Working with Young Dual Language Learners and their Families in Early Learning Settings

By Peggy Hickman, Ph.D.

Urgent calls are emerging in the Philadelphia region for training for early learning professionals in meeting the linguistic needs of young dual language learners—children from birth to five years old who are living in homes where a language other than English is the primary language used for communication. This paper is intended to inform program design and planning, to meet the needs of program directors, education managers, and others involved in considering how to meet the needs of young children who are dual language learners.

The Office of Head Start defines dual language learners as "children who…acquire two or more languages simultaneously, as well as learn a second language while continuing to develop their first language. The term 'dual language learners' encompasses other terms frequently used, such as Limited English Proficient, bilingual, English language learners, English learners, and children who speak a language other than English (Head Start Program Facts Fiscal Year 2015)." It is also a "child-centered term which seeks to recognize the totality of young children's early language learning experiences" (NCELA, 2011, p. 10), and the influence of language on all areas of development of the young learner.

To provide best-practices in early learning

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>
> The Office of Head Start

programs for this growing population of young learners and their families living in the Philadelphia region, it is important to understand their characteristics and needs. For dual language learners, the influence of family and community cultures, as well as native and second language attainment, are major overlapping factors in developing responsive early learning programs. The goal of this document is to provide an overview of considerations to build and sustain programs which provide important cultural and linguistic supports for dual language learners. In doing so, early learning professionals contribute to current and future positive effects on young learners' linguistic, social-emotional, cognitive, and academic development.
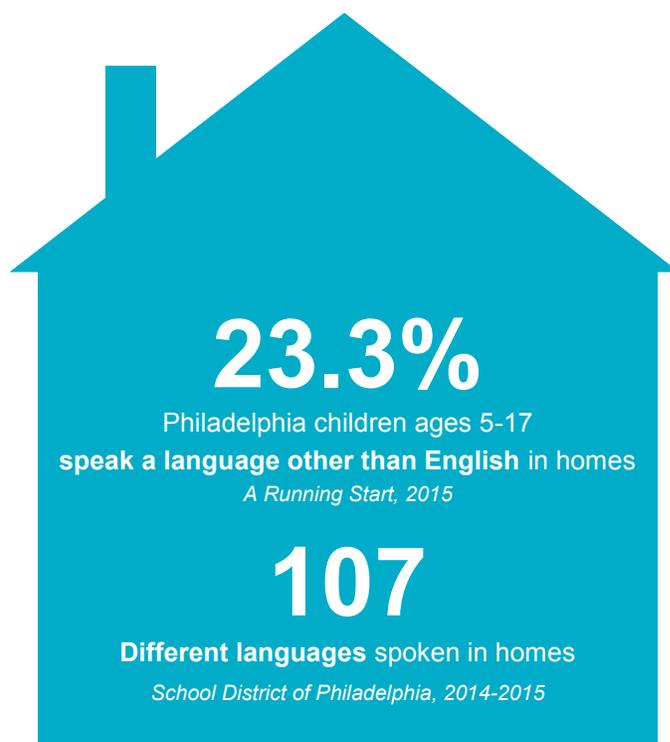
DEMOGRAPHICS: WHO ARE THE YOUNG DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS?

Estimates of the number of young dual language learners in the United States, and the Philadelphia region, vary due to a lack of systematic information-gathering across different types of early learning settings (e.g., there is no specific data collected on language learner status family child care programs, however Early Head Start programs do collect this information). What is clear is that the number of young dual language learners in communities continues to rise. In 2015, Head Start and Early Head Start indicated that 29% of child participants nationally were from families [including extended families and nontraditional family units] that primarily spoke a language other than English at home. Nearly 25% were from families that primarily spoke Spanish at home (Head Start Program Facts Fiscal Year 2015).

A Running Start Philadelphia (2015) has reported that 23.3% of children ages 5-17 residing in Philadelphia speak a language other than English in their home. In 2014-2015, the School District of Philadelphia reported 107 languages other than English spoken by students. The largest group of students with languages other than English was Spanish speakers, making up 52% of the District's dual language learner population. Other languages spoken by students across the District, in descending percentages, were Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, Vietnamese, Khmer, various English and French-based Creoles and Pidgins, Russian, French, Portuguese, Nepali, Cantonese Chinese, Pashto, Malayalam, Ukrainian, Albanian, Bengali, and 82 additional low-incidence languages (Windle, 2016).

