Alabama's Standards *for* Early Learning and Development

APPENDIX FOUR

DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN ALABAMA'S EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF Early Childhood Education

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Dual Language Learners in Alabama's Early Learning Programs

(adapted from Minnesota Practice Brief #3, Dual Language Learners)

Introduction

The term dual language learners (DLL) refers to children, age birth to five, who are learning two or more languages at the same time or learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language. Children who are DLLs come from homes where a language other than English is spoken. For some, both a language other than English and English may be spoken at home. *(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, 2016)*

DLLs may master two or more languages in different ways. Some may begin learning them at the same time or simultaneously, right from the beginning – at birth. Others may learn them sequentially, learning their home language first and adding English as they begin to participate in schools or early learning programs. The timing and exposure and opportunity to use both languages impacts the rate of development. Also important to DLLs' language mastery are community attitudes towards their learning and use of multiple languages, as well as each child's own personality, motivation and ability. (*WIDA, 2014)*

Children exposed to two languages early in life develop two separate, but inter-related language systems. Learning more than one language at the same time does not confuse young children; rather, the human brain is capable of learning multiple languages at very young ages. In fact, this learning is often easiest at young ages, under the right conditions. (Espinosa 2013)

We know that language learning occurs through relationships and is a primary task in young children's development. As infants interact with their family members and primary caregivers, they hear the sounds of the language that surrounds them. In addition to sounds, children learn vocabulary and meaning from daily interactions that are concrete and related to their experiences. For example, the word "apple" conveys the concept of a round fruit that may be red, yellow, or green; that is ready to eat in the fall; that can be eaten raw or cooked, etc. Just one word carries a great deal of meaning.

"During the first five years of life, children's brains develop rapidly, highly influenced by the experiences they share with the adults and peers in their lives. Exposure to language is a unique experience because it is continuous and constant. Children are surrounded by language during many of their waking hours. Constant exposure makes language highly consequential for brain development and learning." *(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education 2016)*

The capability for infants to learn multiple languages is now well-recognized in the field of neuroscience. Through exposure to the home language, children's language learning narrows and becomes focused on the interactions with their loved ones. Beginning as early as nine months of age, the brain starts to do away with language synapses that are no longer necessary for understanding the child's home language (Kluger 2013). Throughout their early years, children's ability to learn multiple languages is more acute than in the adult years as this pruning continues. Therefore, it is important for families and early childhood professionals to make the most of these remarkable capabilities and consider the benefits of learning multiple languages.

"The weight of current research indicates that becoming proficient in two languages is both possible for and beneficial to young children. Reports also show that a strong home- language base makes it easier to learn English, and that young children can learn two languages as naturally as learning one. (August & Shanahan 2006; Genesee 2010; Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak 2011; Magruder, et al 2013)

"There is a scientific consensus that children have the capacity to learn two languages from birth and that this early dual language exposure does not confuse children or delay development in either language. In fact, dual language learning provides children with many cognitive and linguistic benefits. DLL children should be provided with high quality language experiences and support to master both of their languages." (Sandhofer & Uchikoshi, 2013).

The growing number of children who speak two or more languages often presents challenges in a society that is primarily English-speaking. As professionals in early childhood programs and educational systems implement use Alabama's Standards for Early Learning and Development and work toward high quality services to improve child outcomes, they must consider strategies for using the ASELDs effectively with all children including dual language learners.

The number of DLLs in early care and education programs and public schools in the United States has continued to rise during the past 20 years, with some states experiencing over a 200% rate of growth. (Espinosa, 2013)

The US Census Bureau projects that by the 2030s, children whose home language is other than English will increase from roughly 22 percent to 40 percent of the school-age population. The numbers are growing even more rapidly for the preschool years due to increasing immigration and birth rates (Center for Public Education 2012). (Magruder, Hayslip, Espinosa, and Matera 2013)

Stages of Dual Language Learners' Development

Preschoolers who learn English as a second language after they have begun learning a home language will typically progress through several stages (Tabors, 2008). The variability of how and when these stages happen can be even greater for DLLs than for children learning a single language, depending on how well-developed their first language may be and how well their first language transfers to their second. (Sandhoffer & Uchikoshi, 2013)

Children's second-language learning can be dependent on the similarity of the two languages, and the child's exposure to the second language. Their exposure to their home language also impacts learning since they are dependent on this information to build new knowledge. While it may take longer to learn some aspects of language that differ between the two of them, those differences are typically normal and do not indicate a delay or disorder. (Espinosa, 2013)

