First 5 California
Dual Language Learner Pilot

What Constitutes High Quality Early Learning Experiences for California's Young Dual Language Learners

A Working Paper

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Executive Summary

California's early learning settings serve children shaped by a variety of cultures and traditions within their families and communities. Currently, 60 percent of California's children ages birth through 5 live in a household where a language other than English is spoken (compared to 22 percent nationwide). Dual Language Learners (DLLs) are children who are learning two or more languages at the same time. In California, most DLL children also are members of low-income families; 72 percent of DLL children live in families with income less than 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.

First 5 California (F5CA) has the opportunity to identify effective strategies that support dual language development across early learning settings, engage families to support their children's dual language development, and deliver effective professional learning opportunities so early educators, caregivers, and other staff can effectively support the learning and development of young DLLs. Early educators and administrators struggle to find actionable information about how to address the needs of their DLL children. Increasingly, early educators are seeking resources to build an emphasis on supporting DLLs and their families.

Despite the prevalence of dual language learners, little research has been conducted on the dual language learning in infants and toddlers. California's diverse population warrants a more focused effort to understand strategies for serving youngest DLLs, birth through age 5 whose home language is neither Spanish nor, English, and the conditions under which strategies are effective in a variety of early learning settings. There is a need for to provide enhanced learning experiences, social-emotional supports that requires a system-wide response.

For this reason, First 5 California is investing $20 million from FY 2017–18 through FY 2020–21 for a study designed to evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of existing strategies implemented in early learning settings with young DLLs and their families. The evaluation will help F5CA determine and disseminate information about effective, scalable, and implementable DLL strategies across California with children birth through five years old, with an emphasis on infants and toddlers and alternative settings.

The sheer number of young DLLs in California make F5CA's DLL Pilot a critical investment and necessary to determine appropriate and effective instructional strategies and curricula for all DLLs. Results from the DLL Pilot will help California policymakers and the public develop a deeper understanding of what constitutes high quality DLL learning experiences for infants, toddlers, and preschool age children across language groups and in a variety of settings.

Investing in California's Children

Children's brains are primed for the necessary language skill developments in a way that adults' are not. Brain science highlights two key opportunities: development of bilingualism or multilingualism is easiest at young ages,[1] and children are capable of learning more than one language at the same time when given appropriate support. DLLs are an asset to their family, community, and globally. Some studies indicate that

Two is better than one. Earlier is better than later."
-L. Espinosa

the extent of these advantages is greatest for children exposed to two languages before the age of five.[2] Evidence indicates supporting bilingualism from the earliest moment yields wide-ranging benefits, from early cognitive and social advantages to better long-term employment opportunities and competitiveness in the workplace.[3] Children continuously exposed to more than one language from a young age have increased grey matter density and more efficient synaptic connectivity in regions of the brain associated with language processing.[4] Further, "the cognitive demands of managing two languages may sharpen abilities in other domains, and these enhanced cognitive abilities may be used to further process and learn language."[5] These benefits translate to increased memory, attention, and other executive functions.[6] Many young DLLs demonstrate better self-regulation skills and have fewer behavior problems, with advantages in social-emotional skills persisting into elementary school.[7]

While young children have the capacity to learn more than one language, the child's home language must not be neglected in the process of acquiring the second language.[8] Linguistic and cultural continuity between home and the early learning setting are key to preventing home language loss and promoting positive development. Without intervention and intentional support for the home language first, young DLLs develop proficiency in neither their home language nor English.

Despite the overwhelming evidence, California's system of early care and education does not adequately support educators and administrators to realize the advantages of bilingualism and multilingualism. Unsupported children who are DLLs in the U.S., "on average, lag behind their monolingual English-speaking peers in academic achievement when structural supports are not in place. These patterns may suggest that there is a mismatch between the learning experiences these children *need* to meet their potential, and the quality of experiences they are receiving currently. Given the growing number of young children who are DLLs and the sizable proportion of the workforce they will comprise in the coming years, ensuring they are prepared for school and do well once they arrive is an economic imperative that will directly influence the competitiveness of the U.S. in an evolving global economy."[9]

Recent studies indicate, on average, unsupported DLLs enter kindergarten behind their peers, particularly in the areas of language, literacy, and mathematics. As a group, DLLs lag behind their peers on measures of school readiness when they enter

kindergarten, and are further behind in reading assessments at the end of kindergarten and first grade.[10] Larger achievement gaps are evident in third grade when 79 percent of California's English learners are below proficient in English-Language Arts, and 49 percent are below proficient in Mathematics on state standardized tests.[11] Research also finds increasing disparities in academic achievement between DLLs and their English-as-a-first-language counterparts as children progress through their educational careers, including high school, and are over-represented in college drop-out statistics when programmatic structures are not in place.[12]