It is important to note that not all of these students and their families represent new immigrants; many are in first, second, and third generation families and communities where a language other than English predominates. For some learners, English is first encountered in their early learning environments; in other families, infants, toddlers, and preschoolers may learn their home language and English simultaneously. Other families may start by using the home language exclusively, and as their children enter learning environments with English speaking peers, younger siblings communicate more often in English. For those families who are newly immigrated, nationally they are "less likely to enroll their children in preschool programs than native-born ELL families." However, this is not true in Pennsylvania, where "41% of 3 year-olds, and 63% of 4 year-olds in immigrant families; and 35% of 3 year-olds and 61% of 4 year-olds in native-born ELL families" were enrolled in preschool programs. These statistics are important considering that Pennsylvania, and the Philadelphia region in particular, are high on the list of immigrant-receiving communities across the United States (PA Keys, 2009, p. 23).

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BEST PRACTICE IN EARLY LEARNING SETTINGS

As noted above, dual language learners bring the intertwined factors of cultural diversity and first-language development to early learning environments. Therefore, a framework for best practice in supporting young learners requires not only a socio-cultural approach to learning and development (and related professional cultural competence), but also recognition and value of the role of the learners' first language and culture. Specific supports for first and second (English) language acquisition and literacy skill development must be provided.

A socio-cultural approach: Understanding the value in diversity

A socio-cultural approach to working with dual language learners and their families is strengths-based and family focused. It requires that early learning professionals seek understanding of the ways diverse cultural and linguistic experiences guide development for these (and all) students. It includes decision-making that is based in the understanding that the experiences children have in their communities in relation to culture (social norms), language use, and historical, culture-bound "bodies of knowledge and skills, or 'funds of knowledge'" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2001, p. 133), are critical factors influencing their development, learning, self-concept, and identity. Learner, family, and community funds of knowledge are important resources from which to build new learning. Professionals can support young dual language learners by recognizing and valuing these home and community experiences, beliefs, and language(s) used for communication within early learning contexts, as the foundation of their understanding about the world (Coltrane, 2003). In doing so, early learning professionals demonstrate "cultural responsiveness," sometimes also referred to as "cultural competence."

Practitioners of early learning who are culturally responsive:

- "understand the relationship between culture and language and how each contributes to development;
- reflect care and connectedness;
- respect and acknowledge family and community values and belief systems related to child development and learning from other non-Western groups;
- demonstrate understanding about the unique challenges that English language learner children and families encounter in US society" (PA Keys, 2009, p. 89);
- "respect all learners as individuals with culturally defined identities;
- realize that students bring funds of knowledge to their learning communities" (NCTE, 2006);
- show a commitment to "socially responsive and responsible teaching and learning"; and
- are "advocates for and models of social justice and equity" (NCTE, 2006).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) asserts that culturally competent educators of young children "must accept the legitimacy of children's home language, respect (hold in high regard) the home culture, and promote and encourage the active involvement and support of all families" (NAEYC, 1995, p.2). In particular, it is important for early learning professionals to understand the diverse ways in which children are socialized, or in other words, the ways they are provided with implicit and explicit guidance in what behaviors and interaction styles are considered appropriate with whom, at what times, and in what contexts. This socialization results from the (often unspoken) sets of cultural values and beliefs that are held by, and guide, decisions and interactions in families and communities. Although too complex to cover in-depth in this article, the recognition that the way children, families, and educators themselves have been socialized to communicate and interact across the different communities in which they live and work, is central to building learning environments that are responsive to the strengths and needs of young dual language learners and their families.

Indeed, awareness and knowledge of, and understanding about, one's own worldview and deeply held beliefs can lead to better understanding about other groups and individuals, and promote cultural responsiveness. Henderson and Mapp (2002) add that culturally responsive early learning professionals can "address the challenges that ELL families may face, and encourage active participation in the educational process by being aware and knowledgeable about their [own, and families'] worldviews about child development, child rearing, and early childhood education; by considering alternative, non-traditional ways to reach out and communicate with these families in a culturally responsive manner, particularly in light of the myriad of socio-cultural and

INTERPRETING AND TRANSLATION SERVICES

The following vendors are available in the Philadelphia region. This list is a small sample of resources available.

