motivation, pro-social



behavior, and engagement with peers, adults, and learning (Best & Dunlop, 2011; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). When families become engaged and stay engaged during children's early years, this can have deep and lasting effects on a child's development. It can also be an important protective factor for children at risk of future school failure due to their race, ethnicity, home language, immigrant status, family income and/or parental education (Dearing et al., 2006). Yet schools and early learning programs often struggle to engage diverse families. Many lack clear organizational goals and objectives on how best to involve parents (Zarate, 2007). And teachers themselves receive little training on supporting meaningful engagement of families in children's learning. Linguistic and cultural differences between families and school staff can also be barriers (Goodwin & King, 2002). Often family engagement efforts take the form of "random acts" rather than systemic, integrated, and sustained shifts in practice (Mapp, 2013). As a result, schools and early learning programs often miss a critical opportunity to powerfully engage with families in children's learning.

PREPARING PROFESSIONALS

Preparing Early Childhood Professionals to Work with Young DLLs

Research has established that culturally and linguistically responsive practices and meaningful family engagement have many long-term benefits for DLLs. So how can we support teacher learning in these areas? Teachers have many opportunities for development, ranging from weekend workshops to formal seminars to informal peer



interactions. The question remains, What kinds of opportunities are most effective? What makes a difference for early learning practice?

Current research tells us that teachers learn best when professional development is social, interactive, and embedded within their daily practice. This can take the form of co-teaching, peer mentoring, discussing lesson plans, and/or observation and self-reflection (Desimone, 2009; Hunziker, 2011; Penuel et al., 2007). Additionally, professional learning communities (PLCs) are emerging as a promising practice in teacher learning. PLCs provide teaching teams the opportunity to reflect on practice, review goals and outcomes, and learn with and from each other (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010).

When learning about cultural and linguistic responsiveness, teachers must also have the opportunity to reflect on their own cultural identities, assumptions, and biases. For example, they might consider how their own cultural assumptions inform how they interact with

children and families (Hepburn, 2004; Durden & Truscott, 2013; NAEYC, 1995).

Yet teachers alone are not responsible for culturally and linguistically responsive practices and family engagement. To affect early learning practice, programs must consider program-wide changes that establish new systems, practices, and norms. This process should include staff at all levels, including administrators, para-professionals, and instructional support staff (Hains et al., 2000).

Conclusion

Early learning programs are powerfully poised to shift the dial on DLLs' life and learning outcomes. By implementing culturally and linguistically responsive strategies, skillfully engaging families in their children's learning, and embedding teacher development, programs can provide quality early learning experiences for young DLLs. This has the potential to interrupt the achievement gap in the elementary years and beyond.



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