- In **stage one**, children keep using their home language at school but may begin to say less or even stop talking if the school environment does not support it.
- In **stage two**, children observe interactions and develop receptive language, but may not yet be willing to express the language they have learned. At stage two, a child may go right to his seat at the table when he hears the teacher announce lunch time, but is not ready to reply when asked what kind of sandwich he wants.
- In **stage three**, children understand the rhythms and intonations of English and begin to use some key phrases. You may hear "telegraphic speech" — for example, "Up!" can mean "Look up at the bird!" while "Up?" can mean "Will you reach up and get me that toy?" Children also employ "formulaic speech" — using memorized phrases that serve a function when a gesture or word is added. For example, "I want ___" plus pointing might mean "I want an apple."
- In **stage four**, children have informal fluency in the new language, including the ability to speak in full sentences and hold conversations. Even when they have progressed to the fourth stage, young DLLs still think and understand many things in their first language and will continue to need support and experiences in that language while continuing to develop their English. (Nemeth, 2016)

Alabama's Standards for Early Learning and Development support professionals' identification of children's language development stages and the design of strategies to support their learning.

Benefits of Multilingualism

Children who understand and speak multiple languages experience unique benefits and advantages. In fact, new studies show that a "multilingual brain is nimbler, quicker, better able to deal with ambiguities, resolve conflicts and even resist Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia longer." (Kluger 2013)

Researchers have found differences in brain structure and development between bilingual children and their monolingual peers. Individuals who have continuous, high-quality exposure to more

than one language from a young age have greater grey matter density and more efficient synaptic connectivity in regions of the brain associated with language processing, as well as memory, attention and other executive functions. The extent of these differences, some studies have found, is greatest among individuals who were exposed to two languages before the age of five, and is dependent on how proficient the individual is in his or her second language, and at what age exposure to a second language began. *(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, 2016)*

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University reminds us that executive function and self-regulation skills are those mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. Dual language learners use executive function to figure out the differences and similarities in words they hear in all languages they are exposed to. They are able to switch between languages, ignore irrelevant information, and transfer knowledge.

Dual language learners demonstrate cognitive flexibility or are better able to task switch, inhibit impulses and solve problems.

Dual language learners, compared to their non-bilingual peers, have been found to have an easier time understanding math concepts and solving word problems; developing strong thinking skills; using logic; focusing, remembering and making decisions; thinking about language; and learning other languages. They demonstrate cognitive flexibility or are better able to task switch, inhibit impulses and solve problems.

Children's social emotional skill-building or their developing identity is also positive impacted as they become bilingual. DLLs show stronger ties to their family, culture and community. They are able to make new friends and establish strong relationships. (*Zelasko and Antunez, 2000).* And, recent research has also found that children raised in bilingual households show better self-control *(Kovács and Mehler, 2009*), which is a key indicator of school success.

The benefits for dual language learners continue into adulthood. "One-half to two-thirds of adults around the world speak at least two languages. In today's global society, they have many advantages. Globally, bilingual and biliterate adults have more job opportunities than monolingual adults. Bilingual and biliterate individuals have the opportunity to participate in the global community in more ways, get information from more places, and learn more about people from other cultures." *(Too Small to Fail)*

With so many benefits identified, it is clear that young children who are dual language learners have many strengths. Yet, historically, their academic achievement has lagged behind native English- speakers (Magruder, et al 2013). It is essential that early childhood professionals build on the many strengths identified and engage in thoughtful and intentional practices that address the needs of DLLs in all varieties of programs and services for children and families.

Addressing Gaps in Dual Language Learners' Achievement

Research tells us that children who are dual language learners enter kindergarten behind their peers in language, literacy and math, and these disparities grow as children progress through their school years. This is particularly true for children from lower incomes. This may be a result of early childhood systems lack of preparedness and failure to recognize children's cultures and languages as assets.

"Unless teachers and families make an effort to support both the home language and English, young DLLs can easily lose the ability to speak and understand their home language, or lose the balance between the two languages (*Puig 2010; Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak 2011*).

If young children lose the language of their home, they will never experience the many advantages of becoming fully bilingual. They might find communicating with elder family members difficult and feel less connected to their family traditions and heritage. This disconnect can lead to emotional and self-esteem concerns as DLLs approach adolescence. (*Wong Fillmore, 19 1991), (Magruder, et al 2013)*

These gaps can be impacted when professionals provide early childhood programs and services for children and families that attend to the social and cultural context in which children are being raised and recognize and celebrate the diversity of families, languages, and cultures in their programs and communities.

