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# What Are ‘Linguistically Responsive Practices’ and Why Are They an Essential Ingredient of “High-Quality” Early Childhood Education?

Babies begin to learn and develop language before they are born.<sup>1</sup> For many children, this includes more than one language. As Paradis, Genesee, and Crago note:

“There is no scientific evidence that children’s language learning ability is limited to one language. On the contrary, research indicates that infants have the capacity to acquire two languages without significant costs to the development of early milestones.”<sup>2</sup>

It is likely that most children around the world grow up with more than one language, making them dual language learners (DLLs).<sup>3</sup> However, aspects of dual language development continue to generate challenges, questions and concerns for early childhood care and education programs (ECE) in the United States.

Latino\* children constitute a large and growing segment of the U.S. population. By 2060, it is estimated that they will comprise one-third (32%) of the three-to-four-year-old population†. More than four million children enrolled in preschool programs in the United States are DLLs,<sup>4</sup> and more than 75% of Latina/o children over the age of five enter U.S. schools speaking Spanish.<sup>5</sup>

It is critically important that ECE program administrators and teachers are prepared to work with culturally and linguistically diverse children. One important aspect of this preparation is to become informed by the history of discrimination against language minority communities and by the current research evidence on DLLs.

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\* The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. This document may also refer to this population as “Latinx” to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

† UnidosUS calculation using U.S. Census Bureau, “Projected Population by Single Year of Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States: 2016 to 2060”. Washington, DC, 2018, <https://census.gov/data/datasets/2017/demo/popproj/2017-popproj.html> (accessed January 15, 2020), Table 1.

## What Does the Historical Record Demonstrate?

### Nice is Not Enough

*"A warm, friendly, helpful teacher is nice, but it isn't enough. We have plenty of warm, friendly teachers who tell the kids nicely to forget their Spanish and ask mommy and daddy to speak to them in English at home..."<sup>6</sup>*

The previous quote is the current description of a long-established practice. Historically, children and families from language minority communities receive negative messages about their home language, typically from school personnel. In the United States, there is a legacy of devaluing languages other than English; punishing children for speaking Spanish; and "advising" children and families away from their home language. As noted in Flores, "the United States has been aptly described as the 'graveyard' for languages because of its historical ability to absorb immigrants and extinguish their mother tongue within a few generations."<sup>7</sup>

Ochoa describes some of the methods used by school personnel to "extinguish" children's home languages in prior generations:

"School officials washed their mouths out with soap, swatted them with rulers, confined them to the corner of the classroom, forced them to wear dunce caps and ridiculed them in front of their peers."<sup>8</sup>

Nieto, Flores, and Ochoa demonstrate that negative messages about home language continue to be disseminated in K-12 school settings. "Students who enter school speaking a language other than English may be perceived as lacking English-language skills rather than as possessing resources that can be strengthened."<sup>9</sup> Many families from the Latino (and other) communities hear that they must minimize or abandon their home language in favor of English. The reason—which may or may not be directly stated—is for their child to be successful in school. The message may be delivered with a smile, but it perpetuates discrimination and **aims for the extinction of a child's home language.**

Negative messages about a child's home language are founded upon the long-standing assumption that children are not capable of developing two languages; that two languages are "too many." This is demonstrated in Ochoa's interview with a Mexican American educator, who describes a variety of fallacies she's heard from teachers-in-training who oppose bilingual education, including, "There's only so much room in that brain to acquire languages. If they're doing it in Spanish, they're not going to have enough brain."<sup>10</sup>

A second assumption is that a child is "confused" by more than one language. In this narrative, Spanish is presented as a barrier to school achievement. Many times, Latino parents, who place a high value on education, minimize or completely give up speaking their home language to their children in the mistaken belief that they are supporting their child's English-language development and school success.

### Negative Messages; Lifetime Impacts

"Too many Latina/o college students have shared with me that in school, they were punished for speaking Spanish, ridiculed for their supposed accents, reprimanded for assisting their peers, or ignored by their instructors. Over time, some stopped participating in class; they withheld their voices."<sup>11</sup>



In 2018, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NAEM) released *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts and Cultures*, a synthesis report of research on the processes and functions of human learning, which updates the initial version published in 2000. In the updated report, children's sense of belonging is identified as a fundamental component of an effective learning environment. *How People Learn II* also denotes the importance of culture in the classroom. "Culture shapes every learning environment and the experience of each learner within that environment: learners who find the classroom environment unfamiliar, confusing, unwelcoming, or unsupportive will be at a disadvantage."<sup>12</sup>

As such, negative messages about a child's home language or culture can undermine a child's sense of self and their feelings of belonging in their classroom. Since the language we speak is instrumental in forming our identity,<sup>13</sup> minimizing or eliminating a child's home language may undermine their developing concept of self or ability to interact with family members and friends. A child who experiences the rejection of their home language in their classroom may, in turn, feel that *they* (and their family) have been rejected.

Negative messages about home languages can also undermine the basis for effective family engagement. Since language is fundamental to parent-child interactions, telling parents to minimize or eliminate their home language may negatively impact the ability of parents to interact with and to support their child's development. Furthermore, a child who has grown up hearing their parents speaking Spanish (or any other language) since birth may conclude that "something" is wrong with *them* because their parents no longer use Spanish as frequently or as in depth as they once did.

