

## Language and Literacy Development in the Context of Multicultural Communities: Supporting children's home language

Our early learning and public school systems face challenges with the increasing numbers of immigrant and refugee children and families. Most of these children are dual language learners (DLLs), learning both the language of their family as well as English. Schools must adapt as they serve more children who speak English as their second language. One challenge for schools is the commonly held belief that the retention of home language impedes the acquisition of English. Research shows the opposite: Intentionally supporting the acquisition of English *and* the home language in young children fosters their social, emotional and cognitive development.<sup>1</sup>

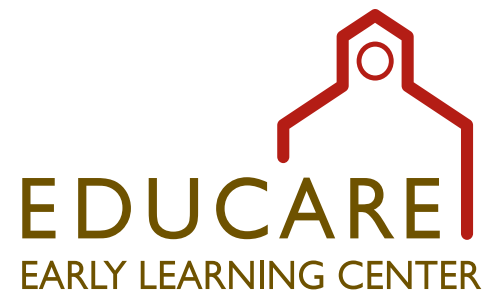
Dual language children are more likely than other learners to come from low-income communities and are less likely than other children living in poverty to attend preschool. They often miss critical opportunities to participate in early learning experiences to prepare them for school. As a result of these multiple factors, when young dual language learners enter kindergarten, they may already be academically behind their monolingual peers.<sup>2</sup>

Teachers need to help children acquire English as the primary academic language of the American school system. But, it is also crucial to help children preserve their home language because it serves as a foundation of cultural and familial identity and an integral element of children's cognitive and language development. The Educare Early Learning Center in Seattle is located in a community where more than 80 languages are spoken; the Center has no majority language. Thus, it is uniquely poised to explore strategies to support dual language learners and decrease the academic achievement gap before children enter kindergarten.

### Supporting Home Language

Most parents are concerned about their children's literacy and language development, but they often have a limited understanding of the role they play in supporting that development. In families where one or both parents do not speak English, parents are also less likely to read to their children regularly than in families where both parents speak English.<sup>3</sup> Yet, research shows that children who come to school with experience in reading are less likely to encounter reading difficulties, regardless of the language in which they read or are read to at home.<sup>4</sup> When children develop early literacy skills in one language these skills can and do transfer to another language.

Educare staff, therefore, work intentionally to reassure parents who do not speak English that early reading activities in their home language are key in helping to build their child's literacy skills. Through home visits and family literacy events, Educare staff increase parents' understanding of the importance of early language experiences (at home and at Educare). They help parents promote their children's interest in reading and language regardless of what language is spoken in the home. Educare staff connect families to their local library and provide books for the home through grant projects such as *Page Ahead*. Teachers and parents develop individualized learning plans that encourage parents to be actively involved through literacy activities in the home. Parents are encouraged to read to their children and to understand the value of the storytelling, songs, rhymes and word play games of their culture as key ingredients in supporting their children's success as early readers.<sup>5</sup>



Educare Early Learning Center emerged from a bold vision to start early to change the academic and life trajectories for children and their families by delivering children into kindergarten ready to succeed. By intervening in the earliest weeks and months of a child's life, Educare aims to prevent the academic achievement gap before it develops.



The Educare Early Learning Center in Seattle's White Center neighborhood is one of 12 centers across the United States in the Bounce Learning Network. This network seeks to provide the highest-quality learning environments for children at risk of school failure. Each center is designed and built around a research-based program model that reflects the developmental needs of children from prenatal to five, their families, and the communities in which they live. Educare centers showcase the results of high-quality robust services delivered to the most at-risk families.

# FROM THE CLASSROOM

The Educare Early Learning Center currently employs sixteen bilingual teaching staff who speak a variety of languages, including Spanish, Vietnamese, Somali and Arabic. On a broader level, the **professional development and training** of all staff is critical to providing consistently high-quality language and literacy experiences for children. All staff receive training specific to the second language acquisition and strategies to build literacy and language rich classrooms. This training includes online modules, group training, and onsite coaching and mentoring.

The Educare Early Learning Center also participates in an **Early Reading First** project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Early Reading First provides additional training to staff, so that they can more effectively promote early development of verbal language, phonological awareness, and awareness of print and the alphabet; use assessments and screenings to individualize children's learning activities; and better facilitate smooth transitions for children from our preschool program into formal classroom settings in local schools.

In addition to staff training, Educare provides **Bilingual Assistants** to each classroom with multiple children who speak languages not represented within the classroom teaching team. Bilingual Assistants are available to teaching teams for a limited number of hours each week and focus on supporting dual language learners to build relationships with their peers and teachers and to learn classroom routines and expectations. Bilingual Assistants are typically placed in classrooms for the first weeks or months of a program year and help facilitate child-to-child and adult-to-child communication in the home language of the child. Most often, Bilingual Assistants are former parents of the program and are familiar with classroom practice.

## Supporting Children's Literacy with the Support of Page Ahead

Studies show that being read to as a child and having books in the home are two critical indicators of future academic success. *Page Ahead* is an organization that partners with programs working with children most at risk of academic failure, providing free books for children. Each child at Educare receives 3-4 books each year. Parents learn reading strategies, and information about the importance of reading to their children. There is also an annual **Community Reading Day**, a *Page Ahead* event that opens the classrooms to volunteer readers from the local community, including students from neighboring schools, members of local service agencies, and extended family members. Community Reading Day visitors share stories in their home language through oral storytelling, songs, and poems. Books in multiple languages are given to families. This special day brings the community into the classroom to support children as early readers and lifelong learners.



1. Allen, K.E. & Marotz, L.R. (2003). Developmental profiles (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Albany, NY: Delmar Learning.
2. Ballantyne, K.G., Sanderman, A.R. & McLaughlin, N. (2008). Dual language learners in the early years: Getting ready to succeed in school. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. Available at <http://www.nclac.gwu.edu/res/about/ecell/earlyyears>.
3. O'Donnell, K. (2008). Parents' reports of the school readiness of young children from the national household education surveys program of 2007 (NCES 2008-051). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C. Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008051.pdf>.
4. Gabriela, A., Throseth, E., Martohardjono, B., & Otheguy, R. (2009). Emergent literacy skills in bilingual children: Evidence for the role of L1 syntactic comprehension. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 12 (5), 1-15.
5. Yopp, H.K. & Stapleton, L. (2008) Conciencia fonémica en Español (Phonemic awareness in Spanish). *The Reading Teacher*, 61 (5), 374-82.

## Resources for more information:

- Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center: <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc>
- NAEYC Position Statement: Screening and Assessment of Young English-Language Learners: [http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/ELL\\_SupplementLong.pdf](http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/ELL_SupplementLong.pdf)
- Revising and Updating the Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs Serving Children Ages Birth to Five: [http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/resources/ECLKC\\_Bookstore/PDFs/Revisiting%20Multicultural%20Principles%20for%20Head%20Start\\_English.pdf](http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/resources/ECLKC_Bookstore/PDFs/Revisiting%20Multicultural%20Principles%20for%20Head%20Start_English.pdf)
- Page Ahead: [pageahead.org](http://pageahead.org)

Educare Early Learning Center is located in the White Center neighborhood just south of the city of Seattle. More information can be found on the White Center Early Learning Initiative website: [www.wceli.org](http://www.wceli.org). Tours are arranged by appointment. Please call (206) 716-8800 for more information.



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