



## Dual Language Learners in Head Start

### Overview

Children who are learning two or more languages at the same time are known as Dual Language Learners (DLL). They represent a large subgroup of the Head Start population: in 2007-2008 DLL children made up 29% of Head Start participants. Given the unique cultural and linguistic context of this population, these children and their families need tailored educational and outreach services in order to fully participate in Head Start learning and social activities. As discussed below, current Head Start legislation and regulations contain requirements and recommendations for supporting these children and their families.

In addition, the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 mandated a study on the status of children who speak more than one language or who are learning English, which was completed in 2013.<sup>1</sup> Providing targeted assistance to and monitoring the progress of DLL children can contribute to improved service delivery for these children and their families. Moreover, given the benefits of bilingualism in school and at home to future cognitive development,<sup>2</sup> a learning environment with multiple languages and cultural traditions may benefit not only DLL students but all children in the classroom.<sup>3</sup>

### Supporting Dual Language Learners in Head Start

Head Start has a long history of supporting children and families of diverse backgrounds and cultures. Since the 1960s, Head Start has maintained two culturally and linguistically specialized programs: **American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start programs** and **Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs**. More generally, Head Start legislation, regulations, and program guidelines all contain requirements and recommendations for supporting DLL children.

For example, the **2007 Head Start Act** requires that when determining funding for a Head Start agency, the agency's plan to meet the needs of DLL children should be a consideration.<sup>4</sup> The **Head Start Program Performance Standards** require that "when a majority of children speak the same language, at least one classroom staff member or home visitor interacting regularly with the children must speak their language."<sup>5</sup> The program performance standards also require that classroom staff be aware of the ethnicity of the families they serve and be able to communicate with these families either directly or through a translator.<sup>6</sup> The 2010 **Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework**, a revised version of the Child Outcomes Framework, introduced a new English Language Development Domain which "stresses the importance of maintaining children's home/first language as they learn English."<sup>7</sup> In addition, the Office of Head Start has released various **Information Memoranda** and **Policy Instructions** with specific requirements or recommendations for DLL children such as requiring that centers post emergency information in other languages besides English, and providing guidelines for staff cultural responsiveness in Head Start programs.<sup>8</sup> These represent just a few of the many instances in which Head Start legislation, regulations and guidelines provide additional and targeted support for DLL children.

Beyond these general, program-wide requirements and recommendations, the Office of Head Start (OHS) sponsors and encourages innovative practices, programs and studies to improve services for DLLs, including:

- Two Head Start Innovation and Improvement Projects from 2005 to 2008: the University of Cincinnati's

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Bilingual Bridge program that provided professional development and other support services in Spanish, and the Community Development Institute's HELLP (Head Start English Language Learners Project) that provided comprehensive training on working with DLL children and families to 44 Head Start programs.<sup>9</sup>

- Two cohorts of the CRADLE (Culturally Responsive and Aware Dual Language Education) pilot study, which began in 2006 and assisted 44 Early Head Start programs<sup>10</sup> in “designing and implementing program-wide philosophies, policies, and practices to support children and families from diverse language and cultural backgrounds.”<sup>11</sup>
- A Center of Excellence in Early Childhood grant awarded in 2010 for up to five years to Youth Development, Inc., a large Head Start grantee that uses a dual language model in which classes are taught in English half of the time and Spanish half of the time. Part of the grant must be used for dissemination of best practices to other Head Start programs.<sup>12</sup>

## Monitoring the progress of Dual Language Learners in Head Start

In recognition of demographic shifts, the 2007 Head Start Act mandated that a study be conducted on “the status of limited English proficient children and their families participating in Head Start programs.”<sup>13</sup> The resulting report, published in 2013, examined the population of Dual Language Learners in Head Start. DLLs make up over a quarter of children enrolled in traditional Head Start programs, and around 90% of children in Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) programs. The report found that most DLLs are enrolled in Head Start classrooms that use their home language for instruction at least some of the time. It also found that on average DLLs enrolled in Head Start experience similar classroom quality as children from monolingual English homes, with global classroom quality ranging from minimal to good. However, DLLs are less likely than their English monolingual peers to be in classrooms where new words are discussed as a daily activity. They are also less likely to receive center-based services (as opposed to home-based or combination) or to be enrolled in programs with a center that operates more than 10 hours per day.

In terms of child outcomes, the report found that after a year of Head Start, DLL children had made greater improvements than their monolingual peers in some areas such as English vocabulary development and cognitive-social skills, but they also experienced increased prevalence of overweight during their time in Head Start. Looking at the program more broadly, study findings indicated that children entering Head Start lag behind their same age peers in the national norming population in many developmental areas, and that DLLs lag behind even more. While Head Start children in general, and DLLs in particular, experienced gains in many developmental areas throughout their time in the program, Head Start was not able to narrow the school readiness gap between its participants, including DLLs, and the national norming population.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond Head Start, there is a growing body of evidence on the positive effects of early education for DLLs, although more research is needed. These promising findings come from a variety of **experimental and non-experimental studies** of preschool programs, including Head Start, that show as strong or stronger positive impacts for DLLs compared to their English-speaking or native-born peers. An emerging theme among these studies is the importance of systematically incorporating children's home language and English in classroom instruction for DLL children. Programs that consistently and intentionally incorporate both languages can promote successful development in both languages for Dual Language Learners.<sup>15</sup>

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## Sources & notes:

