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Rethinking Preschool Education through Bilingual Universal Pre-kindergarten: Opportunities and Challenges

Cover Page Footnote

Zoila Morell, PhD., is an Associate Professor in Educational Leadership at Mercy College. In over 25 years of experience working with children and families, she has served in an administrative capacity in a variety of programs serving young language learners and their families. She received statewide recognition for her work as a school Principal where she administered programs for over 1000 children and families, mostly from immigrant homes. Dr. Morell currently serves on several advisory boards to the New York State Education Department on the identification and instruction of young language learners in the growing PreK programs across the state. A frequent keynote speaker and presenter, she also consults with school districts on language acquisition, emergent literacy, school readiness, parental involvement, bilingual education, and early childhood programming. In addition, Dr. Morell's research examines bilingual early childhood education, bilingualism in young children, and conditions for young Latino children in the US.

Editorial

Rethinking Preschool Education through Bilingual Universal Pre-Kindergarten: Opportunities and Challenges

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Keywords: bilingual education, preschool education, pre-kindergarten education

Historically, little was known about the services and experiences that young children have before they enter school in the United States. In fact, there was no unifying system that captures the early experiences of children across the country during the preschool years that might bridge early care programs with early education; much of what is known relates to utilization rates for federally funded programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start or state funded subsidies for childcare (Early Childhood Data Collaborative, 2011).

However, more recently, in 2011, the federal *Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge* (RTT-ELC) funding initiative called for states to develop coordinated systems of early care and education to address and track this very issue. The goal of these funds was to improve access to quality early learning and development programs for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, and in turn, enhance their school readiness (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Then, in his last term in office, President Barak Obama introduced the *Preschool for All* initiative proposing to allocate federal funds for states based on their population of low to moderate income four-year-olds. This cost-sharing proposal would incentivize states to expand enrollment in their existing preschool programs while the federal government expanded funding for Head Start and Early Head Start (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2013).

It is notable that this unprecedented expansion of funding came in to being while the US child population set records of racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity (Frey, 2011). Much of this diversity is driven by the increase in Latinos who comprise the largest ethnic minority in the US, and who are overwhelmingly (72.9%) Spanish speakers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In addition, Latinos constitute 17.6% of the

overall US population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), but in the 0-5 age group, they represent 26% of the child population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

Across the country, the proportion of children identified as English learners in early care and education programs is greater than in Kindergarten (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). This suggests two important conditions relative to Pre-Kindergarten:

1. Population subgroups (racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic) do not attend early education and care programs at the same rates. Usually state-funded programs reach many low-income children and immigrant populations, often children who do not speak English or are bilingual. Consequently, these types of Pre-Kindergarten programs should incorporate cultural and linguistically relevant approaches that will meet the needs of a very diverse student population (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017).
2. There are great gains in English language development during the Pre-Kindergarten year (Tazi, 2011). It becomes important to track the number of children who are classified as *English Language Learners* upon Kindergarten entry to note the impact of a year in Pre-Kindergarten.

It is clear that the field needs more robust sources of information regarding young children. Accurate counts that include culture and language sub-groups, histories of children's early care experiences, programmatic goals of local daycares and Head Starts, family values and preferences – all of these data inform the work of early childhood professionals serving linguistically diverse populations. Additionally, any discussion today about formally creating or expanding Pre-Kindergarten must account for how policymakers, communities, and educators will address the needs of a growing population of very young children who enter Pre-Kindergarten speaking little or no English.

This volume of the *Journal of Multilingual Education Research (JMER)* focuses the conversation on pressing topics in the education of young emergent bilinguals at this time of Pre-Kindergarten expansion. I begin by adopting the term *emergent bilingual* to refer to this population, in order to align the conversation with a strengths-based perspective emanating from proponents of bilingualism and bilingual education (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008). *JMER* has also adopted this term. There is otherwise little consistency in the terms referring to students or children who speak languages other than English. Federal bodies use the term *Limited English Proficient (LEP)* while the states typically use *English Language Learner (ELL)*. These terms emphasize the acquisition of English without acknowledging a student's potential to become bilingual. They reflect a limited and sometimes deficit perspective of the capacities of many thousands of students and short changes a dialogue on the benefits of multilingualism (Wright, 2010).

