



Review

Effects of early education programs and practices on the development and learning of dual language learners: A review of the literature



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ABSTRACT

This article describes the results of a comprehensive review of the research literature from 2000 to 2011 evaluating the effects of early care and education practices on the developmental outcomes of dual language learners (DLLs) from birth through 5 years of age. Across 25 studies that met inclusion criteria, study samples consisted primarily of Latino or Spanish-speaking children 3–5 years of age enrolled in center-based programs. The analysis focused on features of the early education programs and practices (intensity and language of instruction) and research methods (sampling, research designs) in relation to child outcomes for the various types of research interventions evaluated in these studies (center-based programs, professional development, curricula, and instructional strategies). On the basis of a few large-scale scientifically sound studies, the review found at least some evidence to suggest that DLLs benefitted from attending widely available, well regulated programs such as Head Start and public pre-k, particularly with respect to improving language and literacy skills. However, because the extant research has not systematically accounted for the separate effects of language of instruction versus type of intervention, very little can be concluded about how these factors contribute to the positive main effects of these interventions.

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Early childhood is a critical period for children who are dual language learners (DLLs), many of whom face the difficult task of simultaneously learning a new language while acquiring essential school readiness skills. In contrast to broader research on the quality of early childhood programs in general, relatively few studies have evaluated the effects of early care and education programs for DLLs. More specifically, very little is known about the particular interventions or classroom practices that foster language and literacy, social-emotional, and cognitive development in this population of young children prior to kindergarten. The [National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics \(2007\)](#) referred to this knowledge gap as one of the most important unanswered questions within the early childhood field.

The rapid growth among dual language learners (DLLs) in the U.S. over the past decades has raised questions about the capacity of early care and education programs (and the education system more broadly) to adequately address the learning goals and characteristics of this heterogeneous population. The expansion of center-based early childhood programs with the potential to reach a wider range of young learners has emerged as a promising approach for promoting school readiness and future academic success for all children, including DLLs. However, even among those who have attended early childhood programs, Latino children (arguably the largest group of DLLs for whom research data are available) lag behind their peers when they enter kindergarten and the gap widens as children grow older ([Reardon & Galindo, 2006](#); [West, Denton, & Reaney, 2000](#)). Some research suggests that Latino pre-kindergarteners may benefit more than non-DLLs from early childhood education, particularly when these programs are of high quality ([Gormley, 2008](#)). However, barriers related to the access, utilization, and the quality of early education programs means that the promise of these positive effects remains elusive for many DLL children and their families; furthermore, for DLLs already enrolled in these programs, there is a pressing need for additional information about the effectiveness of various instructional practices for these children ([Buysse, Castro, West, & Skinner, 2005](#); [Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011](#); [National Council of La Raza, 2011](#)).

Within the broader field of education, research findings provide some general guidance and recommendations for improving instructional practices for DLLs, primarily in the elementary grades ([August & Shanahan, 2006](#); [Goldenberg, 2008](#); [Snow, 2006](#)). However, there is a paucity of research and guidance on these issues for pre-kindergarten DLLs. As a result, there is a particular need to gather and appraise the existing research on early care and education practices for this population, both to describe what is currently known and to identify any gaps in knowledge to inform future research in this area.

1. Characteristics of dual language learners

Although various terms have been used to describe this population, we use the term DLLs to mean a diverse group of bilingual children or second language learners “who are exposed to and given opportunities to learn two languages from birth or shortly after” (i.e., children who learn multiple languages simultaneously) and those “who have already made significant progress toward acquisition of one language when they begin the acquisition of

a second language” (i.e., children who learn multiple languages sequentially; [Paradis, Genesee, & Crago, 2011](#), p. 6). DLLs represent a large and rapidly growing number of children in the U.S., with many who come from homes in which English is not the primary spoken language. DLLs enter school with language experiences and skills that differ substantially from those of monolingual English speakers, and are diverse with respect to their racial/ethnic backgrounds and their experiences in acquiring the first language (L1) while also learning a second language (L2; [Ballantyne, Sanderman, & McLaughlin, 2008](#)).

Estimates of the proportion of DLLs in the early childhood population can be made on the basis of demographic shifts in U.S. census data and from information on programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start specifically focused on this age group. [Passel \(2011\)](#) emphasized two demographic shifts based on historical and current U.S. population data: (1) immigrant children under the age of eighteen, either foreign-born or native-born, now make up one-fourth of the nation’s 75 million children, and (2) children under the age of eighteen are the most racially and ethnically diverse age group in the U.S., with Latino, Asian, and mixed-race children constituting 30% of all U.S. children (as compared to 6% in 1960). Latino immigrant children under 6 years of age represent the largest group of DLLs. In the coming decades, the number of Latino school-age children is projected to increase from 11 to 28 million, with Latinos accounting for 26% of the nation’s population under five years of age ([National Council of La Raza, 2011](#)). It is estimated that by 2023, less than one-half of all children will be White, non-Hispanic; by 2050, 39% of U.S. children are projected to be Latino and 38% are projected to be White, non-Hispanic ([Federal Interagency Forum on Child & Family Statistics, 2012](#)). The majority of immigrant children grow up in bilingual environments, although the extent to which DLL children are exposed to one or more languages in the home (from little English to fluent English spoken) varies considerably. Head Start data provide one estimate of the language experiences of young DLL children. In 2006, nearly one in three children enrolled in Head Start or Early Head Start lived in households in which a language other than English was spoken ([Ballantyne et al., 2008](#)).

English proficiency has been linked to school performance, educational attainment, and the future economic mobility of Latino students ([August & Shanahan, 2006](#)). According to the [National Assessment of Educational Progress \(2011\)](#), only 31% of fourth grade DLLs are at or above basic proficiency in English reading as compared to 72% of non-DLL fourth graders, emphasizing the need to improve the language skills of these students as a foundation for learning within other content areas. There is also evidence showing that the academic progress of the large majority of immigrant students residing in households in which a language other than English is spoken lags behind that of native-born students ([Kindler, 2002](#); [Tienda & Haskins, 2011](#)). With respect to younger DLLs, an analysis of U.S. census data conducted by [Fortuny, Hernandez, and Chaudry \(2010\)](#) revealed that immigrant children, one-fourth of whom were English language learners, had lower rates of enrollment in early childhood programs. Despite being among the groups with perhaps the most to gain from high quality early care and education programs, only 48% of Latino 4-year-olds were reported to attend center-based early childhood programs compared to 70%

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