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# Learning in English, Learning in Spanish

## A Head Start Program Changes Its Approach

Joan Youngquist and  
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**SKAGIT/ISLANDS HEAD START** (SIHS) in Washington State has always taken pride in its high-quality learning program. But in spring 2002, we discovered a problem: the child assessments from 13 centers serving children from birth to age 5 indicated that although Spanish-speaking 3-year-olds entered with language and literacy skills at a level similar to their English-speaking peers, a year later they were lagging behind.

This finding concerned us greatly, as approximately 60 percent of enrolled

families were Latino, with 40 percent speaking Spanish as their home language. We knew that our Latino children's learning success was at risk because statistics from our local high school showed that 50 percent of Latino boys dropped out of school. We also knew that the stage for school failure is set early.

What surprised us was seeing an early discrepancy in our own program! Our staff recognized the value of a child's primary language and regularly translated information for families into Spanish. In addition, whenever possible, we hired classroom staff who spoke at least some Spanish. However, upon close inspection, we discovered that our classrooms were inconsistent and inadequate in supporting children's primary language. While our local program guidance emphasized English immersion, staff differed in their beliefs and approaches. Some held to the English immersion model; others tried their best to teach in two languages. Many non-English-speaking families wanted their children to learn English quickly, and some stopped speaking Spanish at home and tried speaking what English they could to their children. This created a situation in which children failed to receive a solid foundation in any language during a crucial time in their language development.

Aware of all these factors, we knew it was time to reevaluate our local program guidance, which was based on two assumptions: all children need to be fluent in English by kindergarten and the best way to accomplish this is through a total English immersion approach in the classroom. These assumptions were due to common practice, limited knowledge, and a lack of expertise available in the community. To change would be difficult, we knew. And to be successful, change must be thoughtful, intentional, and take place over time. To begin, we initiated an intentional multistep, multiyear process to transform the approach to language and learning in our classrooms.

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**When young children are learning more than one language, both languages follow the typical development process, and this does not cause language disorders or substantive language delays.**

### **Step 1.**

#### **Refining the vision and defining a paradigm shift**

The SIHS vision was and *is* that all children succeed in learning now and when they continue on to kindergarten and the higher grades. Our non-English-speaking children were not achieving this goal. Thus, the first step in changing our language-learning approach was for both staff and families to understand the important role language plays in achieving this vision. Support of program directors and management staff was essential, and one of us (coauthor Bárbara Martínez-Griego) took the lead in researching language learning and presenting our findings to the management staff.

Research supports the need for children to develop a strong foundation and learn concepts in their primary language, and it identifies the cognitive benefit in learning two languages as long as children have a strong foundation in their primary language (Bialystok 2001; Cronin & Sosa Massó 2004.) We learned that when young children are learning more than one language, both languages follow the typical development process, and this does not cause language disorders or substantive language delays (Lee 1996). Children may sometimes mix both languages within sentences (for example, “*vamos* outside”), but this

tendency resolves itself as language proficiencies increase (Quiñones-Eatman 2001).

Research consistently points to significant social, emotional, cultural, economic, and linguistic gains when children become bilingual early in life:

- Non-English-speaking children with a strong foundation in their home language learn to read, write, and speak in English faster than children who do not have that foundation (Cummins 1993).
- Preventing children from developing their primary language can have a negative impact on academic achievement (Sanchez & Thorp 1998).
- Young children can become increasingly fluent in a second language if they have opportunities to speak it with a variety of individuals, on a variety of topics, and for a variety of reasons (Quiñones-Eatman 2001).
- Failure to learn the primary home language well can be a source of identity confusion for children and be harmful to family function (Makin, Jones Díaz, & McLachlan 2007).
- Children in bilingual school programs outperform comparable monolingual students in academic subjects after four to six years of dual language education. A bilingual program must meet a child’s developmental needs,

including the academic, cognitive, emotional, social, and physical. Schools should create a learning environment with lots of natural and rich oral and written experiences in each language instead of providing translations (Thomas & Collier 2002).

With this knowledge to guide our planning, we began a very intentional process of changing the program paradigm from “English immersion is the road to success” to “A strong foundation in a primary language is essential for success.”

### **Step 2.**

#### **Raising staff awareness**

To *describe* a paradigm shift is one thing, but it is quite another for management to make it happen in a large, geographically and culturally diverse organization. SIHS enrolls 83 children in Early Head Start and 348 preschoolers in 13 centers in Skagit Island and San Juan counties of western Washington. Demanding that staff change their practices would obviously only create resentment, so we began by talking a lot. Management staff shared questions with each other during weekly staff meetings, with classroom staff, and with coauthor



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Bárbara, who offered her knowledge and research findings indicating what was best for children.