Additionally, there is an important cognitive aspect to dual language development. We know that learning begins before birth<sup>14</sup> and that DLLs learn information and develop thinking skills across both their languages. If a child reduces or loses access to their home language, the continued development of their conceptual knowledge (thinking skills, ideas, reasoning abilities) is likely to be interrupted. A child's ability to count, to reason, to categorize, or to make comparisons develops and expands over time. Reducing or eliminating access to the home language removes opportunities to use and develop a range of skills that are crucial for school readiness and reading success.



## Dual Language Children: What Does the Research Demonstrate?

Research evidence **contradicts** the idea that home languages “get in the way” of learning English and school success. Instead, the reverse is demonstrated: NASEM’s *How People Learn II* points to the importance of children’s home language proficiency for their acquisition of English and their school success.

The report includes the following summary of the research evidence:

- Children are born with the capacity to learn two languages.
- Learning and language development begin before birth.
- Children do not benefit by minimizing or eliminating their home language.
- Children can and should learn English, *but not at the expense of their home language*<sup>15</sup>

Dozens of individual studies present clear, convergent evidence on the importance of a child’s home language. In their study of early reading by Spanish-English bilingual children, Miller and colleagues found:

- Cross-language transfer: Spanish oral language measures predicted English reading scores.
- Both Spanish and English oral language skills contribute to reading, within and across languages.<sup>16</sup>

In this study, oral narratives were collected in both languages along with standardized measures of reading in English administered by the school district. Children’s Spanish proficiency did not “get in the way” of reading achievement in English; instead, Spanish oral language proficiency *predicted* English reading scores beyond the variance accounted for by grade.<sup>17</sup>

The authors went on to recommend that DLLs be assessed in both of their languages “to get the most complete picture of the student’s strengths and weaknesses and the full linguistic resources that the child is able to bring to bear in performing academic work.”<sup>18</sup>

Convergent evidence on the importance of a child’s home language is provided by a recent meta-analysis of more than 80 individual studies ranging from pre-K through 12th grade students.<sup>19</sup> The team examined the relationship between oral language proficiency in two

languages upon school outcomes. The results confirmed a *positive relationship* between home language proficiency and school achievement in a second language. The authors reported that continued development of home language proficiency did **not** develop at the expense of learning the second language. They concluded: "Stimulating oral language proficiency in both languages can be a key factor in improving the school outcomes of bilingual children."<sup>20</sup>

For young DLLs, home language is the foundation for learning about themselves, their family, and the larger world. It is the context of their identity formation and social emotional development. "Language enables children to join their culture as they come to share its ways of interacting, thinking and knowing. It empowers children to expand their understanding of the world exponentially by talking with and learning from others. Language also supplies children with a tool for understanding and controlling their own feelings and thoughts."<sup>21</sup> Inhibiting a child's use of their home language limits their ability to express themselves and interact in the world; this is harmful to both personal development and educational success.

Language is also a key influence upon children's communication and learning including the development of many specific cognitive skills that are essential for reading success.<sup>22</sup> In fact, "studies have shown that students who speak two languages rather than just one, or whose culture is infused into the learning experience, perform better on certain academic and cognitive based tasks, and grow up healthier because they have a positive self-concept."<sup>23</sup> Again, these research findings argue for early childhood educators to discard the traditional narrative of language loss and to embrace a new narrative advocating for support for children to develop both their languages.

## Linguistically Responsive Practices Promote Home Language Development

In 2010, the Office of Head Start Bureau revisited and revised the *Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs*. Of the 10 principles contained in the document, principle six is exceedingly clear about the importance of a child's home language:

"Effective programs for children who speak languages other than English require continued development of the first language while the acquisition of English is facilitated."<sup>24</sup>

All programs serving young children and their families should adopt principle six; integrate it into the program's vision and mission; communicate the importance of a child's home language to all stakeholders; and then work to build capacity to implement the principles during daily operations.

When a child is encouraged and supported to continue the development of their home language, the knowledge, skills and abilities they have already acquired can continue to be used, developed, and extended. A child also has opportunities to reflect upon their continuing learning and language development. It is therefore imperative that early care and education programs understand this principle and the research evidence that supports it.

UnidosUS believes that minimizing or taking away a child's home language removes the source of continued cognitive development, learning, and identity formation. It is a policy of failure.



## Linguistically Responsive Practices: What Can Programs Do?

Education personnel can play a valuable role in supporting DLLs when they understand the value and importance of children's home languages, communicate this information to all stakeholders, and integrate the information into program systems and communications. For the ECE field, definitions of "high quality" programs need to expand to include explicit support of the continued development of a child's home language. Programs can:

- Be a place where all languages are visibly respected and valued.
- Provide, to the extent possible, teachers and volunteers who speak the languages of the children and who are strong language models.
- Encourage parents and family members to support their child's continued development of their home language.
- Accept all instances of communication from a child—especially when they mix two languages together. Staff should recognize this as a communication strength and not a "problem."
- Support every child to develop secure and nurturing relationships regardless of their home language(s) or prior experience with English.
- Support the continued development of a child's home language and support the acquisition and development of English.