- <sup>1</sup> The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 mandated a study on the status of children with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). The Act defines a “Limited English Proficient” child as a child “(A) (i) who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English; (ii) (I) who is a Native American [...], an Alaska Native, or a native resident of an outlying area [...]; and (II) who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the child’s level of English language proficiency; or (iii) who is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant; and (B) whose difficulties in speaking or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny such child—(i) the ability to successfully achieve in a classroom in which the language of instruction is English; or (ii) the opportunity to participate fully in society.” The ensuing study expanded the study population to include any Dual Language Learner (DLL), defined as “a child learning two (or more) languages at the same time, or a child learning a second language while continuing to develop their first (or home) language,” including children with Limited English Proficiency. The DLL definition has become more predominant in practical terms, and therefore this informational brief refers DLL children instead of children with LEP throughout.
- <sup>2</sup> Marian, V. & Shook, A. (2012). The cognitive benefits of being bilingual. *Cerebrum*, 2012(13). Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3583091/>; Espinosa, L.M. (2008). *Challenging common myths about young English language learners* (FDC Policy Brief, Advancing PK-3, No. 8). New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development. Retrieved from <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/MythsOfTeachingELLEspinosa.pdf>.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, 42 U.S.C. §9801 *et. seq.* (2007). Note that the 2007 Head Start Act refers to these children as ‘children with Limited English Proficiency’ rather than Dual Language Learners. However, for the purposes of simplicity, this informational brief adopts the standard and more frequently used terminology of Dual Language Learners.
- <sup>5</sup> Program performance standards for the operation of Head Start programs by grantees and delegate agencies, Staff qualifications, 45 CFR § 1304.52 (2007). Retrieved from [http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/resources/pd/Staff%20Development/All%20Staff/prodev\\_pps\\_00016\\_060905.html](http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/resources/pd/Staff%20Development/All%20Staff/prodev_pps_00016_060905.html).
- <sup>6</sup> Staffing requirements and program options, Program staffing patterns, 45 CFR § 1306.20 (2007). Retrieved from [http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/Early%20Head%20Start/supervision/staffing/fiscal\\_pps\\_2009\\_050506.html](http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/Early%20Head%20Start/supervision/staffing/fiscal_pps_2009_050506.html).
- <sup>7</sup> Office of Head Start. (2010). *The Head Start Child Development And Early Learning Framework: Promoting positive outcomes in early childhood programs serving children 3–5 years old*. Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health & Human Services. Retrieved from [http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/eecd/Assessment/Child%20Outcomes/HS\\_Revised\\_Child\\_Outcomes\\_Framework%28rev-Sept2011%29.pdf](http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/eecd/Assessment/Child%20Outcomes/HS_Revised_Child_Outcomes_Framework%28rev-Sept2011%29.pdf)
- <sup>8</sup> National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness. (2013). *Serving Head Start’s diverse children and families: What is the law? What are the regulations?* Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic/docs/serving-head-starts-diverse-families-laws-regs.pdf>.
- <sup>9</sup> Office of Head Start. (2008). *Dual Language Learning: What does it take? Head Start dual language report*. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/eecd/dual%20language%20learners%20and%20their%20families/learning%20in%20two%20languages/duallanguagelea.htm#HeadStartRecentHistoryofServingDualLanguageLearners>.
- <sup>10</sup> Early Head Start programs serve children aged zero to two and pregnant women and is separate from other Head Start programs serving children ages three to five. Diversitydatakids.org focuses on Head Start programs serving children ages three to five (Head Start, American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start) but federal efforts to improve the program for DLL children extend to all types of programs.
- <sup>11</sup> Office of Head Start, (2008), *op.cit.* For more information on CRADLE, see Fort, P. & Stechuk, R. (2008). The Cultural Responsiveness and Dual Language Education Project. *Zero to three*, 29(1), 24-28.
- <sup>12</sup> National Head Start Association (NHSA). (n.d.). Centers of Excellence in Early Childhood. Retrieved from [http://www.nhsa.org/centers\\_of\\_excellence\\_in\\_early\\_childhood](http://www.nhsa.org/centers_of_excellence_in_early_childhood). For more information on the Youth Development, Inc approach to Dual Language Learners, see Martinez-Pacias, J. & Gutierrez, A. (2011). *Achieving a Center of Excellence through dual language implementation* [Presentation slides at the Research-to-Practice Symposium at the 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Head Start Conference]. Youth Development, Inc. Retrieved from [http://www.nhsa.org/files/static\\_page\\_files/7CC8B2F7-1D09-3519-AD339B04B493B9A8/Center\\_of\\_Excellence\\_Power\\_Point\\_Presentation\\_on\\_50-50\\_Dual\\_Language\\_Model.pdf](http://www.nhsa.org/files/static_page_files/7CC8B2F7-1D09-3519-AD339B04B493B9A8/Center_of_Excellence_Power_Point_Presentation_on_50-50_Dual_Language_Model.pdf).
- <sup>13</sup> The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, *op.cit.*
- <sup>14</sup> *Report to Congress on Dual Language Learners in Head Start and Early Head Start programs*. (2013). Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/resource/report-to-congress-on-dual-language-learners-in-head-start-and-early-head>.
- <sup>15</sup> Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J. Burchinal, M.R., Espinosa, L.M., Gormley, W.T.,..., Zaslow, M.J. (2013). *Investing in our future: The evidence base on preschool education*. Ann Arbor, MI: Society for Research in Child Development. Retrieved from [http://www.srcc.org/sites/default/files/documents/washington/mb\\_2013\\_10\\_16\\_investing\\_in\\_children.pdf](http://www.srcc.org/sites/default/files/documents/washington/mb_2013_10_16_investing_in_children.pdf).