

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SUMMARY

A Workshop Model of Strategies for Early Childhood Educators Who Work with Emergent Bilinguals

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This series of workshops is based on a strengths-based perspective to emergent bilingual learning. It shows how a translanguaging approach can empower children, educators, and engage families by expanding learning opportunities, and making families a resource for educators. A blueprint of the professional development series is provided for teachers and administrators working with emergent bilinguals to consider.

Keywords: professional development, emergent bilinguals, Head Start, translanguaging

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades we have witnessed classrooms across the United States become more culturally and linguistically diverse (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Office of Head Start, 2021). The need for a workforce that is prepared to work effectively with “emergent bilingual” is evident. The term positions the child’s multilingualism as a strength within the context of language and literacy development.

Research shows that fluency in children’s languages is not necessary to be a successful educator; but supporting the language development of emergent bilinguals is (Park, 2014). Educators lack training on how to effectively work with emergent bilinguals (Cummings, 2015; Samson & Collins, 2012; Siller, 2018). Professional development has shown effectiveness in changing educators’ knowledge, beliefs, and instruction, which impact children directly (Cummings, 2015; Tran, 2014; Zaslów et al., 2010). In this manuscript we share a blueprint for a training series that includes emergent bilinguals’ learning and development, as well as strategies for effective teaching (Baecher & Jewkes, 2014; Dwarka, 2018).

A study by Author and colleagues (2022) adds to the current knowledge base on professional development that aims to increase the efficacy of early childhood educators who work with emergent bilinguals. Their research highlights the importance of having a strength-based perspective. The series of professional development workshops was designed to further early childhood educators' knowledge and to develop practical skills for working with emergent bilinguals and their families. The workshops demonstrate practices that benefit emergent bilinguals and parent-educator relationships, drawing from the translanguaging pedagogy framework (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

A Workshop Series for Translanguaging Pedagogy

Drawing from research on professional development and from the translanguaging pedagogy, the authors developed a series of four workshops to prepare early childhood educators to work with emergent bilinguals. Having time between workshops is recommended, so that educators have time to put strategies learned into practice and can share what worked and did not work during the next meeting. Opportunities for implementation and practice of strategies have been identified as a feature of effective early childhood professional development (Castro et al., 2017).

Workshop 1: Diversity, Self-Awareness, and Empathy

The purpose of Workshop 1 was twofold, developing and raising educators' self-awareness regarding their personal and cultural identities, and developing empathy towards emergent bilinguals. In order to raise awareness, educators engaged in a discussion and reflection of a diversity iceberg image (Butts, 2012), which compares diversity to the parts of an iceberg that are visible and not visible. Much like one only sees what is above the water line but part is invisible because it is under the water, it is difficult to ascertain all of the diversity traits of a person by simply looking at them or guessing based upon observation. The concept of the importance of unseen traits was further discussed by asking educators to complete the "My Multicultural Self" (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.) activity in which they identified five facets of their multicultural selves that are important in defining who they are (e.g., daughter, dancer, church group member, Brazilian). Then they reflected on how these different facets shape the way they view the world. They discussed how miscommunications can occur when educators are not aware of their own or others' identities and how identities are shaped and reshaped by our environment. What people know about themselves and others can change over time as circumstances change (people move, graduate, get married, change schools), and this can affect the value they attribute to the various facets of themselves. For this reason, translanguaging pedagogy is judgement-free and is free of assumptions about others, and instead creates communication that allows learning about and understanding one another.

Workshop participants had the opportunity to take the perspective of a child who is an emergent bilingual in their classroom by reading *La Vaca que Decía Oink* [The Cow that Said Oink] (Most, 2011) in Spanish. They were asked comprehension questions to see what they grasped, if anything, from the reading. Most educators expressed empathically a lot of frustration as they did not understand the language and could only guess based on the illustrations. Some expressed

disengagement and boredom due to the language barrier. Next, they read *Marisol McDonald doesn't Match* by Monica Brown (2018), a story that exemplifies translanguaging by including words such as “abuelita” [grandma] in Spanish throughout the story and some cultural aspects as her enjoyment of “peanut butter and jelly burritos” and soccer. The occasional use of words in Spanish added to the ability of the emergent bilingual to follow the story as they have a few words in addition to the illustrations from which to draw meaning. Because the story is about a Peruvian girl who likes to wear things that do not match, it highlights the importance of valuing individuality and uniqueness. The mixing of English and Spanish throughout the story exemplifies Marisol’s own heritage as the daughter of a father from the United States and a mother from Latin America. The aim was for educators to experience the difference in that this second read aloud allowed for better understanding of the story and kept them engaged. This led to a discussion of the importance of selecting books that represent the students in their classroom.

Workshop participants were sent home with resources they could use as they were preparing their classrooms for the first day of school. They had access to a welcome letter available in English and Spanish, and vocabulary terms commonly use to label classrooms in both English and Spanish. The importance of a first impression and communicating that diversity is welcomed and valued in the classroom was discussed and encouraged.

