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The Advantages of Bilingual and Dual Language Learners Programs in Early Childhood
Education for Children from Spanish-Predominate Households

Bilingual and Dual Language Learners programs are designed for all backgrounds, including but not limited to indigenous people, English-speakers, second or third generation children who live in households where the primary language is not English, and first generation children of immigrants who are new to the United States. However, for children from exclusively or predominately Spanish-speaking families, bilingual early childhood education programs and dual language learning programs present a unique opportunity for transitioning into life in the United States. Green et al. set out parameters for the different ways that children from such family situations could adapt to life in the U.S.: integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization.¹ Bilingual early childhood education offers hope that Spanish-speaking children can integrate, which is defined as “[maintaining] their cultural identities and [finding] acceptance by the larger society.” The other options make students choose between American society, their own cultures, and whom they would rather find belonging with; marginalization is the result of the students trying to adopt American culture, their culture, or both, but still not finding

¹ Matthew Green, Krista M. Perreira, and Linda K. Ko, “Schooling Experience of Latino/A Immigrant Adolescents in North Carolina,” in *Immigration and Education in North Carolina*, edited by Xue Lan Rong and Jeremy Hilburn, 55.

community in either.² Creating a dual language learning environment fosters appreciation for diversity and inclusion while simultaneously improving cognitive function, making it ideal for children from Spanish-predominate households across the United States, but particularly in New Destination locations. This paper will take a closer look at the implementation of such programs in South Carolina.

The U.S. Department of Education released a joint statement with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in support of dual language learner (DLL) early childhood education programs.³ Bilingual education has proven to be beneficial to cognitive development, learning, social-emotional development, and long-term success. The Department of Education writes that “school readiness and success for children who are dual or multi language learners is tied directly to mastery of their home language,” making a case against strict English as a Second Language (ESL) programs that prohibit the use of any language other than English.⁴ From ages zero to five, it is imperative that children are granted the ability to progress in the language acquisition of both their mother language in addition to what they are being taught in school. Learning multiple languages enables children to “develop more flexible approaches to thinking through problem [...and helps them become] better at blocking out irrelevant information.”⁵ It is important to note that children not placed into DLL programs are still capable of success, “high-quality, intentional, and consistent exposure to the home language and to English can set children

² Green et al., “Schooling Experiences,” 55.

³ U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Policy Statement on Supporting the Development of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs,” January 5, 2017, 1.

⁴ U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “The Benefits of Being Bilingual,” October 2008.

⁵ U.S. Department of Education et. al, “Benefits of Being Bilingual.”

on a positive trajectory toward school success *and* bilingualism.”⁶ Fluent bilingualism can lead to long-term success because “globally, bilingual and biliterate adults have more job opportunities than monolingual adults.”⁷ Bilingual and DLL programs in early education have a strong endorsement from the federal government, but still are not as prevalent as they could be across the U.S.

As previously stated, a large benefit of placing children that come from a Spanish-predominate household into a bilingual or DLL early childhood education program is that they are more likely to adjust to life in the United States better. Policies in schools that encourage integration of children from Spanish-speaking households, no matter whether they are first generation or not, can “support children in maintain strong ties with their family, culture, and community,” which are the pillars of the children’s lives.⁸ Creating a successful DLL or bilingual early education program “requires a climate that is respectful of each child and family, embraces diversity, and assumes that every child and family has strengths that can be built on.”⁹ Teachers in these programs must be extremely culturally aware and sensitive to the implicit and explicit biases that their students currently face or may face in the future. Facilitating integration among students “facilitates positive adaptation outcomes [...and yields students that] have higher self-esteem, better mental health, and improved academic engagement and achievement relative to peers who adopt assimilation, separation, or marginalization strategies.”¹⁰ Green et al. warn of programs that discourage the use of home languages and cultures in the classroom. The

⁶ U.S. Department of Education et al., “Policy Statement,” 9.

⁷ U.S. Department of Education et al., “Benefits of Being Bilingual.”

⁸ U.S. Department of Education et al., “Benefits of Being Bilingual.”

⁹ U.S. Department of Education et al., “Policy Statement,” 15.

¹⁰ Green et al., “Schooling Experiences,” 56.

technique is called subtractive schooling and “occurs when schools view immigrant cultures and identities as deficits, actively working to devalue them, while promoting a monolithic and exclusive notion of ‘American’ identity.”¹¹ Subtractive schooling maims the mental health of those who are subjected to it, particularly from a young age, while dual language programs that are culturally aware and accepting help children from Spanish-predominate households succeed.

The South Carolinian education system is an interesting lens to view bilingual education and dual language learning programs from. In South Carolina, bilingual programs are prohibited for pre-kindergarten students.¹² The policies in place are built in a way that is detrimental to families that speak exclusively Spanish and/or are low-income. In state-funded pre-kindergarten programs, teachers are not required to have any qualifications related to DLLs, recruitment and enrollment materials in non-English languages are not provided, and students’ home language does not qualify as eligibility criteria.¹³ These policies put students from low-income families at a particularly high disadvantage, because the state-funded pre-kindergarten programs are the only education they would have access to enroll in, thus putting them behind even their Spanish-speaking peers that are able to enroll in a private bilingual pre-kindergarten program, although DLLs are more likely to be under the federal poverty level than the non-DLL population in South Carolina.¹⁴ Park et al., from the Migration Policy Institute, insist that “early childhood policies that support cultural and linguistic diversity and meet the unique learning needs of DLLs are crucial to ensuring equal access to high-quality programs for all.”¹⁵

¹¹ Green et al., “Schooling Experiences,” 56.

¹² Maki Park, Anna O’Toole, Caitlin Katsiaficas, “Dual Language Learners: A Demographic and Policy Profile for South Carolina,” *Fact Sheet*, n.d., 4.

¹³ Park et al., “Dual Language Learners,” 6.

¹⁴ Park et al., “Dual Language Learners,” 2.

¹⁵ Park et al., “Dual Language Learners,” 6.

Early childhood education is one of the main pillars of success in the United States, and it is a human right. By building barriers to accessing early education, the U.S. further discriminates against households where English is not the predominate language and perpetuates inequality.

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