Questions and doubts raised by teachers caused us to look even deeper and to develop more knowledge on the topic. Bárbara wrote articles in the staff newsletter based on her experience, the research, and her observations of children in our program. The management team established a new program committee—the Multicultural Committee—to explore the question of primary language learning and the broader issue of cultural awareness in which the issue rested. This talk continued for about a year, and some frustration set in. Bárbara felt that her knowledge and expertise were not convincing enough for staff and that, as is often true for an organization, an outside expert could be more effective in demonstrating that change was necessary and possible.

### Step 3.

#### **Solidifying staff by bringing in outside expertise**

Our location near Seattle, a large metropolitan center, had advantages, such as access to Pacific Oaks College. Faculty member Sharon Cronin was well known for her work and expertise in the area of supporting primary language and culture. Bárbara invited her to present a one-day training for all SIHS staff in spring 2004. Through lecture, group activities, music, and games, Cronin effectively communicated the importance of supporting learning in a child's primary language.

**Children enter preschool rich in their own language, and the important teaching builds on that strength rather than immersing children in a new language and ignoring the language and literacy development they have experienced so far.**

## Real Stories about Dual Language Curriculum

**Our intention each year is to design a program uniquely responsive to each particular group of children.** Decisions about language usage and curriculum choices are always based on data gathered from families and observations of the children during the crucial first few weeks of the year.

This year we had a large group of monolingual Spanish speakers. The teaching staff decided to have two teachers speak Spanish and our third teacher speak English throughout the entire day. We recently reassessed the children's needs and will incorporate more English in our day. We are seeing children gain skills in their primary language and develop skills in a second language. They can then practice new terms and phrases in English.

The children attain goals more rapidly than they did when we spoke to them only in English, which allows us to develop new goals with parents. This is in contrast to the slower progress observed in past years. Another benefit we've noticed is an increased sense of community within the classroom environment.

—Cynthia Fuentes, Teacher,  
Burlington-Edison Child Development Center

Literacy is more than reading books and counting and reciting the alphabet, staff learned as they began to see the importance of communicating with children in a variety of ways—through oral stories and folklore and through art, drama, and music. Children enter preschool rich in their own language, Cronin emphasized, and the important teaching builds on that strength rather than immersing children in a new language and ignoring the language and literacy development they have experienced so far.

In an English immersion program, Cronin explained to staff, children struggle with learning both basic concepts and language at the same time. She noted that it takes seven years

or longer for a person to learn the new academic language. In contrast, when a program supports children in learning concepts in their primary language, they can more readily transfer these concepts to the second language and actually become fluent in English faster.

The workshop was a success. Teachers spoke with excitement about supporting every child's primary language in the classroom. Now, we had staff "buy-in," but was this enough to bring about the needed change?

We recognized the importance of involving families and the community. Family services specialists and teachers at each of our centers talked with parents individually and during family-night activities both to educate parents and to invite their feedback. Although initially some parents were hesitant about a dual language approach, as they learned more about language and learning and the benefit to all children, most became strong advocates for dual language and bilingual learning. Coauthor Bárbara held forums at local schools and community centers to present information to the community at large.

#### **Step 4.** **Turning knowledge into practice— Experimentation starts**

After the staff training, we noticed that the inconsistencies in classroom support of children's primary language that had existed in 2002 began to disappear. By this time, September 2004, staff knew that the expectations of program leadership had changed. They understood better the importance of supporting children's primary language at school and in the home.

In classrooms with bilingual teachers, we observed changes in teaching strategies. Teachers were more intentional in their use of Spanish when conversing with children who were Spanish speakers. At one center, teachers held two circle time groups, one in Spanish and one in English.

Children took part in the Spanish circle one day and the English circle the next day, so that both the English and Spanish speakers would experience the same content and activities in each language. Staff requested books in Spanish, and we allocated funds to increase our bilingual library. But with all their valiant efforts, staff still expressed frustration and doubt about how to implement a dual language curriculum. Knowledge based primarily on one workshop was not enough to bring about change.

#### **Step 5.** **Committing organizational support**

Supporting children's primary language is difficult when staff speak only English. The vast majority of

our teaching staff in 2002 were monolingual English. Many teacher aides or teaching assistants were Spanish speaking, but many had limited English skills. We knew that if children were to hear and converse in their primary language, we would need at least one teacher in each classroom who spoke the child's language. In addition to staff training, we changed the ways we support and use language in our classrooms. Our four primary strategies included the following:

**Hire bilingual staff whenever possible.** This was relatively easy for positions that did not require a degree or experience, but we found a very limited, often nonexistent, pool of bilingual applicants for teaching or home-visiting positions that required associate's or bachelor's degrees.

