

## **Transforming Pre-K Learning Spaces: Five Reasons Dual Language Learning Matters for the Academic and Socioemotional Development of Latino Children**

Early childhood serves as the starting point for the development of essential skills, abilities, and knowledge allowing individuals to navigate the world in all its facets (Britto et al., 2017). Consequently, this stage of development has become a priority area of research for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. Given that children spend the majority of their early years in schools or other educational settings, it is imperative to optimize these spaces for a growing, diverse population of children in the United States. The Pew Research Center reported that in the coming years, more than half of the population in the United States will be composed of people of color (Krogstad, 2019). However, research also shows that children of color are more likely to be impacted by sociocultural stressors stemming from poverty and discrimination, which can occur in and outside of educational spaces. Such experiences contribute to flawed perceptions of academic and behavioral challenges of children of color before they even enter kindergarten (Kang et al., 2014; Lee & Burkam, 2002; NBCDI, 2013). The failure to adequately and equitably support the potential of historically marginalized students demands an examination of how current educational spaces are failing to provide the right resources to foster learning.

One such group of students includes Dual Language Learners (DLLs). As described by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education, dual language learners (DLLs) are “children who have a home language other than English and are learning two or more languages at the same time, or learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language” (p. 1). Currently, they make up 32% of the nation’s population from birth to 8 years, with Spanish speakers representing about 62% of the DLL population (MPI, 2017). These findings could be linked to the high representation of immigrant groups within the Hispanic population in the United States. In 2017, about 57% of children of immigrant parents came from Latin America (Urban Institute, 2019). Because of the elevated representation of Hispanics in DLL spaces, it is important to distinguish and disentangle the diverse experiences and needs of DLLs with a critical examination of growing disparities as a function of intersectionality.

Data exploring the outcomes of children from immigrant parents report that they are most likely to have less than a high school education and have lower incomes compared to children born from non-immigrant families (Urban Institute, 2019). Linguistic inequities interwoven into various American social, economic, and policy structures contribute to discrepancies of outcomes between immigrant and non-immigrant groups. Young DLL children -- over 75% of whom are native-born American citizens -- are too often marginalized and stigmatized simply because they and their families speak non-English languages at home (Williams, 2015). As the dual language learning population has increased by 24% since 2000, American educational institutions have not made sufficient changes to meet or foster the needs of these students’ potentials (Weyer, 2018; Williams, 2015). This review will summarize the research on the issue

of dual language learning in early care and education settings, with a focus on children of immigrant parents and of Latin American descent.

### **What is Dual Language Learning?**

The process by which this occurs varies in two ways. For some children, dual language learning occurs from birth all throughout childhood and therefore, both languages are always learned simultaneously. For others, dual language learning can occur such that one language, the home language, is learned first, and then supplemented by a second language introduced later in early childhood, most often through an educational setting. Many first, second and even third generation Latino immigrant children go through this latter process when they enter preschool or kindergarten, as they are exposed to English in addition to their home language, Spanish or an indigenous language. Oftentimes, children also begin to speak in Spanglish, a combination of Spanish and English. This fluidity of language is representative of translanguaging, which acknowledges that rhetoric, behavior, and communication can be interwoven in a way that positively regards the combination of the two languages (Ponthier & Gort, 2016). However, because of widespread, but misguided concern about splitting attention and cognitive abilities by learning two languages, many parents, educators, and policymakers assume that English must take priority over any other; indeed, this is an unspoken rule for functioning in American society.

Failure to provide services that are inclusive of other languages poses significant challenges to immigrant families in areas of economic growth, access to education, and experiences of discrimination which can affect housing and employment opportunities. The pairing of limitations in language accessibility and experiences of discrimination against immigrant populations make it difficult to successfully navigate the social, educational, health, and economic sectors around them. This often creates a sense of distrust for these institutions. Anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies have added to this distrust (Ayón, Valencia-Garcia, & Kim, 2017). As a result of their own experiences, many immigrant parents encourage high English proficiency in their children, such that in some instances, their home language will be lost in the process, at the detriment of long term occupational, educational, and economic costs (Callahan & Gándara, 2014). Children who undergo acculturation are placed at risk of weakening connections to their native language, cultural identity, and even endangering their sense of family closeness (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Bernhard, & Freire, 2001). The current review seeks to challenge this ideal, noting that with changing demographics, a push towards valuing new languages is necessary to promote the future outcomes of our growing Latino, immigrant population.