The New York Education Department has recently adopted the term *emergent multilingual learners* to refer to pre-school students (New York State Board of Education. Board of Regents, 2017); this term conveys optimism and respect for children's abilities to develop more than one language in school. The term *Dual*

Language Learner (DLL) emerged at the federal level to refer to children from birth to age eight who are exposed to English while still learning their home language (National Head Start Training and Technical Assistance Resource Center, 2008). While this term seems to acknowledge bilingual capacity, and tries to capture the unique nature of language learning in the preschool years, it also builds distance from the historic struggle to promote bilingualism and bilingual education in the US by defining the same population without specific reference to the word “bilingual.” By contrast, I do want to sustain the connection to that struggle as educators in this country create what is essentially a new grade level with the expansion of Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK).

Foremost in the minds of the contributors to this special issue are questions regarding the instruction and programming we should offer emergent bilinguals in Pre-Kindergarten: How do we employ a child’s home language to enhance learning? What is the role of the child’s home language in the Pre-Kindergarten classroom? What dispositions or skills should the early childhood work force develop in order to be effective? How do we engage parents and communities on behalf of emergent bilinguals? What guidance can we garner from current research? These questions and others are addressed in the volume’s articles and in the discussion that follows.

Over the past decades, key national early childhood professional groups have issued position statements regarding appropriate practice for classrooms of young emergent bilinguals. In 2003, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) advised that the curriculum used in preschools should be responsive to and support children with non-English home languages (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2003). The Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children urged those who work with children to respect and support their home language (Council for Exceptional Children, 2010). Head Start recently adopted new standards where bilingualism is viewed as an asset to be sustained in early childhood programming (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). These groups advocate for integrating the home language in all activities and promote bilingualism. This volume also includes a reprint of the position statement on bilingual preschool disseminated by the New York State Association for Bilingual Education (NYSABE) in 2014 (New York State Association for Bilingual Education, 2014).

State affiliated Pre-Kindergarten programs have been slower to adopt a clear vision for the role of the home language. The State of Preschool 2015 Yearbook (Barnett et al., 2016) lists the following features relative to the home language for state funded Pre-Kindergarten in the fifty states and the District of Columbia (n=51):

- 19 (37%) require recruitment and enrollment materials to be available in languages other than English.
- 15 (29%) collect data on children’s home language at school entry.
- 6 (12%) require assessments be conducted in the home language.
- 10 (20%) allocate additional resources (through weighted formulas) to serve emergent bilinguals.

While bilingual instruction is permitted in 27 states (Barnett et al., 2015), to date only two states (Illinois and Texas) mandate bilingual instruction at the preschool level (Bridges & Dagys, 2012). The states may learn from Illinois' example included in this volume (Hadi-Tabassum & Gutiérrez, 2016/2017) as it looks to make bilingual instruction widely available; disseminating information in a timely manner, and making training readily accessible will be among the first formidable challenges.

The research indicating the benefits to garner from bilingual instruction in early childhood education is compelling. Vocabulary development is particularly important at a time when oral language is a primary focus of instruction. As a result, many studies in early childhood education examine the relationship between the language of instruction, vocabulary development, and early literacy skills for emergent bilinguals. Several studies report strengthened English vocabulary resulting from instruction in the home language (Farver, Lonigan, & Eppe, 2009; Lindholm-Leary, 2014; Méndez, Crais, Castro, & Kainz, 2015; Roberts, 2008; Schwartz, 2014). Bialystok (2007) found that vocabulary mastery in Spanish supports reading comprehension in English. Hammer, Lawrence and Miccio (2007) found growth in Spanish oral language skills predicted English early reading skills in Kindergarten. Among Spanish-speaking preschoolers, for example, Burchinal, Field, López, Howes, & Pianta (2012) found that Spanish language instruction was associated with better reading readiness. Similarly, Tazi (2014) found that children who received bilingual instruction were nearly 4 times more likely to be rated as "Very Ready for School" in four or more domains, than emergent bilinguals who received English only instruction. For emergent bilinguals, English-only instruction typically results in a decline of home language skills and no greater gains in English (Barnett, Yarosz, Thomas, Jung, & Blanco, 2007). In fact, in a metaanalysis of comparison studies, English-only instruction represented no advantages to language growth for young emergent bilinguals (Barnett et al., 2007; Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005).

