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Introduction to Roundtable Proceedings: Emergent Bilinguals in New York's UPK

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Recently New York State has seen a substantial increase in enrollment in Pre-Kindergarten programs since Governor Cuomo began allocating funds towards a total investment of \$1.5 billion to make Pre-Kindergarten available statewide by 2019 (Craig & McKinley, 2014). The \$377 million budget for the state's Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) program served nearly 100,000 children in 2013-2014 (Barnet, et al., 2015); over half of these children were from New York City (Potter, 2015). The KIDS COUNT (www.kidscount.org) national database includes the following statistics about children living in New York:

- In 2015, New York's preschool population (0 to 4) had only 45% of the population identifying as White while 26% were Latino, 15% Black, 8% Asian, <.5% American Indian and <.5% Pacific Islander, and 4% multiracial;
- In 2015, 23% of children ages 0 to 5 were living in poverty;
- In 2011, 21% of children of immigrants lived in homes where no one over 14 reported speaking English "very well."

New York State's 2013 application for the *Early Learning Challenge* federal grant indicated that there were more than 146,000 children ages 0 to 5 who spoke languages other than English in their homes (NYS-ELC Application, 2013). That same year, there were more than 24,000 children classified as "Limited English Proficient" in Kindergarten (NYS BEDS Enrollment) using the *New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners* (NYSITELL). However, the NYSITELL is not valid for children before Kindergarten and, until now, the identification of emergent bilinguals in UPK has been locally determined. In the 2015-16 UPK year-end report, programs were asked two questions (Tables 1 & 2) about their procedures in identifying students and their total counts. Most (82%) of school districts had created a method to identify children (Table 1), although there are no publicly available data on what these methods included (NYSED, 2017).

Table 1

Question on the Year-end Report for State Funded UPK Programs

N=478	Yes		No	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Does your school district currently have a process in place for identifying Pre-K students who speak a language other than English?	392	82.0%	86	18.0%

Source: New York State Education Department, 2017

Districts who did identify EBs, reported their counts (Table 2); of the total 29,802 children identified, 78% attended programs in New York City.

Table 2

Question on the Year-end Report for State Funded UPK Programs

N=120,000	Yes		No	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
How many students served by your state funded Prekindergarten programs are considered to speak a language other than English at home?	29,802	25%	90,198	75%

Source: New York State Education Department, 2017

On April 3, 2017, a protocol for identifying emergent bilinguals in Pre-Kindergarten (now called “Emergent Multilingual Learners”) was presented to the New York Board of Regents (New York State Education Department, 2017). This was the culminating work of the *New York Committee of Bilingual Education in Pre-Kindergarten*, which brought together a wide coalition of service agencies, practitioners, and advocacy groups. The protocol involves a series of steps designed to serve multiple purposes:

- Identify Emergent Multilingual Learners (EMLs) as they enter Pre-Kindergarten;
- Inform instruction and programming to implement culturally and linguistically relevant approaches;
- Gather useful data about young children to inform policy;
- Create meaningful transitions into the K-12 school system;
- Modeled on a design by Tazi-Morell and Apointe (2016), the protocol serves as guidance to programs and practitioners with the goal of creating a uniform method of identification, instructional planning, and programming.

Instruction at the Pre-Kindergarten level is organized around principles aligned with the *New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core* (2011) [PKFCC]. One of the principles expressed by the PKFCC concerns the use of the home language for learning, stating that it is “essential to encourage *continued first language development* [emphasis mine] in our children by providing them with appropriate education settings...” (p. 6). Organizations such as the New York State Association for Bilingual Education (NYSABE) call for making bilingual education available at the earliest opportunity in their recent position statement included in this issue (NYSABE, 2014).

In 2015, when New York City first scaled up the number of programs to make Pre-Kindergarten truly universal, a roundtable discussion was organized under the direction of the *New York State Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network* (RBE-RN) and NYSABE. To inform the reader of this seminal and influential event, the roundtable proceedings are included in this section of *JMER's* Volume 7. Charged with setting the focus and direction for the field, the roundtable brought together regional experts, practitioners, policymakers, and state officials, to articulate a vision to inform the following areas:

- Instruction and programming;
- Leadership and policy;
- Community partnerships;
- Higher education and teacher preparation;
- Research.

The roundtable proceedings are included in this issue of *JMER* (Morell, 2016/2017).

As argued in this special volume, the interest in early childhood education to prepare children for academic achievement is gaining momentum. The expansion of Pre-Kindergarten in New York and throughout the states creates an urgency to organize approaches that will best support young emergent bilinguals. As more studies point to the efficacy of bilingual instruction for young language learners, practitioners and researchers alike need to advocate for greater access to bilingual instruction. Another key issue to support is the integration of the home language in early childhood education for instruction and programming. While the struggle to first provide early childhood education universally is only beginning, we cannot forgo the argument for the kind of experience that will best support young emergent bilinguals. Our struggle on their behalf is fueled by the promise of early childhood education and the brilliant capacities of young children.

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