



The role of access to Head Start and quality ratings for Spanish-Speaking Dual Language Learners' (DLLs) participation in early childhood education[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Data from the Head Start Impact Study ($N=4442$) were used to test for differences between Spanish-speaking Dual Language Learners (DLLs) and monolingual English-speaking children in: (1) Head Start attendance rates when randomly assigned admission; and (2) quality ratings of other early childhood education (ECE) programs attended when not randomly assigned admission to Head Start. Logistic regressions showed that Spanish-speaking DLL children randomly assigned a spot in Head Start were more likely than monolingual-English learners to attend. Further, Spanish-speaking DLLs not randomly assigned a spot in Head Start were more likely to attend higher-quality ECE centers than non-DLL children. Policy implications are discussed, suggesting that, if given access, Spanish-speaking DLL families will take advantage of quality ECE programs.

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1. Introduction

With the number of U.S. children who come from homes where English is not the primary language rapidly growing (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011), it is increasingly important that such students are equipped to succeed academically. However, research shows that at the beginning of kindergarten, Dual Language Learners (DLLs) trail their monolingual English-speaking peers in key academic skills such as English language that predict future English literacy and academic success – a gap that continues throughout schooling (Lee & Burkam, 2002). Compounding the matter is that many DLL children come from low-income families, an additional risk factor for delayed English language development (Hart & Risley, 1995; Kieffer, 2010; Mancilla-Martinez & Vagh, 2013). The majority of DLLs come from Spanish-speaking homes (García, 2012), and

Hispanic children constitute the greatest population of children living in poverty (Lopez & Velasco, 2011), placing this group doubly at risk for delayed English skills (Mancilla-Martinez & Vagh, 2013).

Early childhood education (ECE) has been shown to help prepare young learners for future academic success (Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2005; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007); this may be especially true for low-income children (Barnett, 2011; Ramey & Ramey, 2006; Schweinhart, 2006). Research suggests that perhaps the largest beneficiaries of ECE programs are children whose English language skills are the weakest (Buyse, Peisner-Feinberg, Páez, Hammer, & Knowles, 2013). It is therefore critical to provide the growing segment of Spanish-speaking DLLs with access to quality ECE programs so they can enter kindergarten with early English language skills that will support their future English literacy development and academic success (Espinosa, 2013; National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007). Census data, however, indicate that the majority of Hispanic families do not participate in formal ECE programs; rather, they utilize familial care over center-based care options such as Head Start (Laughlin, 2013). Further research suggests that the ECE programs that Spanish-speaking DLLs attend may be of lower quality than those that monolingual-English speakers attend (Espinosa, 2013).

This paper contributes to the growing body of research on the ECE participation patterns of Spanish-speaking DLLs. Using data from the Head Start Impact Study (HSIS; U.S. DHHS, 2002–2006),

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a large, nationally representative sample of Head Start-eligible children assigned at random to Head Start centers or a comparison group between 2002 and 2006, we examine: (1) the effects of access to Head Start (through random assignment) on the actual participation of Spanish-speaking DLLs; and (2) the quality of centers that Spanish-speaking DLLs, who were not offered a spot in Head Start, attended. Specifically, we seek to determine if there were differences in take-up rates and center quality attendance between Spanish-speaking DLLs and their monolingual English-speaking peers. We aim to contribute to the ongoing inquiry of Spanish-speaking DLLs' access to and participation in quality ECE programs.

1.1. *Dual Language Learners in the U.S.*

We use the term “Dual Language Learner” (DLL) to describe students who are tasked with learning more than one language – their home language and English (Espinosa, 2013). This term encompasses the diversity of this population, which includes children from a wide variety of language backgrounds; young Dual Language Learners may be of limited English proficiency, bilingual, or may not fluently speak their home language (August & Hakuta, 1997). Regardless of their home language experiences, DLLs have less English language exposure and practice in early years than monolingual English-speaking children – children who come from homes where English is the primary language – and DLLs do not perform on par with such children on various emergent English skills (August & Shanahan, 2006). Further, persistent achievement gaps between the population of all DLLs and monolingual-English speakers (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2011) suggest that young DLL children are not equipped with the English language skills to succeed academically. Underlining the English language and academic disparities between DLLs and monolingual English-speaking children is that the population of U.S. DLLs is rapidly growing. From 1994–1995 to 2009–2010, the number of school-aged DLLs in the U.S. increased by nearly 65% (NCELA, 2011) – from 3.2 million students to over 5.2 million students. Roughly 25% of U.S. children come from homes where a language other than English is spoken (Espinosa, 2013), and DLLs represent the fastest growing student segment in U.S. public schools (Calderón, Slavin, & Sánchez, 2011).