- **School District of Philadelphia**
  www.philasd.org/face/translations

- **Nationalities Service Center**
  https://nscphila.org/interpretation-translation-services

- **Avante Language Services**
  www.avantelanguage.com

- **Quantum**
  www.quantumtranslations.com

Additional **telephonic interpreting**, which staff may use to schedule appointments and communicate with families:
- **InterpreTalk** offered by Language Service Associates
  https://lsaweb.com/solutions/telephone-interpreting/

economic issues they may be facing; and by knowing and understanding effective strategies for productive cross-cultural communication with ELL families, including sensitivity to non-verbal communication and to the use of skilled interpreters and translators who are culturally knowledgeable and respectful of confidentiality" (PA Keys, 2009, p. 91).

Getting families involved

Educators can also show support for diverse children and families by encouraging family involvement with their child's early learning program. Though this involvement may take different forms by families, due to cultural, linguistic, citizenship, educational, and previous experience factors, early learning professionals can promote cultural responsiveness and competence, including native language learning, by encouraging families to be involved in their child's learning in a variety of ways. Family members can share specific strengths and resources with other families or with the school community, individually or through get-togethers. Families who have flexibility to participate directly with their children in early learning programs can provide valuable native language support to young dual language learners, particularly when the early learning professionals are not bilingual. This demonstrates to young learners and their families that their home language is valued, and valuable. In addition, educators, families, and community members can collaborate to ensure two-way communication between families and caregivers in a variety of ways:

- community members becoming paraprofessionals in classrooms, or serving as cultural and linguistic liaisons between educators and families;

- educators and families collaborating on educational goals and initiatives;
- all stakeholders participating in collaborative discussions and learning opportunities to "raise awareness of the importance of supporting children's native languages at home; or family literacy programs that give parents and children the opportunity to learn together" (Coltrane, 2003, para. 6).

Furthermore, educators can show responsiveness to families by ensuring the availability of native language interpreters for face-to-face communication with families, as appropriate, and by providing families with written communication in their preferred language. Early learning programs cannot require families to provide their own interpreter or use their child as an interpreter in adult interactions.

Stages of second language acquisition

Early childhood settings can support young dual language learners by creating culturally and linguistically appropriate early learning programs. Two important building blocks of programs for these learners have been mentioned above: understanding and implementing a socio-cultural approach, and recognizing and valuing the role of the first language and culture in overall development. A third cornerstone of culturally responsive programs is knowing the process and stages of second language acquisition to support positive language, literacy and learning outcomes for young learners.

First and second language development and second language acquisition occur in parallel stages. However, progress in developing second language acquisition is related to children's first language development, and the ways in which supports and scaffolding are provided to learners to enhance proficiency in both languages.

Most researchers and practitioners have described the process of second language acquisition using a system of stages, or levels, each one characterized by higher proficiency in the use and expression of language. They apply to both social language, as well as "academic" language related to curricular concepts in language arts, math, science, and social studies. Understanding these levels allows early childhood professionals to support and build the developmentally appropriate language skills of dual language learners. There are six levels identified as follows:

Six levels of second language acquisition

Level 1: Entering- In this stage, the child spends a lot of time listening to the new language to begin to identify sounds of the language, the way language is used, and high-frequency/high utility words and phrases. During this time, the learner:

- has little to no speech production,
- indicates comprehension physically,
- relies heavily on context for meaning; comprehends key words only,
- responds nonverbally.

The young learner can show understanding through non-verbal communication: listening, movement, drama, matching, mime, choosing, drawing, pointing

Level 2: Emerging- In this stage, the learner begins to use oral language in meaningful ways:

- verbalizes key words,
- relies heavily on context,
- responds with one- or two-word answers, or short phrases,
- uses routine expressions and key words independently,
- listens with greater understanding,
- demonstrates increased confidence.

The young learner can show understanding by: answering yes/no or either/or questions, providing one-word answers, lists of words, two-word strings and short phrases ("formulaic speech" related to everyday phrases, common words in routines, greetings, etc.).

Level 3: Developing- In this stage, the learner is growing in their ability to understand and produce language. He/she:

- produces whole sentences,
- hears smaller elements of speech,
- shows good comprehension (given rich context),
- functions competently on a social level,
- uses newly-acquired receptive vocabulary to take risks, experiment and form new messages in English.