In my observations of the field, despite interest and advocacy among parents and practitioners, the growth in bilingual programs in Pre-Kindergarten is slow. Limited resources and few qualified bilingual teachers plague the preschool system as it does the upper grades (Cross, 2016); however, in early childhood, a strong home-school connection is an important resource that has significant impact on learning. Families that speak languages other than English at home can contribute to their children's learning by fostering strong skills in the home language. Building links between home language learning and school instructional goals requires intentional planning. In this volume, Otero Bracco and Eisenberg (2016/2017) describe a model of community-based preschool programming for immigrant families that supports family members in preparing their young children for school. Home language activities, preschool classes, family support, and access to services strengthen the families' ability to focus on developing their children's home language skills.

Programs must develop guidelines that will inform the interactions between teachers and parents to deliver a common message about how the home language enhances learning. These guidelines must be informed by research and the consensus of experts reporting that children have the capacity to become bilingual without confusion or detriment, to learn from instruction in more than one language, and to

transfer learning from one language to the other (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). More specifically, rather than passively accept the home language as a cultural feature of the home, programs should actively encourage parents to conduct all learning activities – reading, singing, learning letters, using vocabulary – *in the home language*. Programs sometimes encourage speaking to children in the home language but expect “homework” or school activities to be conducted in English. Introducing more English in the home can weaken the ability to develop strong home language skills. Hammer et al. (2009), for example, found that a mother’s use of Spanish at home did not negatively affect growth in English but introducing more English in the home, slowed the growth of Spanish vocabulary *without* increasing English vocabulary. Meanwhile, research suggests that bilingual instruction enhances English acquisition and long-term academic achievement for emergent bilinguals from Pre-K to 3rd grade (Escobar, 2013).

Clearly, the teachers that would make these recommendations to parents would themselves have a clear, robust understanding of the cross-linguistic advantages that bilinguals exhibit. These teachers would utilize translanguaging strategies (García, 2009) where children would be free to use all their words (and languages) in school and where they saw their home language elevated and honored in the same manner as English. Included in this volume, Morales and Rumenap (2016/2017) provide examples of translanguaging after a read-aloud, where we can see the children’s natural, spontaneous use of multiple languages. Yet, these examples also show the teacher’s missed opportunity of “valuing Spanish only in as much as it structurally performed the same task as English” (p. 36). Our early childhood programs need to deepen the ways in which they leverage children’s emerging bilingualism to enhance learning.

Even for those programs offering English-only instruction, professional development must promote appreciation for multilingualism grounded in sound knowledge on language acquisition in young children and the relationship between language and other domains of development such as social-emotional, physical, and cognitive. Understanding this relationship is fundamental to addressing inequities such as the disproportionate classification and suspension rates among minority children. Brillante and Nemeth (2016/2017) outline in this volume a tiered approach similar to *Response to Intervention* (RtI) that supports identifying the factors contributing to challenging behaviors prior to referral. Fortified with accurate knowledge about language development, teachers can broaden their strategies and implement more effective approaches.

In June of 2015, a group of practitioners, policymakers, and researchers came together in a roundtable event in New York to discuss planning for the many emergent bilinguals in the state’s Pre-Kindergarten. The recommendations resulting from this discussion, presented in this volume as proceedings, suggest a way forward in organizing the resources and the approaches we need to serve emergent bilinguals in state-affiliated early childhood education. Universal Pre-Kindergarten offers an invaluable opportunity to launch the educational trajectory of these children from the best possible foundation, to the extent that we can integrate their home languages in all aspects of instruction and programming. I would argue that the best foundation is laid

with bilingual education at the preschool level, yet, we are a long way from universally available bilingual education. Even so, increasing linguistic diversity signals a moral imperative for educators to grow, adapt, and reform common practices in response to the linguistic needs and strengths of emergent bilinguals. This means, as García (2011) argues, preparing for both bilingual education and *bilingualism in education* where all teachers, bilingual or monolingual themselves, welcome, invite, and use children's home languages in the teaching-learning process.

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