Taken together, these approaches and strategies can empower families to take a more active role in their child's learning and to promote the cultural heritage and individual identity of all children enrolled in the program.

DLLs, and Latinx children, are the future American workforce. The educational achievement of the current generation of young DLLs is therefore a national interest and ECE programs and schools have a special obligation to "get it right."<sup>25</sup>

## Linguistically Responsive Practices: What Should Policymakers Do?

Policymakers can play a valuable role in supporting Latinx and other DLLs' language development that moves the United States beyond the 'graveyard' approach. UnidosUS has three initial recommendations:

### **1. The ECE field should recognize and incorporate cultural and linguistic responsiveness as essential elements of high-quality ECE programs.**

States operating pre-K programs should review existing rating and monitoring systems, standards, and indicators in order to ensure that these systems recognize and incorporate cultural and linguistic responsiveness as essential elements of high-quality ECE programs.

State policymakers should revise the definition of "quality" used by programs and systems to include dimensions of cultural and linguistic responsiveness. To that end, all ECE programs should adopt the Office of Head Start *Multicultural Principles* as the foundation from which to define quality and as the basis for capacity-building within systems.

Furthermore, states should review, select, and use specific items from the Head Start Program Performance Standards to establish cultural and linguistic responsiveness as an essential priority and component of program quality and effectiveness, reflected in program operations and quality rating systems.

### **2. Revise teacher preparation programs to meaningfully incorporate cultural and linguistic responsiveness as substantive and fundamental to course syllabi and degree program requirements.**

The recent reports from the NASEM on the importance of culture and DLLs necessitate strong and swift action to address the disparity between the scientific evidence and the current content of many college courses and degree programs in ECE.

For UnidosUS, the lack of attention to cultural and linguistic responsiveness in many (if not most) ECE teacher preparation programs is unacceptable and must be addressed without delay. Extensive information on cultural responsiveness and dual language development must be included in teacher preparation courses and degree programs.

The disconnect between the tens of thousands of diverse children in ECE classrooms around the United States and the content of college courses used to prepare their teachers perpetuates inequitable access to high-quality ECE, thus contributing to the continuing and persistent achievement gap that too many Latino and other children experience.

### **3. Supports should be put in place to retain currently employed Latina preschool teachers, increase the number of Latina lead teachers, and prioritize diversity in the ECE workforce.**

Current Latina preschool teachers need access to financial resources and other supports to comply with increasing credentialing requirements while remaining in the field. These supports should include but are not limited to scholarships, tax credits, paid release time/substitutes, childcare, and transportation subsidies.

If Latina teachers choose to exit the profession rather than enroll in a degree programs, negative impacts may include:

- The loss of cultural and linguistic diversity within the ECE field.
- The loss of experienced personnel with the capacity to promote cultural responsiveness and support the continued development of Latinx children's home language.
- Minimizing or eliminating children's and families' access to teaching staff who are familiar with their culture, home language, and lived experiences in their communities.
- Latina teachers losing employment and wages.

Additional educators of color should be recruited to the ECE field through concerted efforts, which may include alternative teaching programs, apprenticeship programs, cohort-based models, and mentorship.

Representative educators of color can make an important impact on the students that they serve. "Numerous studies show that having teachers who look like their students of color benefits all students academically, socially, and emotionally."<sup>26</sup> As preschoolers in the United States become more diverse, the ECE workforce should mirror that diversity.

## Additional Information

In 2018, UnidosUS conducted policy research on Latina teachers working in ECE settings operated by our Affiliate organizations. Our primary purpose was to examine the "BA Challenge," namely: the concern that Latina ECE teachers without degrees would lose or leave their positions due to increased educational requirements. Across the United States, many Latina ECE teachers must now have a bachelor's degree or be enrolled in a degree program as a condition of their employment. From within our national Affiliate network, we interviewed 26 ECE program administrators and conducted 10 focus groups with 94 teachers working in state pre-K and federally funded ECE programs. The teachers informed us about the strategies and practices they use to support Latinx children's learning and development.

The report, *Latina Teachers and the "BA Challenge:" Impacts and Conditions of Increasing Degree Requirements in Early Childhood Education* is available for download here: <http://publications.unidosus.org/handle/123456789/1986>.

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## About Us

UnidosUS, previously known as NCLR (National Council of La Raza), is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an [Affiliate Network](#) of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos at the national and local levels.

For more than 50 years, UnidosUS has united communities and different groups seeking common ground through collaboration, and that share a desire to make our country stronger.

Latinos will soon represent nearly 30% of all students enrolled in U.S. schools. Our success as a nation is tied to their success, and UnidosUS's education work is dedicated to ensuring all children have access to quality education. Our education programs, policy, and advocacy ensure that all kids have the opportunity to become empowered adults. We work with practitioners, policymakers, and advocates to develop and promote best practices that help students succeed from early childhood programs through college and beyond.

For more information on UnidosUS, visit [unidosus.org](http://unidosus.org) or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).

## Endnotes

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