The young learner can show understanding by using: three-word phrases or longer—maybe even complete sentences, dialogue, extended conversations and story-telling

Level 4: Expanding- In this stage, the student:

- produces connected discourse and narratives,
- uses more extensive vocabulary,
- hears some subtle elements of speech,
- shows good comprehension (context),
- uses more "academic" language, though still has many errors in comprehension or in using language to communicate compared to their same-age, English-speaking peers.

Level 5: Bridging- In this stage, the learner demonstrates more accurate and correct use of language, with fewer errors in comprehension or in using language to communicate, compared to their same-age, English-speaking peers. Also, for the most part these errors do not affect the learner's or listeners' understanding of meaning.

Level 6: Reaching- At this stage, the young learner's language skills are comparable to their same-age, English-speaking peers.

These six levels of English language proficiency form part of a comprehensive instructional and assessment framework known as WIDA, created in partnership with, and used in schools across Pennsylvania and 38 other states. The WIDA framework supports structured assessment and instruction for ELLs in line with their levels of social and content-based language proficiency levels in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Once enrolled in K-12 public school settings, English language learners' proficiency is assessed yearly using the WIDA ACCESS proficiency test to monitor progress over time.

The WIDA organization has also collaborated with partner organizations, including the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), to document standards for English language learning, by grade and language proficiency levels. These PA English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS), grades Pre-K-12, assist educators in pre-k through 12th grade to plan language instruction and linguistic support for dual language learners, aligned to the child's level of language proficiency (1 to 6) in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and aligned with the PDE general grade-level learning standards.

Using the standards, early learning professionals can match the level of language used in instruction to the level of language use and understanding of the learner; in other words, they provide instruction and opportunities that align with the child's level of language proficiency. This is referred to as providing comprehensible input, defined as "language input that can be understood by listeners despite them not understanding all the words and structures in it. It is described as one level above that of the learners if it can only just be understood…Trying to understand language slightly above their level encourages learners to use natural learning strategies such as guessing words from context and inferring meaning" (British Council, 2006, para. 1).
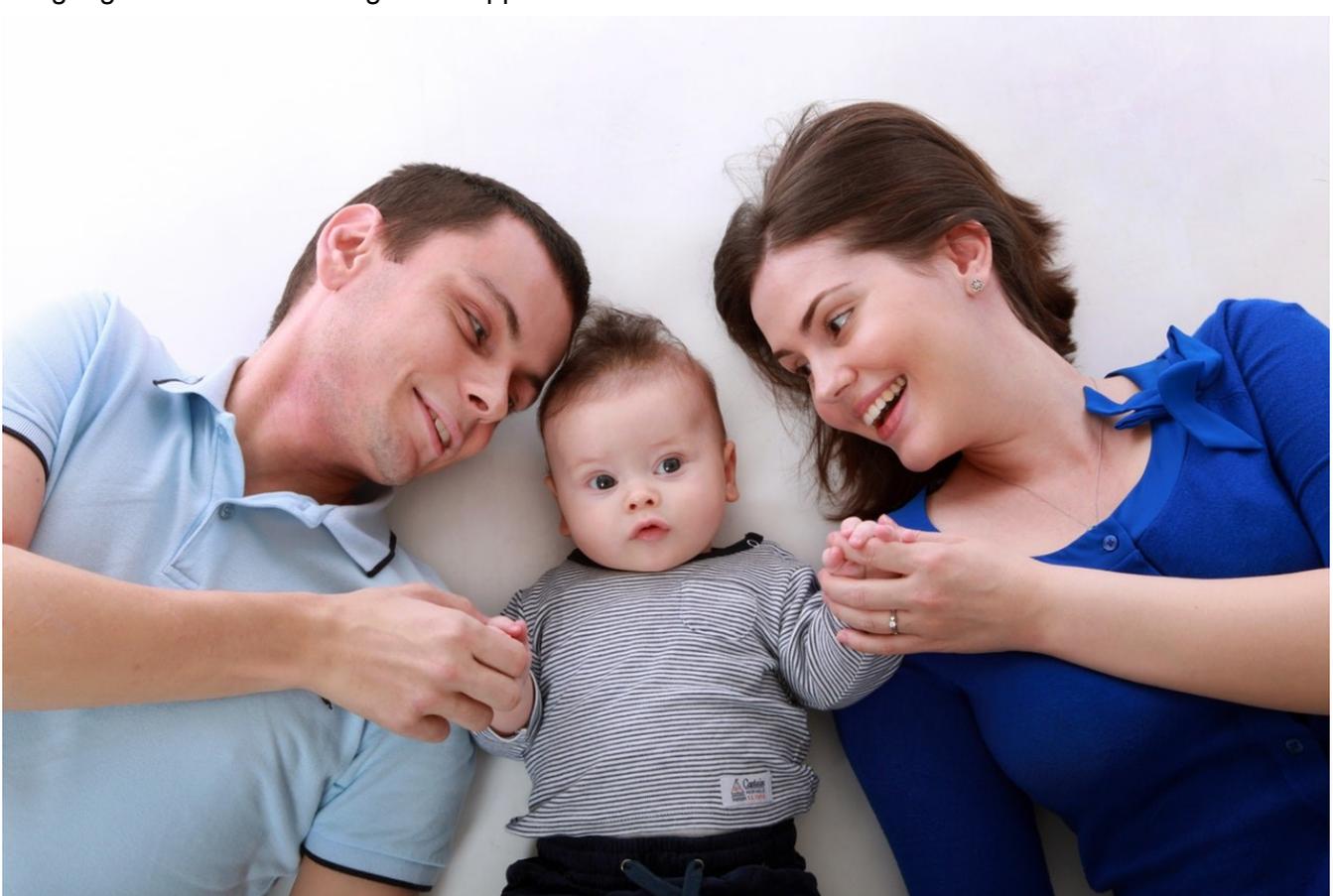
Supporting language learning in the early childhood setting