Research shows that, contrary to popular belief, dual language learning has many benefits for children cognitively (Kovács & Mehler, 2009), socially (Chang et al., 2007), academically (Esposito & Baker-Ward, 2013; Lyons, 1990) and economically (Callahan & Gándara, 2014). In other words, bilingualism is a huge asset for children to develop in their early years and is especially relevant for learning spaces serving immigrant children.

## **Latinos and Schooling**

The process of entering formal schooling is a particularly challenging milestone for all children, regardless of ethnic/racial background (Ahtola et al., 2011). However, the types of experiences differ between groups and could have implications for later academic and social wellbeing (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988). In the United States' predominantly English-only educational system, many DLLs can face \_\_\_\_\_. Kang and colleagues (2014) described various reasons highlighting the importance for English proficiency in the transition to formal schooling. The first includes the need for English proficiency for learning behaviors at school. Latino and African American children are more likely to receive disciplinary punishments or assessment for behavioral problems (Dray, 2008; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Schiraldi & Zidenberg, 2001). For Latino children, studies have cited that this could partly be due to misunderstandings of the child's behavior, often mediated by language barriers between teachers and students (Santos & Ostrosky, n.d.). Another area receiving attention is English proficiency as an influential factor in establishing relationships with peers. Albers and colleagues (2009) found that many children experience discrimination at school for not being proficient in the majority language or for their accent when speaking the language. These experiences with early discrimination can have longer term implications for how comfortable students feel speaking in English or for how actively they participate if they fear facing further prejudice in their abilities. In the current English-centric education system, English proficiency has also been found to be essential in building relationships with teachers. Of those teachers working in high-Hispanic serving early childhood settings, only 45% identify as Hispanic and only 22% actually speak Spanish with the children (Guzman et al., 2018). Mutual understanding and communication between students and teachers have important implications for closer relationships and teachers' perceptions and assessment of students' success, social abilities, and academic abilities (Chang et al., 2007). These expectations play a substantial role in how teachers treat their students and in the students' learning environment. Exploring the long-term effects of inconsistencies in language and understanding between teacher and students is essential for its larger implications on students' future success. For example, compared to teachers in bilingual schools, those in regular schools were most likely to hold lower expectations for students who were identified as English Learners (ELs), and these had implications for later academic achievement (Jussim & Harber, 2005; Umansky & Dumont, 2019).

Scholars have found that an impaired teacher-student relationship has been associated with a child's risk of staying behind a year, dropping out of school, or engaging in future delinquent behaviors (Jimerson et al., 2000; Raver, 2002); and these behaviors have been linked to higher depression and anxiety (Kaplan et al., 1994; Kortering et al., 1997). Not only do these outcomes affect an individual's academic trajectory, but also influence their psychological and socioemotional development.

## **Immigration and Socio-emotional Development**

Stevens and Vollebergh (2008) explain that beyond any characteristics of the racial/ethnic group, much of the stress and mental health problems experienced by immigrants is largely associated with their position as a minoritized group in the United States. The authors reference Garcia-Coll and colleagues (1996) who explain that developmental outcomes of migrant children are derived from the social, political, economic and psychological settings they inhabit, largely impacted by racism and discrimination. Such experiences of racism and discrimination manifest through racial profiling for undocumented individuals to policies targeting deportation of families. Many Latino, immigrant children are often exposed to these psychologically violent behaviors and are also burdened with the problems endured by their parents (Rubio-Hernandez & Ayón, 2016). Kouider et al. (2014) found that emotional and behavioral problems of migrant children stemmed from a series of risk factors including high acculturation stress, low English competence, language brokering, and differences in intergenerational cultural orientation. Given the nature of migration-related stressors in children's lives, education settings should place further attention on how they meet the compounded needs of Latino, immigrant children.