Early educators in all types of early learning settings are critical drivers to ensure children are supported to meet their full potential. Not all early educators can provide instruction in all languages, but *all* early educators can support all languages when equipped with the knowledge and opportunity to develop skills to enhance responsive and intentional teaching. An early learning setting is defined as any setting in which children receive care and education, including family child care, and it is important to note, early educators are individuals who provide care and education for children from birth to age five. Language and communicative competence provide important tools for learning, engaging in social relationships, and behavior and emotion regulation from birth. The ultimate goal of the DLL Pilot is to create equitable opportunities so California's young DLLs are supported and thrive in their early childhood settings, develop bilingual ability, are ready for kindergarten, and succeed in school and beyond.

California's DLL Children

The population of young DLLs is growing significantly in California and nationwide. Currently, 60 percent of California's children age, birth through 5 live in a household where a language other than English is spoken compared to 22 percent of children nationwide.[13] Nearly three-quarters of these California homes are Spanish speaking (see Table 1).[14] In California, most DLLs also are members of low-income families; 72 percent of DLLs live in families with income less than 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.[15]

Table 1: Languages Spoken at Home by Children Ages Birth to Five, 2015 (California Health Interview Survey)

Language Spoken at Home	%	Population
English	48.2%	1,447,000
Spanish	14.9%	448,000
Chinese	1.6%	49,000
Vietnamese	0.6%	18,000
Other, one language only	1.2%	36,000
English and Spanish	23.6%	710,000
English and Chinese	1.4%	43,000
English and one other language	6.5%	194,000
Other, two or more languages	1.8%	55,000
Total	**100.0%**	**3,001,000**

DLLs often, but not exclusively are the children of immigrants. Research documents the advantages of immigrant families and the challenges acculturation imposes on healthy learning and development. Studies show young DLLs of first-generation immigrant parents tend to demonstrate robust social skills similar to *English speaking* peers, compared to second or third-generation DLLs where this advantage diminishes.[16] Second-generation immigrants tend to lose their home language faster than first-generation immigrants and without intervention and partnerships with families, knowledge of the home language is diminished further by the third generation as English becomes universal.[17]

> *Sixty percent of California's children ages birth through 5 live in a household where a language other than English, or another language and English, is spoken.*

DLL Pilot Focus Areas

F5CA's DLL Pilot was developed with input from the First 5 Association of California, First 5 county commissions, and other partners. It will contribute to gaps in research regarding strategies for serving and supporting California's young DLLs and their early learning settings. For example, much of existing research has been conducted with Spanish–English DLLs, who comprise the largest proportion of young DLLs. However, California's children speak a variety of other home languages, including Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), Vietnamese, Hmong, Farsi, Urdu, Tagalog, and Filipino. Further, the majority of research about approaches and strategies to support DLLs comes from research conducted in elementary and secondary education settings; research conducted in early learning settings has focused primarily on preschoolers in center-based preschool programs.[18] The context for existing research does not reflect the range of settings serving California's young DLLs during the first five years of life. Little is known about strategies used to support DLLs in family child care and community-based settings, and there is not adequate research to inform the support for DLL infants and toddlers overall.

The DLL Pilot goal is to identify effective approaches to optimize home language and promote dual language acquisition across different types of early learning settings, and the conditions under which they impact child and family outcomes. Within the approaches and across a variety of early learning settings, the DLL Pilot will identify research-based and research-informed strategies within the following categories:

- Intentional teaching strategies to promote young DLLs' dual language acquisition and foster DLLs' language, learning, and development

- Family engagement strategies to promote families to engage in, in-home learning activities and support home language development

- Professional development strategies to build early educators' supportive attitudes, knowledge, and skills to work effectively with young DLLs

The Pilot not only seeks to understand the strategies within the contexts of California, but also will address how the CA-QRIS tools and measures of rated quality can better reflect the diverse population of children in California's early learning settings.

The following sections will explore the DLL Pilot focus areas: both approaches to supporting young DLLs and the influence of quality on DLL approaches.