**Support monolingual staff in improving their language skills.** Our program paid the tuition for several staff members to attend intensive Spanish language classes both during the summer and the school year. This allowed several teaching and home visiting staff, previously uncomfortable conversing in Spanish, to become familiar with the language and able to have meaningful conversations with children and families. Several improved their fluency to the point that they no longer needed the support of translators even during parent conferences.

**Support bilingual staff in working toward a credential or degree.** Our program historically supported center teachers in working toward an AA (associate's) degree in response to national Head Start expectations. We extended that support to aides, many of whom were bilingual. After bilingual aides had achieved the CDA (Child Development Associate) credential and/or received AA degrees, they were effective in supporting dual language classroom activities. We created a pool of bilingual candidates ready to apply for teaching positions as these opened up.

### **Real Stories about Dual Language Curriculum**

**We divide children into three groups:** Spanish, bilingual, and English. We meet with each family and assess the child's needs to determine the primary language. We consider the child's age. If the child will be going to kindergarten next and their English skills are good, we place them in the English group, since kindergarten instruction is in English in our community.

The children learn in their language group during small group and individual activities during free choice. Large group activities are inclusive. The English speakers also learn Spanish. We use props and gestures that help English speakers understand what is happening. Throughout the school year we reassess the children, and we may reassign a child to a different group as needs and skills develop. Teachers also work on their language skills to build their vocabulary in Spanish.

Each year brings something new, so we adjust as needed. Sometimes we have lots of Spanish speakers. Sometimes we have many bilingual Spanish/English. This year one child is becoming trilingual English/Spanish/Punjabi. The mom gave us the Punjabi alphabet and has made labels for the classroom. She also wrote out her child's name in Punjabi so the child could practice writing it each day during sign in.

Dual language curriculum is a lot of work, but I know that the children and parents are benefiting. Everything we do supports the acquisition of a second language and retention of the primary language. Parents can communicate with the teachers in their language so they can ask questions and participate without any hesitation.

—*Barbara Guillen, Manager,  
LaPaloma Head Start Center*

**Engage language aides.** When other strategies were unsuccessful, we found volunteers or hired part-time language aides who worked with children in their primary language in the classroom. Teachers reported that having an aide who speaks a child's primary language in the classroom even just one hour per day made a difference in a child's ability to integrate into the classroom and maintain his or her primary language skills while learning English.

## Step 6.

### Testing new models in pilot centers

With administrative support, staff buy-in, and a growing knowledge and skill base, we readied ourselves to increase the intentional support of primary language in the classroom. Four centers expressed a strong interest in piloting an intentional dual language curriculum in September 2004. Each center's community was completely different, and centers employed staff with skills in different languages. The same approach might not be appropriate for each center, and we knew different models could be effective in supporting bilingual classrooms (Cronin & Sosa Massó 2004).

The models ranged from valuing the home language by learning a few key words and encouraging parents' use of the primary language at home to implementing true dual language programs providing meaningful learning experiences and language development in two languages. When determining the best model for a given program, it was important for staff to consider both the language and cultural experiences of enrolled children as well as bilingual language skills of staff.

Bárbara met with each center team to discuss its plans for implementing dual language curriculum. One center, located in a predominantly Latino neighborhood, wanted to teach primarily in Spanish. Even though this was not a true dual



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language approach, we supported the plan since all the children came from monolingual, Spanish-speaking families. Centers gradually introduced English during the year through small group activities that focused on concepts already learned in Spanish.

Other centers enrolling both English- and Spanish-speaking children assigned part of the day to teaching in Spanish and the balance to teaching in English. Two circle times—one in Spanish and one in English, at different times of the day or on different days and with all children or in small groups—covered the same concepts. Staff who were not fluent in Spanish were encouraged to learn four key words each week to use in conversation with children. One center employed a model that had four days of instruction per week. This included two days teaching in Spanish and two days teaching in English, with the same concepts and activities emphasized in both languages. An Early Head Start class for 2- and 3-year-olds used English one day, Spanish the next day, and sign language on alternate days as a bridge between days.