### **Socioemotional Development and Learning**

#### **Dual Language Learning for Developing Relationships with Peers**

Communities across the United States have enthusiastically embraced dual language programs as a means to providing opportunities in which all children begin to value bilingualism and multiculturalism. During a critical time like early childhood, where children are observing cues and learning from their surroundings, exposure to another language can be critical for how they view differences in others. By the age of 4-5 years old, children start to develop a self-concept, and they start to build preferences for peers with shared native language and accents (Aboud et al., 2012; Kinzler et al., 2009). Early childhood interventions can help shape children's relationships during this critical phase. Linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms can accentuate cross-cultural and cross-racial friendships and acceptance towards diversity.

Further, these classrooms can help dual language learners feel more accepted and included in the classroom. Research tells us that children who speak their native language or display an accent in English have faced great discrimination from other peers (Albers et al., 2009), inhibiting peer relationships (Howers, Sanders, & Lee, 2008) and school belonging. Moreover, English language learners' sense of school belonging in sixth grade has shown to be negatively linked to other students' evaluation of them, such that the more negatively they were viewed, the less likely they were to feel like they belonged in school (Morrison et al., 2003). Alternatively, classroom practices that promote school belonging have been linked to children's academic self-efficacy (McMahon et al., 2009) and may be especially important for students from collectivist cultural backgrounds who value kinship (Taylor, Larsen-Rife, Conger, & Widaman, 2012). Given that the US education system presents dual language learners with multiple barriers to transitioning into schooling, culturally and linguistically, providing curriculum and instruction that facilitates genuine and inclusive peer interactions can foster

comfort and further participation of these students in unfamiliar spaces (Meyer, Klein, & Cenishi, 1994).

### **Dual Language Learning for Establishing Relationships with Teachers**

Teacher-student relationships also shape DLL's learning. Positive teacher-student relationships have been shown to decrease chronic absenteeism (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004), improve student motivation, and promote positive attitudes towards education in general (Andersen et al., 1981). Teacher-student relationships often rely on the sense of closeness between the students and their educators, which also predict students' sense of school belonging. One study exploring the rates of school belonging between English Language Learners and non-English Language Learners found lower rates of school belonging for ELLs in fourth grade, noting that language status and teachers' evaluations of the students contributed to this variance (Morrison et al., 2003). This finding holds longitudinal importance, given that a poor school-student relationship has been linked to higher dropout rates (Wayman, 2002).

Grasping from existing literature on teacher-student relationships during adolescence can provide a fresh perspective for how teachers can better serve students of color, particularly Latino DLLs from immigrant families. One study examining Latino high adolescents found that youth who had a lower sense of school belonging, were more likely to miss school and have less intrinsic motivation in their classes (Sanchez et al., 2005). However, when educators displayed authentic caring, respect, and trust, students were more likely to be academically engaged and willing to participate (Vasquez, 2018). This study, conducted with Latino high school male students, also concluded that many times, teachers' perceptions were flawed in assuming students' disinterest and apathy, primarily because these behaviors stemmed from a lack of connection to the school and the teachers (Vasquez, 2018). Effective student-teacher communication greatly contributes to a student's adaptation, development, and academic achievement. This is critical, because as Han (2010) notes, "the teacher-child relationship is a salient marker of the socioemotional processes involved in academic performance" (p. 721).

Furthermore, apparent support from teachers, demonstrated by respect and praise, was linked to better attitudes towards school and improved language learning outcomes (Hallinan, 2008). For DLLs, educator support is critical in their language development, since language-learning often sparks anxiety or even discomfort in some students (Huang, 2010). A study conducted on language-learning anxiety found that, "Teacher academic support was negatively correlated with speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation as well as fear of failing the class, but was positively associated with student comfort with English-language learning" (Huang, 2010; p. 25) and "teacher personal support correlated with two types of anxiety, student comfort with English-language learning and fear of failing the class, and was positively correlated with student comfort with English-language learning and negatively associated with students' fear of failing the class" (Huang, 2010; p. 25). These findings demonstrate that teachers' academic and personal support is critical in improving students' sense of comfort and belonging as they navigate a new language. By valuing the English language and

students' native language, teachers can serve as vessels by which students feel more at ease in their learning journey.