Approaches to Supporting Young DLLs

A comprehensive approach to supporting young DLLs must include both intentional teaching strategies and family engagement strategies, as well as the professional development necessary to ensure early educators are prepared to implement them. To support bilingualism effectively, we must examine recent findings on language development and brain science, along with new research on the pedagogical, family engagement, and professional development strategies that best support DLLs, their families, educators, and caregivers.

Intentional Teaching Strategies

DLLs have unique individual learning needs, and their language development differs widely from one child to the next. "The lack of proven instructional practices and evidence-based models that effectively support the development and learning of children who are DLLs also is a contributor to the achievement gap."[19]

When children experience meaningful interaction in two languages from infancy, they begin to acquire two languages simultaneously.

Ultimately, English-language proficiency is essential for school success. However, this proficiency does not require an exclusive focus on English-language development during the early years. In fact, high levels of proficiency in the home language facilitate English acquisition and high levels of academic achievement long term.[20] When instruction is in English, DLLs need additional supports to make meaning, such as home language explanations of English concepts, intentional scaffolds, and interactive literacy and language strategies to facilitate access to content.[21] Strategies integrating cultural and language competence must be woven into all aspects of the curriculum to ensure quality supports for language are applied to other areas of learning and development.

Some DLL models promote a balanced dual language approach while others focus on English-language development with home language support. However, most research is conducted in K-12 settings, in center-based preschool settings, or with Spanish-speaking DLLs.[22] Far less is known about the impact of different approaches and intentional teaching strategies in different early learning settings, with infants and toddlers, or with other language groups. To generate new knowledge, it is necessary to document and evaluate the range of approaches, specific intentional teaching strategies, and level of implementation among all of California's diverse young learners.

The DLL Pilot will consider the unique developmental needs of infants and toddlers, separately from those of preschoolers, since DLL infant and toddler DLLs have received

limited research attention.[23] Recent studies have confirmed the importance of socio-linguistic interaction in infants and toddlers, with strong evidence about the role played by infants' social skills in cracking the language code.[24] Importantly, early learning settings must prioritize and support dual language exposure from birth. Experiences in non-parental care provide important contexts for rich language input, whether in the child's home language or a second language, or both.[25]

Family Engagement Strategies

Early learning settings are key in fostering continued development of the home language, and for the added cognitive and social-emotional benefits of maintaining their relationships with their families and communities.[26] Children's learning and development are enhanced when early educators partner with families in culturally and linguistically responsive ways.[27]

Dual language learners learn and develop best when early educators engage in collaborative relationships with their families.

Educators must help families understand their essential role in supporting their children's learning and development and parents and providers need to understand the importance of developing home language competency on children's development for personal identity, connections to family, long-term social-emotional, health, and cognitive outcomes. In order for DLLs to reach their full potential, long-term academic and life success begins with embracing and building on home and community language practices and cultural values. Family engagement should use a strengths-based approach to addressing the bilingual and bicultural needs of children and families, developing warm and mutually responsive relationships, bridging the language difference between home and the early learning setting, and engaging in regular two-way communication with families.[28] Early learning settings also should support family members' efforts to promote learning at home, continue to support home language development, and encourage families to read to their children.[29]

In addition to identifying research-based and research-informed strategies within different types of early learning settings, across different age groups of children and different language groups, the DLL Pilot will investigate how strategies might differ when the early educator and family do or do not speak the same language.

Professional Development Strategies

Early educators' effectiveness is one of the most important out-of-home factors influencing young children's learning and development. The extent to which early educators can support DLLs' learning and development will have a profound impact on their academic success later on in school and in life.

California's early childhood education workforce is largely unprepared to meet the needs of the increasingly diverse population of children in early learning settings. Further, while experts agree the quality of relationships between early educators and children is foundational to a child's learning and development across domains,

additional research must document and articulate the nature of responsive adult interactions with culturally and linguistically diverse children.[30]

Effective professional development to build the skills of early educators to support young DLLs must incorporate practice-based adult learning strategies, use research-based content, and consider implications and effectiveness across different types of early learning settings. Early educators need guidance on how to modify, individualize, and implement high-quality intentional teaching practices targeting both content and language, providing direct teaching when needed to help DLLs learn skills and concepts, and integrating the home language throughout the day to support concept and language development.[31]

Not all early educators can provide instruction in all languages,
but all early educators can support all languages.