In addition to understanding the process of second language acquisition, early learning professionals can support the language and literacy development of young dual language learners by providing evidence-based practices and instruction aligned with their needs, including:

- Implementing culturally responsive curricula and assessment strategies that reflect the lives and experiences of dual language learners

- Creating a language-rich environment that provides many opportunities for children to use their first language and English to interact with peers and adults for a variety of purposes

- Using a consistent format for planning lessons that ensures attention to and supports for language development for ELLs, such as tapping into and building on children's prior knowledge; creating lessons that include both language objectives and content objectives; identifying and pre-teaching key instructional and content ("academic") vocabulary related to the lesson; intentional planning for learners to interact and use content-based language; teaching learning strategies explicitly (e.g., retelling uses the structure of first-next-last to show listening comprehension); and allowing for multiple opportunities for practice, application, review, and assessment (see, for example, the SIOP framework and resources (Echevarría, Short, & Peterson, 2012)

- Ensuring consistent daily routines, predictable interaction opportunities, and common terms for activities and tools (e.g., circle time, daily rhymes and songs, center activities, etc.) in both languages

- Providing structured opportunities for language learning and ongoing, positive feedback and modeling language use

- Using scaffolding techniques to build young learners' social and content-based language and knowledge

- Developing a print-rich environment that pairs words with visuals. In bilingual settings, books and materials should represent both languages; labeling should be in both languages, with a system for children to be able to determine which print is in the home language and which is in English (e.g., black lettering for English, blue lettering for Spanish).

- Embedding first and second language-based phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness, and vocabulary teaching into all activities

- Helping children see connections between phonemes, letters, words, and communication patterns in their first language and in English

- Using structured read-aloud activities that target vocabulary and listening comprehension skills

(August & Shanahan, 2006; Bryant, Smith, & Bryant, 2008; Dray & Hickman, 2014; Echevarría & Graves, 2003; Echevarría, Short, & Peterson, 2012; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola & Vaughn, 2004; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; PA Keys, 2009)

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EARLY LEARNING DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNER RESOURCES

In the greater Philadelphia region, the Southeast Regional Key provides professional development opportunities throughout the year for early learning professionals to assist in building the skills and knowledge to help address the needs of young dual language learners. Trainings include:

- A series of modules developed by the Pennsylvania Key on Supporting English Language Learners (ELL) and Dual Language Learners (DLL) in Early Childhood Classroom Settings. For more information about these sessions, please contact SERKPD@phmc.org.

- Cultivating Language for Linguistically Diverse Children provided by Children's Village. In this session, participants have the opportunity to understand the experience of infants, toddlers and preschoolers who are DLLs. Valuable strategies for facilitating language and literacy for this population at home and in school are shared. For more information, please contact maryg@childrensvillagephila.org.

Additional online resources:

Better Kid Care, Dual Language Learners: Strategies for Successful Opportunities in ECE
This 2-hour self-learning module provides strategies for working with dual language learners and supports ECE providers in understanding the cognitive, social, and language development of dual language learners.