### **Dual Language Learning as a Link to Engaging Families in Schools**

It has been often cited that many Latino families abide by several values that are culturally important to them when interacting with others. *Respeto*, a critical component of interpersonal interactions, is a determining factor in the level of comfort of Latino families in different spaces. This respect is fostered when families and parents feel that they are being treated as equals by others. Muñoz and Garcia (2009) reveal that many Latino parents have historically had negative experiences with U.S. school systems, particularly in terms of respect for their language and cultural differences, often perceiving them from a deficit-based lens, thereby holding lower expectations for their students. This phenomenon has contributed to a deficit learning model in which actors view Latino students as less than or poor children who do not have enough understanding, causing a major rift between families and the school system (Muñoz & Garcia, 2009). Given that culture and language are inextricably linked, many researchers (Baquedano-Lopez, Jorge Solis, and Gabino Arredondo) call for a whole-child assessment that examines linguistic, relational, and interactional dynamics between Latino families and schools to promote their students' long term and holistic achievement.

Parents' Spanish language use has also been reviewed in the literature regarding engagement within the school system. Zarate (2007) notes that because of the structural gap between parents' primary language and services or resources offered by the school, many parents have felt uncomfortable in engaging with teachers, school activities, or helping their children with homework. For example, Latino parents have noted negative experiences with teachers, including feeling rejected, hindering further relationship building (Olivos, 2004, Poza et al., 2014). The deficit lens by which the Spanish language is viewed within schools has impacted teachers' perceptions of the benefits and contributions that parents can make in their child's education through their native language. This has led teachers and schools to show greater support for more traditional forms of parent engagement like PTA or parent-teacher conferences. Schools should acknowledge less publicized forms of parent engagement that occur through families' native languages, thereby valuing families' funds of knowledge and the maintenance of students' home language (Hurtado, Cervantez, & Eccleston, 2009 in Munoz & Garcia, 2009; Zarate, 2007).

Indeed, language matching within schools can move collaboration between parents and teachers forward by easing parents' understanding of their role in their child's learning. Carrasquillo and London (1993) found that Latino parents viewed academic learning as something that should occur at school, through teachers; and that their role was to teach their children more about moral and civic responsibility (Rodriguez-Brown, 2009). Through language matching, teachers can explain to parents different strategies that will enable them to be co-facilitators in the academic development of their children. This also holds high relevance for dual language learners' academic success, as parent engagement has been positively linked to

behavior (Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2015; Hill, Castellino, Lansford, Nowlin, Dodge, Bates, and Pettit, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Wang, Hill, and Hofkens, 2014), emotional functioning (Casper & Lopez, 2006; Wang, Hill, and Hofkens, 2014; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2013), social functioning (El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010; Hernandez, 2000), and student attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon, 2007). Beginning these practices early on can provide a foundational role for successfully connecting DLL students' and families' to educational settings.

### **Dual Language Learning as a Promotive Factor for Cultural/Ethnic Identity Formation**

Beyond being a driving force for social change, dual language learning serves as a conduit through which an individual's native language is maintained, serving as a protective factor for cultural or ethnic identity formation. Drawing on the model by Knight et al. (1990), enculturation processes are facilitated through the family and other nonfamilial agents who play a part in the child's socialization. For parents, this socialization is largely influenced by and dependent on language for communicating ethnic practices, customs, and cultural values to their children. Ethnic socialization is critical for the development of self-concept, particularly in relation to ethnic identity, or the connectedness and identification to one's ethnic group (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). Ethnic identity is important because it has been found to promote academic achievement and be protective against the effects of discrimination and against the development of mental health disorders (Lawrence, Bachman, & Ruble, 2007; Umaña-Taylor, 2011). In other words, ethnic identity serves a critical role as children navigate the world and begin to understand who they are in it (Bernal, Knight, Ocampo, Garza, & Cota, 1993).

Just as important, however, is the socialization that takes place in schools that foster that cultural or ethnic identification. Brown (2017) suggests that part of this exploration and identity formation is influenced by outside factors such as interactions with peers and teachers. Moreover, Brown (2017) explains that environmental factors within schools also determine the extent to which children have the ability to strengthen or weaken their ethnic identities, such as the ethnic/racial composition of the school. The adaptation process that children go through in embracing an identity over the other is highly relevant for immigrant children who may compromise their identification with their ethnic group in order to feel like they belong with the majority group (Nishina, Bellmore, Witkow, & Nylund-Gibson, 2010). Similarly, when faced with discrimination by peers, children are more likely to negatively evaluate their ethnicity and less likely to want to identify with that group (Turner & Brown, 2007). This process is also explained by Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2009) who coined the term "social mirroring" to explain how a school's messaging and culture heavily influences immigrant children's self-perceptions.