F5CA's DLL Pilot will deepen California's understanding of this intersection between effective professional development and preparation of early educators serving young DLLs to:

- Ensure early educators' attitudes and understanding of bilingualism, and the culture of the early learning setting support successful implementation of effective DLL approaches

- Improve early educator preparation programs and professional development opportunities to deliver content and strategies in a manner that builds expertise to support multilingual and multi-cultural groups of children

The Influence of Quality on DLL Approaches

The DLL Pilot will be implemented in early learning settings participating in the CA-QRIS to test the assumption that high-quality DLL practices require a foundation of high-quality early learning to impact DLL outcomes. Information gleaned from the DLL Pilot regarding culture and policies in high-quality programs, rating practices, and child assessment will inform changes to the CA-QRIS rating matrix and statewide training and technical assistance to ensure they address the unique assets and needs of DLLs.

Culture and Policies of the Early Learning Setting

A supportive work environment is essential to improving program quality and facilitating children's learning. Early educators' abilities to apply their knowledge and skills and continue to hone their practice require a work environment that supports their ongoing learning and professional activities, and offers dependable benefits to ensure their well-being.[32] Similarly, the early learning setting's vision, policies, and goals for serving young DLLs are drivers for effective implementation of DLL strategies. Early learning settings that embrace and support dual language acquisition beginning in the earliest years lead to long-term success in school. When staff do not share the language and/or culture of the children, it is most imperative for the setting's approach to DLL supports include strategies to compensate for staff language capacity.[33]

QRIS Rating Practices

The CA-QRIS[34] provides a comprehensive approach to enhancing program quality for young children in early learning settings by utilizing a set of quality assessment tools to determine a given program's quality rating. The CA-QRIS rating matrix addresses the key drivers of program quality: program administration, professional development, child observation tied to curriculum, and family engagement. However, despite being closely aligned to core components essential to program quality, the tools used in QRIS do not capture effective approaches and enhancements specifically to support DLLs. The decisions about how to enhance learning environments to best support young DLLs' learning and development should be guided by assessment that informs practice and supports improved child outcomes (e.g., a focus on program elements; teacher quality; and formative, continuous improvement). The program assessment tools currently being used are designed for contexts characterized by monolingual development or are not intended for use with DLLs. In effect, they do not account for effective approaches and enhancements and may not capture important aspects of practices that support young DLLs. Enhancements to existing tools or the development of new tools may be necessary to explicitly capture effective approaches to support young DLLs.

Assessing the Language and Development of Young DLLs

The measures used to assess DLLs' language and development must be appropriate to generate accurate and relevant information about the development of young DLLs. Further, the individuals doing the assessments must have the linguistic proficiency in the relevant language(s).[35] In addition, assessing DLLs in both English and their home language is essential given the possibility of varying proficiency in either language. If children are assessed only in their least proficient language (typically English), their language skills and skills in other developmental domains will be underestimated.[36]

Conclusion

Children are born in or immigrate to California every day. Results from the DLL Pilot will be instrumental in expanding the quality early learning settings reflecting the elements shown to improve child development outcomes for DLLs, so they can thrive in their early learning settings, succeed in kindergarten, and demonstrate proficiency in third grade and beyond. The path to success for young DLLs reaches far beyond promoting English-language fluency. Research is clear – promoting greater proficiency in a child's home language leads to improved academic outcomes, which likely will have substantial impact on California's future workforce in a global economy where the ability to speak more than one language is a key asset.

As our understanding of the value of bilingualism grows, sharing this knowledge broadly with families, early educators (i.e., caregivers, teachers and program directors), and policymakers is crucial to ensure children have opportunities to become bilingual or multilingual.

With the DLL Pilot, F5CA hopes to address research gaps regarding ways to effectively support DLLs. While a compelling body of scientific research presents a case for both

long-term benefits of effective early education services as well as programmatic features that make them effective, much is still to be learned about how to best support DLLs in these settings.[37] With the increased national focus on expanding access to high-quality early education services to children from low-income and non-English-speaking families, results from this Pilot will contribute to the articulation of effective approaches and specific strategies to serve these diverse learners.

As the DLL Pilot gets underway, F5CA is helping young DLLs and their families in other ways. The Pilot is embedded in a multi-faceted approach to site quality improvement and broad messaging. F5CA will share and promote the findings of the Pilot broadly, across California and the nation, promoting far-reaching implementable recommendations and guidance for the early learning field to address this critical area of need.

Appendix A: Acronyms

CA-QRIS: California Quality Rating and Improvement System
CDE: California Department of Education
DLL: Dual language learner
DRDP: Desired Results Developmental Profile
ECE: Early childhood education
ELD: English Language Development
F5CA: First 5 California

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