Recent policy statements and recommendations emphasize the importance of honoring children's diversity. The Division for Early Childhood tells us: "For optimal development and learning of all children, individuals who work with children must respect, value, and support the culture, values, beliefs, and languages of each home and promote the meaningful, relevant, and active participation of families." *(Division for Early Childhood 2010)*

The U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education states: Early childhood programs should be prepared to optimize the early experiences of these young children by holding high expectations, capitalizing on their strengths- including cultural and linguistic strengths - and providing them with the individualized developmental and learning supports necessary to succeed in school." *(DHHS and DOE 2016)*

WIDA, an organization that provides language development resources to those who support the academic success of multilingual learners has developed Early English Language (E-ELD) and Early Spanish Language (E-SLD) Development Standards to provide guidance to early childhood professionals. The key message is that children who are dual language learners need listening, speaking, and meaning-making skills (e.g. gestures and facial expressions) to make sense of and to contribute to the world of the classroom, home, and community. (*See Standards for Dual Language Learners in ASELD's Language and Literacy domain.)*

Establishing a Classroom Language Model

Early childhood programs have opportunities to work with children and families at the time in children's lives when language development in multiple languages has its most potential. Recommendations focus on a strength-based approach that recognizes the many benefits of bi- and multilingualism for children. Administrators and teachers and providers can identify a "language plan" for their program. (Passe 2013). They can approach language learning with children who are dual language learners by identifying and implementing a Classroom Language Model (CLM). (DHHS and DOE 2016).

"Taken together, research on language use in early childhood programs, and on the aforementioned benefits of supporting home language development, including fostering bilingualism, maintaining cultural connections and communication with family members, and the transferability of home language skills to English language acquisition, suggests that systematic and deliberate exposure to English, paired with supporting home language development within high quality early childhood settings, can result in strong, positive outcomes for children who are DLLs, as well as positive outcomes for native English speakers. (DHHS and DOE 2016, 12)"

There are different classroom language models (CLM) that can be adopted to ensure children's exposure and use of language are intentionally planned and implemented. These plans will identify strategies that promote children's optimal language and literacy development. Early childhood programs should carefully choose their CLM, based on the composition of the home language/s of the children in their program and their learning needs, and the language proficiencies of their lead teachers and providers, informed by input from families.

While four models are identified, the first three have the greatest impact for young dual language learners. And benefits are seen, for not only dual language learners, but for monolingual English-speaking children as well.

- **Dual immersion.** This approach provides instruction in both English and a second language at alternating times of the day, on alternating days, or on alternating weeks.
- **Home language instruction with English support.** Under this model, instruction is primarily provided in children's home language, but there is support for English language acquisition, through intentional exposure to English, the availability of learning materials in English, and the display of English words. This approach can be appropriate for infants and toddlers who are DLLs.
- **English language instruction with home language support.** In this approach, instruction is primarily provided in English, but there is support for the home language through intentional exposure to- and some instruction in- the home language, the availability of learning materials in the home language, and the display of multicultural pictures and words in the home language. This approach can be appropriate for preschool children who are DLLs whether or not the program also serves monolingual-English-speaking children.

- **Use of English-only.** In this model, instruction and all activities are carried out in English only, without home language or cultural support. Not supporting development of the home language means that DLLs who speak that language are less likely to receive the benefits discussed above, including developing bilingualism, maintaining cultural connections and communication with family members, and the transferability of home language skills.

Supporting Dual Language Learners

Unless you believe "in your bones" that having a second language in addition to English is a gift, and not a disadvantage, and diversity is a resource, not a problem to be solved, you are likely to respond to DLL children in ways that discourage the continued use of their home language—especially if you are not fluent in the child's home language. (Espinosa and Magruder, 2015)

Minnesota's Practice Brief for Dual Language Learners identifies six primary strategies for supporting Dual Language Learners in their programs that build on children's strengths and scaffold opportunities to support the development of each child towards their full potential.

1. Celebrate the cultural and linguistic diversity of children and their families.
2. Support children's fluency in their home language or honoring home languages if staff are not proficient in that language.
3. Use best practices to teach English.
4. Establish a culturally responsive learning environment across domains.
5. Support children's language development through play (in English and in-home languages).
6. Talk, read, and sing together every day in English and in-home languages.

1. Celebrating Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Developmentally appropriate practices include addressing the social and cultural context in which a child is being raised. This context is a complex whole of language, knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs, and ways of living. When early childhood educators are intentional in creating a climate that celebrates cultural and linguistic diversity, they establish strong partnerships with families built on trust and acceptance.