The majority of DLLs in the U.S. are Spanish-speaking; one in four students in U.S. elementary schools is of Hispanic descent (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Additionally, the population of Hispanic children represents the largest group of children in poverty in the U.S. (Lopez & Velasco, 2011), which further places Spanish-speaking DLLs at risk for delayed English language development (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2013; Kieffer, 2010; Mancilla-Martinez & Vagh, 2013). Spanish-speaking DLL 4- and 5-year-olds perform one to two standard deviations below monolingual-English norms on measures of English vocabulary (Hoff, 2013). While an initial English language gap is understandable given the limited amount of home exposure to English (compared with monolinguals), vocabulary gaps between monolingual-English speakers and Spanish-speaking DLLs are still often significant at age 11 (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2011). This is troubling given the link between early English language skills and future literacy, academic success, and improved social dispositions (Spira, Bracken, & Fischel, 2005).

The early childhood years are a critical period to equip Spanish-speaking DLLs with the English language skills that they will need for future English literacy and academic success (Hoff, 2013; Mancilla-Martinez & Vagh, 2013; National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007), and therefore it is imperative that young Hispanic DLLs have access to quality ECE programs that support English language development.

1.2. *Prior research on Spanish-speaking DLLs and early childhood education*

1.2.1. *Theoretical framework*

The current study is grounded in a framework that recognizes the importance of quality ECE programs for Spanish-speaking DLLs (Buysse et al., 2013; Espinosa, 2013; U.S. DHHS, Final Report, 2010; National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007). We draw upon two non-mutually exclusive strands in the research on Spanish-speaking DLLs and early childhood programs. The first investigates participation patterns of DLLs in ECE programs (Buysse et al., 2013; Espinosa et al., 2013; Greenberg & Kahn, 2012; Laughlin, 2013; Vesely, 2013; Winsler, Robinson, & Thibodeaux, 2013), and the second looks at the quality of programs attended (Espinosa et al., 2013; Fuller & Kim, 2011). Research in both of these areas is mixed, and we seek to contribute to the two complementary bodies of literature as we utilize nationally representative Head Start data to examine Spanish-speaking DLLs' participation rates and the quality of ECE centers attended. The overarching theoretical question that we address is about access to quality ECE and has strong policy implications (i.e., if Spanish-speaking DLLs are given access to quality ECE programs, are they likely to attend?).

1.2.2. *Differential benefits of ECE for DLLs*

Early childhood programs such as Head Start are intended to equip young learners, especially those from disadvantaged circumstances, with academic and behavioral skills that will better prepare them for kindergarten (U.S. DHHS, Head Start Bureau, 2012). Participation in high-quality ECE promotes positive child development in cognitive, socio-emotional, and language skills (Howes et al., 2008; Karoly et al., 2005; Vesely, 2013). Although there are advantages for all young learners who attend ECE programs, children who come from homes where a language other than English is spoken may particularly benefit from participating in ECE programs (Buysse et al., 2013; Espinosa, 2013).

Research indicates that improved English language skills is one of the greatest benefits of ECE for young DLLs (Espinosa, 2013). Hammer, Lawrence, and Miccio (2007) determined that DLLs who participated in Head Start showed improvements in receptive language and, by the end of kindergarten, performed on par with monolingual-English students in English reading abilities. Furthermore, the HSIS Final Report (U.S. DHHS, 2010) found that Spanish-speaking students who were offered the opportunity to participate in Head Start demonstrated gains in oral language, as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, Third Edition (PPVT; Dunn & Dunn, 1997). In a recent review of literature on the effects of ECE on DLLs (primarily those who were Spanish-speaking), Buysse et al. (2013) found that overall, Spanish-speaking DLLs benefitted from participating in Head Start, and there was evidence to suggest that children with weaker English abilities and less English exposure benefitted the most. This converges with earlier research suggesting that Latino preschoolers benefitted more from ECE than monolingual-English children or children from other subgroups, especially when the programs were of high quality (Gormley, 2008; Loeb, Bridges, Bassok, Fuller, & Rumberger, 2007).

1.2.3. *Lower DLL enrollment rates in ECE*

Despite evidence illustrating the value of ECE for DLLs, there is a body of research indicating that some Hispanic families do not enroll their children in formal ECE programs (Buysse et al., 2013; Laughlin, 2013). Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten cohort (ECLS-K) indicate that DLL children attend preschool at lower rates than non-DLL children, and Spanish-speaking DLLs have the lowest participation rates (Kagan, 2009). According to Laughlin (2013), Hispanic families are more likely to utilize relative or familial care over non-relative or

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