Pennsylvania's English Language Learner Toolkit
The ELL Tool Kit is an initiative of the Office of Child Development and Early Learning. It is a collaborative effort between the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare [now Human Services] and the Pennsylvania Department of Education to address the needs of infants, toddlers, and PreK-3 ELLs from immigrant, refugee, and migrant families within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Office of Head Start, Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center
This site offers a Dual Language Learner Toolkit, a compilation of ELL resources for Head Start and Early Head Start communities which can be utilized in various early childhood education settings. Resources include culturally and linguistically appropriate practices related to ELL early childhood development and learning, family and community engagement, assessments, children with disabilities, and professional development for staff.

Language Castle
This site, by author Karen Nemeth, provides resources for early childhood educators working with linguistically diverse young children.

Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures
The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine provides evidence-based research and recommendations on improving educational outcomes for ELL students from birth to grade 12 through policies and practice.

Zero to Three
This site provides information on building language and communication for children from birth to age three, which includes resources on early literacy and language development of young ELLs and the benefits of dual language development.

NAEYC
These position statements offer a variety of recommendations to support early childhood practitioners in meeting the needs of ELLs.

WIDA
This site provides resources to advance the academic language development and achievement for culturally and linguistically diverse children through high quality standards, assessments, research, and professional development for early childhood educators.

National Research Center on Hispanic Families
This site provides the latest research to advance early childhood education for young children from low-income Hispanic families.

Colorín Colorado
A bilingual site for educators and families of ELLs from pre-k through grade 12.

BENEFITS OF BILINGUALISM

Being bilingual, or multilingual, is common in many communities across the world, and it brings many cognitive, linguistic, academic, and social-emotional benefits to children, families and communities (Child Trends Databank, 2014; PA Key, 2009). Current and historical research supports the many advantages of literacy development in more than one language, including increased cognitive and linguistic flexibility compared to monolinguals; more efficient English language learning; and higher levels of school achievement for dual language learners who have access to native language instruction for longer periods of time while learning English (August & Hakuta, 2005; August & Shanahan, 2006; Goldenberg, 2008). In particular, dual language learners "exposed to their two languages early in life, ages 0-3, often have a reading advantage over monolinguals; and this [bilingualism] may have such a powerful positive impact on literacy that it counteracts any negative effects of low-income status" (Kovelman, Baker & Petitto, 2008, as noted in NCELA, 2011, p. 7). When young learners interact with the world around them, they build cognitive understanding, and experience the many ways language(s) can be used to discover and learn about the world and their communities. Theoretically, once a child cognitively stores understandings about the world, in any language, those ideas, and simple and complex units of learning, can be shared in either or both languages once acquisition begins, and can serve as the foundations of connections to new conceptual understandings. For young dual language learners in high quality early learning contexts, social and communicative interactions with adults and peers, in both their home language and English, offer opportunities to support cultural, cognitive, social and linguistic competence development (Halle et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, early learning professionals are experiencing ongoing increases in the number and types of young dual language learners and families they serve. Different program alternatives require different human and material resources (e.g., bilingual teachers and materials, or co-teaching language programs, ESL-only with or without native language supports). Best practice research provides guidance in ways professionals can work to develop culturally and linguistically responsive programs that can have lasting benefits for children and their families.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peggy Hickman, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Education at Arcadia University. She completed her doctorate in Multicultural Special Education at the University of Texas, Austin, as well as an M.Ed. in Educational Administration from UTAustin and an M.Ed. in Bilingual/Elementary Education from Arizona State University.   In addition, Dr. Hickman taught school-aged students for 9 years including students in pre-kindergarten through second grade, in bilingual inclusive settings. She is proficient in Spanish. Her research interests include literacy and biliteracy, multicultural special education, educator preparation related to diverse and multicultural populations, and educational leadership in diverse cultural and linguistic environments, with children in general and special education. Dr. Hickman has worked directly with teachers and educators in the region in meeting the needs of English language learners, and has consulted regionally and presented regionally, nationally and internationally on these topics. She has published articles in Learning Disabilities Quarterly, Exceptional Children, Teaching Exceptional Children, Curriculum and Teaching, and The Reading Teacher, among others, and a co-authored book published by the International Reading Association entitled *Dynamic Read-Aloud Strategies for English Learners: Building Language and Literacy in the Primary Grades.*

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