While many staff understood what they thought a dual language curriculum should look like, a few struggled with program implementation and a concern that if they didn't get it right,

children would suffer. Because this concern might hold people back, we encouraged staff to develop their own ideas and strategies. It was important to try and OK to fail and try again. The mentoring and coaching Bárbara provided to center staff was extremely valuable at this stage. She observed in classrooms, scheduled meetings and reflection time with each center team, and arranged for Sharon Cronin to visit each center to observe and offer ideas to staff.

Monthly meetings of the multicultural committee became a venue for group sharing and reflection. The mutual support that staff provided to each other was key in encouraging teachers to implement a new and unfamiliar approach. The support from Bárbara and from one another helped to ensure that strategies met program expectations.

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## Step 7.

### Providing more staff development and experiencing a little serendipity

Looking for and taking advantage of opportunities that support change is essential. In January 2005, our local community college, Skagit Valley College, received a Head Start/Higher Education Latino Partnership Grant. The grant funds let us hire faculty with a strong knowledge of dual language and bilingual curriculum approaches. The award paid the tuition for some staff members to work toward the CDA credential and/or an AA degree. The Early Childhood Education Department of the college arranged a summer, weeklong intensive course in dual language curriculum, led by Sharon Cronin, who had joined the Praxis Institute for Early Childhood Education in Seattle. Many of our teaching staff participated and returned to their centers with stronger skills, a fuller understanding of dual language/bilingual curriculum approaches, and a new, positive attitude toward and in support of the program priority for hiring Spanish-speaking staff.

By February we had experienced another unexpected opportunity that contributed to the success of Skagit/Islands Head Start's changing approach. Six staff members attended the first Head Start Latino Institute in Albuquerque. The sessions helped them further build their knowledge and skills, and they met professionals from across the country who were interested in dual language and bilingual curriculum approaches.

Without the grant or the institutes, we are confident that we would still have been successful in implementing the change to a dual language curriculum. By now we had the commitment of administration, management, and key staff and had accessed resources for building staff knowledge. But this support from outside our program contributed to the effectiveness of

dual language learning and to faster adoption of classroom strategies, and it validated the importance of our approach.

## Step 8.

### Reflecting and planning

Thinking about where you have been and where you are going is crucial to maintaining a paradigm shift and program change. We spent four years developing an understanding of and changing our approach to primary language development. We increased the number of bilingual staff in classrooms and furthered staff knowledge and skills about the importance of children learning in their primary language. We successfully established an intentional dual language curriculum in several preschool centers, an early Head Start classroom, and a home-visiting program.

Our new approach is working. Child assessments indicate that children from Spanish-speaking families now demonstrate progress in early literacy skills equal to or better than their English-speaking peers. Families understand the importance of their own language and value the dual language approach. English- and Spanish-speaking families alike are excited about their children becoming fluent in two languages.

The journey is not over. There are challenges associated with changing

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communities and questions yet to be answered. How do we effectively support five or more primary languages in the same classroom? With staff turnover, how do we maintain and continue to develop staff knowledge and skills? Without the continued staff development assistance of Bárbara, how do we continue to mentor staff? How do we keep our momentum with increasing demands on our time and attention?

Skagit/Islands Head Start is committed to continuing its efforts to ensure that every child has a strong foundation in his or her primary language. Staff from our pilot centers will share what they have learned with other center staff and early childhood professionals in our community. We will collaborate with school district partners who are implementing dual language and bilingual classrooms. We will continue to seek opportunities to increase staff knowledge and skills.

## Conclusion

After discovering that Spanish-speaking children in English-immersion preschool classrooms demonstrated lower literacy and language skills, we transformed the approach to language and learning in our Head Start program through an intentional process to

- increase staff knowledge of language learning and dual language/bilingual curriculum approaches;
- provide support through bilingual and multicultural materials for children, teachers, and parents, and additional staff when needed; and
- enlarge the number of staff with bilingual skills—through hiring and educating bilingual staff and supporting monolingual staff in pursuing language classes.

With encouragement, staff developed and tried new strategies, and the support they received ensured that the strategies met program expectations.

Our efforts were successful. Children from both Spanish- and

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English-speaking families now demonstrate similar skill levels in language and literacy. After five years, our teachers find teaching in a bilingual or dual language classroom very natural. We have participated in the national CRADLE (Cultural Responsiveness and Dual Education) project bringing dual language and bilingual learning to Early Head Start. Our Early Head Start teachers implement a trilingual

approach with Spanish, English, and American Sign Language.

The future includes maintaining a language-appropriate curriculum approach—dual language or otherwise—in the face of new challenges, including classrooms with multiple languages, and continuing the education of all staff, even in the face of limited funding.

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