"Early childhood leaders should intentionally promote a climate and values that are respectful of each and every child and their family, welcoming and inclusive to all, and assumes that every child has strengths that can be built on to help them meet their potential. Leaders should communicate that bilingualism is an asset, not only for DLLs, but for all children. Learning two or more languages is not a risk factor; it is a strength

that should be fostered. Families, regardless of their English proficiency, should be seen as capable partners in promoting children's learning and development and should be provided language assistance services to ensure they can act as the most important advocates in their children's educational experience. ((In some cases, language assistance services may be required to be provided.) The program should not only demonstrate respect for peoples of all cultures; it should embrace and celebrate their diversity. "(DHHS and DOE 2016, 20-21)

Alabama's professionals are encouraged to adopt the ASELDs in conjunction with curriculum and assessment in their programs. They must recognize the appropriateness of the developmental expectations in the standards for all children, while also taking into consideration the social, cultural, and linguistic context in which the children in their program are being raised. They communicate with families in a reciprocal, two-way manner so that their knowledge of family values, beliefs, and child-rearing practices helps them to consider the ways children are demonstrating their accomplishment of specific indicators of progress. They view the ASELDs through the lenses of the cultures of the families in their program community.

2. Supporting Children's Fluency in Their Home Language and Honoring Home Languages

It is important that professionals support and honor children's continued use of their home languages and recognize their developmental capabilities and accomplishments in the languages of their families rather than in English alone. Research has found that dual language learners who receive instruction in their home language make greater gains than those who received little or no home-language support. In one study of Spanish speakers across 11 states, results found that DLLs showed greater gains in math and reading when they received instruction in their home language.

Children whose home language is supported within their early learning program are more likely to develop a strong cultural identity and feel more confident in communicating with family members.

> "DLLs come to early childhood programs with richly varied backgrounds, sets of skills, and cultural ways of knowing: they need teachers who welcome them and recognize their unique abilities, what they know, and what they need to learn. Teachers of young DLLs understand that children communicate their knowledge using the safest method possible, and this may mean the use of their home language, English, or a mixture of both." (Magruder, et al 2013)

Monolingual English educators have the responsibility to honor the children's home languages, even if they do not know those languages. They can make use of language specialists, family members, and volunteers to assist them in learning key words and phrases, finding resources in various languages to bring into the classroom, and interacting with the children in their home languages.

3. Using Best Practices to Teach English

English is the dominant language in the United States and Alabama. There is agreement that all young children need exposure and instruction to learn English. There are multiple ways to approach teaching English and more and more research to guide English-language learning experiences for children whose home language is not English.

"Multiple bodies of literature – including developmental and cognitive psychology, education research, and neuroscience – point to the benefits of supporting the home language of young children who are DLLs, alongside their English language development, in early childhood settings." (DHHS and DOE 2016)

4. Establish a Culturally Responsive Learning Environment

To be culturally and linguistically responsive, the learning environment needs to reflect the children and families in the early childhood program. Professionals intentionally plan for an environment that is organized into established learning areas appropriate for the age and developmental capabilities of the children in the program. They consider materials and experiences that will encourage interaction among children and adults so that oral language is nurtured and supported. They offer materials in multiple languages so that they are reflecting children's home languages as well as English. Print-rich environments include labeling of shelves and areas and providing books and posters in multiple languages.

Here are additional recommendations for establishing a culturally responsive learning environment for DLLs:

1. Find out what languages will be spoken by children in your class and focus your classroom setup on what will most effectively support children who speak those languages.
2. Stock bookshelves with bilingual and monolingual books in each of the languages needed. Look for storybooks and nonfiction books that come with CDs or books available as apps with sound to help you learn to pronounce words in each child's language. Wordless books are also great for multilingual classes.
3. Ask families to send in photos of things that are meaningful to each child, such as foods, celebrations, and family activities. Ask them to help you label the images with words in both English and the home language to give you lots to talk about with the children. Use the pictures to make personalized posters, displays, and class books that children can relate to.
4. Add labels that reflect the represented languages. Ask families or volunteers to help with the proper and the phonetic spelling. Labels don't build language and literacy unless you and the children really use them.
5. Play music from different countries and in different languages. Ask families to send in their favorites to build that home-school connection.

6. Learn to say 10 to 20 key words in each child's home language to help them feel welcome, safe, and comfortable starting from their first day. Use an online translation app like Google Translate or ask parents to record words for you to learn. Try hello, my name is, eat, drink, hurt, bathroom, your parents will be here soon, wash your hands, help, yes, and no to start.