In a study exploring the development of ethnic identity in school settings, Brown (2017) found that children's ethnic identity is largely established by the end of elementary school, such that they are more likely to report and identify with the same ethnic group every year. This has

important implications for early childhood education, as teachers and schools can begin to create learning environments that foster this identity formation early on. In the same study, the author found that Latino children were more likely to embrace their ethnic identity over the span of time, when the school's demographic composition was primarily Latinos, both in teachers and students (Brown, 2017). Similarly, children were more likely to espouse their ethnic identity when schools valued or demonstrated support for multiculturalism. In thinking about how dual language learning spaces promote similar characteristics to the ones specified in this study, proponents can point to the diversity and inclusion that is championed in valuing multiple cultures and multiple languages with equal weight. In this, dual language immersion programs can contribute to the growth of a population that proudly embraces their ethnicity and background, which has been deemed critical for positive development.

### **Dual Language Learning as an Entryway to Social Change**

As previously described, many Latino, migrant children face significant changes emotionally, socially, and psychologically as a result of cross-country and cross-cultural transitions, either of their own or of their family (Toppelberg & Collins, 2010). Many of them must learn how to adapt to a new culture, language, and way of life fairly different from that of their parents' home country. Moreover, many children go through the adaptation or acculturation process at the same time they are overcoming past traumatic experiences (Rubio-Hernandez & Ayón, 2016). A part of this acculturation process includes learning the norms and practices of the majority culture and incorporating it into their own. For children, this adjustment occurs in school, since this is where they spend a great portion of their day. However, instead of focusing this socialization into one that adapts to the American culture or English language, dual language learning provides children with the opportunity to learn from each other and value diversity in one another. In a case study conducted at James F. Oyster Bilingual School, Freeman (1996) describes this process of bilingualism and cultural pluralism as a tool for social change. Relying on the language-as-resource orientation, the author goes on to explain that whereas language in mainstream society is viewed as a problem, it actually offers children the ability to resist homogenization and establish bilingualism and cultural pluralism as assets to be reinforced.

Similarly, Garcia-Coll et al. (1996) offer an integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children in which they describe that children are situated at the center of social, political, economic and psychological forces that promote, inhibit, or shape their environments and progress. Given that ethnicity and culture are such principal elements in the development of minority children, particularly Latino immigrant children, learning environments that strip away home languages can inhibit children's linguistic, cognitive, and social development. Dual language learning, on the other hand, provides access to developing such competencies that even the playing field for Latino, immigrant children.

### **A Shift Towards Equity**

In considering the implications of this review, we look towards an important study developed by Sanders and Downer (2011) in which they lay out how to promote diversity in



pre-kindergarten classrooms and elevate the outcomes described above. Both authors suggest ways that classrooms and teachers can contribute to a more culturally attuned environment in which diversity is valued. This includes constructing classrooms with students and teachers that are demographically, socially, emotionally, and psychologically different, who are able to engage parents and families with different backgrounds and stories (Brown, Tanner-Smith, Lesane-Brown, & Ezell, 2007). Furthermore, for spaces in which demographic diversity is not attainable, early childhood spaces should hire educators who engage in reflective practices in their teaching, as this has often been linked to greater use of multicultural practices and high-quality learning (Nieto & Bode, 2008).

Though this review has included important considerations for DLL classrooms, social change is the main focus. As educators, appreciation for diversity and inclusion can begin early on in childhood, not only in positively impacting dual language learners in their socioemotional and academic development, but also in elevating the curriculum and instruction they receive. Therefore, scholars should continue to explore the ways in which research from middle childhood and adolescence can inform early childhood practices that center around identity, cultural and linguistic inclusion, peer relationships, and parent engagement. Moreover, policymakers should be cognizant of how these are implemented within classrooms and assessed through quality indicators, so that states begin to place more emphasis and resources in identifying these gaps and addressing them.