7. Make a picture communication board to help all children communicate their needs and feelings. Post photos of the children looking sad and happy, helping each other, cleaning up toys, going outside, solving a conflict, and participating in daily routines. (Nemeth 2016, 5)

5. Supporting Children's Language Development through Play

The most effective curricular approaches in early childhood are based on young children as active learners emphasizing play, exploration, and constructive learning more so than didactic, teacher- led, passive learning experiences. The Alabama Standards for Early Learning and Development emphasize play, exploration, and active learning for children from birth through kindergarten entry.

Play provides multiple opportunities for professionals to address children's language development. Books, toys, art, science, building materials, and dramatic play props can generate rich language interactions that reinforce vocabulary, concepts and language usage in all areas of the classroom. Adults interact with children as they play, narrating what they are doing, asking questions, and engaging children in non-verbal and verbal conversations. If early educators speak the children's language, they can have a conversation in that language. If they do not speak the child's language, early educators must use clear and precise English, with the addition of demonstrations, gestures, and facial expressions.

Play facilitation can be conducted in a child's home language or in English. Professionals can pair children in ways to encourage cross-language communication. Early educators must be aware of the amount of talking that children do. Classrooms with dual language learners tend to be quieter than classrooms with monolingual speakers, as children have less language to use with each other. Professionals do not want to miss the great meaning play has for children and the rich possibilities for both receptive and expressive language development it provides.

6. Talk, Read and Sing Together Every Day

One of the most common recommendations to support dual language learners involves talking, reading, and singing together every day with children as they learn both English and their home languages.

"The more interesting and interactive the conversations are that children take part in, the more language they learn. Reading books, singing, playing word games, and simply talking to and with children builds their vocabulary while providing increased

opportunities to develop listening skills. Children learn by engaging in daily interactions and experiences with peers and skilled adults." (Magruder, et al 2013)

Daily conversations, exposure to books, and engagement in songs and chants are common happenings in early childhood programs. When professionals plan intentionally to engage with children in these ways, they are supporting the language development of all children. Conversations within the context of a warm and caring relationship provide a safe place in which to take risks with self- expression. Dual language learners may attempt to interact with a trusted professional in their second language because they know they will be supported. They feel confident to interact in the new language when adults encourage them in a calm and matter of fact manner. That happens best at play or reading time, one-on-one and in small groups.

Professionals recognize that learning language is important and are intentional in supporting such learning. They know that exposure to books in many languages builds on children's enjoyment of stories and connections to print and the sounds of languages. And that songs and chants provide opportunities for repetition, vocabulary, rhythm, and word play. In addition, for preschoolers, they plan for opportunities to support their emergent writing skills in multiple languages.

Partnering with Families

Alabama's Standards for Early Learning and Development stress the importance of family engagement in early childhood programs. Partnering with the families of dual language learners is an essential step in supporting their development. Professionals should:

- Create a respectful, welcoming, and inclusive climate.
- Perceive dual language learning as a strength and benefit.
- Learn about children's language backgrounds and families' preferred language for ongoing communication with the program.
- Engage with families in establishing a culturally responsive learning environment.
- Inform families of how the ECIPs are used with dual language learners and with all children.
- Emphasize the importance of oral language as the foundation for literacy.
- Support families as children transition between programs and systems.
- Reassure families that their children will learn English to be successful in school.

Policies and procedures in early childhood programs should include attention to the needs of dual language learners and their families and provide information to families about rhe benefits of bilingualism, the importance of home language development, and families' central role in home language development and tips on providing a high-quality language environment in the home language, at home and in the community. (DHHS and DOE 2016)

Conclusion

Children who are dual language learners are attending early childhood programs in growing numbers. The benefits of bi- and multilingualism for both children and adults are well-documented. The Alabama Standards for Early Learning and Development are designed to support high quality services to improve child outcomes. Early childhood professionals must take steps to use the ASELDs effectively with ALL children including children who are dual language learners.

"….Everyone brings valuable resources to the education community. Children and youth who are linguistically and culturally diverse, in particular, bring a unique set of assets that have the potential to enrich the experiences of all learners and educators. Educators can draw on these assets for the benefit of both the learners themselves and for everyone in the community. By focusing on what language learners can do, we send a powerful message that children and youth from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds contribute to the vibrancy of our early childhood programs and K–12 schools." (WIDA)

For additional resources to support children who are Dual Language Learners, view the Family and Community Engagement domain of the ASELDs as well as each of the Adaptations and Accommodations pages for each domain.

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