Workshop 2: Multicultural Education and Emergent Bilinguals

Workshop 2 started with asking participants to share their thoughts and opinions about Workshop 1 and engaging in the completion of a KWL (What I Know, What I Want to Know, and What I Learned) chart. Thus, engaging in an important reactivation of previous knowledge and reflection that are essential elements of an effective professional development series (Moon, 2013). The goal of this workshop was to discuss how schools and educators can value and enhance the education of emergent bilinguals through having a multicultural classroom that truly embraces diversity. The discussions focused on the need for a school- or program-wide effort to integrate children’s home cultures into the classroom or school setting. There were discussions about how celebrating one holiday in the year such as “Día de los Muertos” does *not* mean educators are being culturally responsive. There were discussions about how multicultural education recognizes and values differences, and ensures all children have access to an equitable and discrimination-free education on a *daily* basis (Banks, 1996). There were also discussions about possible steps toward becoming culturally responsive, including showing interest in the culture of one’s students, building bridges between school and home, and having books that represent various cultures. Moreover, during Workshop 2, there was a discussion about the importance of creating a safe environment where children can express themselves freely without judgements.

A thorough discussion of the Affective Filter hypothesis in Krashen’s Theory of Second Language Acquisition (Krashen, 1982) engaged the participants in understanding how learners’ attitudes impact the success of second language acquisition. To demonstrate how lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence, and learning anxiety act as filters that impede and obstruct language learning, a large “carboard wall” was utilized by the presenters to show how the existence of negative emotions did not allow for effective communication. Metaphorically the “carboard wall” blocked eye contact, sound, and hindered ability to understand and take action on what the person on the

other side of the “cardboard wall” said. Next, the presenters cut out holes on the “cardboard wall” representing boredom, stress, anxiety, insufficient self-confidence, lack of motivation, etc. which made the “cardboard wall” permeable, thus facilitating effective communication. This “cardboard wall” allowed for verbal and non-verbal positive feedback. This activity demonstrated that students’ attitudes and emotional variables can either help or obstruct the process of acquiring a new language.

With the intent of strengthening children’s bilingual identities and socioemotional development, one of the four primary purposes of translanguaging (García et al., 2017), participants brainstormed practices that educators can engage in to appreciate the language and culture of children and their families. Among the practices discussed was a home language survey, which allows educators and schools to properly identify the bilingual students. Another way to engage students is having them share their bilingualism through telling their stories and experiences. Additionally, there was discussion about how educators can promote and develop an ecology of multilingualism by including multilingual welcome signs, labeling the classroom in their students’ languages, and providing resources to parents in their languages (García et al., 2017). Schools and educators that develop consciousness about both English language and home language facilitate development in the cognitive, social, and linguistic domains that benefit early bilingualism and therefore, school readiness goals (Espinosa, 2015).

Workshop 3: Emergent Literacy and Practices

Workshop 3 focused on literacy as a means to support children’ engagement with text to maximize comprehension and provide opportunities to use language in academic contexts; two of the four primary purposes of translanguaging (García et al., 2017). The first part of this workshop addressed morning meetings as a way to build community, emergent literacy including a print-rich multilingual environment, the benefits of bilingualism, book selection, and developing community listening centers.

The training began with providing opportunities for the participants to learn about and understand the theory and reason for change; then participants were invited to observe modeling and practice in an environment where risk-taking was supported and opportunities to receive feedback and coaching from colleagues were provided, both evidence-based aspects of effective professional development (Lieberman & Miller, 1999). The second part of the workshop was devoted to demonstrating classroom practices that encourage comprehension and vocabulary development, borrowing from Zimmermann and Hutchins’ (2003) 7 Keys to Comprehension. The four strategies selected were those that can be easily implemented with preschool age children: building background knowledge, asking questions, making inferences, and building mental images.

Building Background Knowledge. Children use their prior knowledge to enhance their understanding of what they are reading. Their background knowledge helps connect what the children already know to what they read. To demonstrate the concept of background knowledge to the participants, the participants read the children’s story *Mango, Abuela, and Me* by Meg Medina (2015). In the story, a Spanish-speaking abuela and her English-only granddaughter cannot communicate. The granddaughter resorts to her prior knowledge of language development

experienced in her school and attaches English labels to everything in sight so the grandmother could learn the words. According to Zimmerman and Hutchins (2003), “background knowledge is all that you as a reader bring to a book: your personal history, all you’ve read or seen, your adventures, the experiences of your day-to-day life, your relationships, your passions” (p. 45). A discussion with the participants focused on how the story not only exemplifies the notion of background knowledge, but it adds to the translanguaging concept, which embraces language and cultural diversity.

Asking Questions. The second strategy reviewed with the participants was asking questions. Children generate questions before, during, and after reading. The questions help clarify meaning, make predictions, and focus their attention on what is significant. Children should be encouraged to ask questions when they are being read to, as this means they are thinking and interacting with the words and images. Bloom’s taxonomy was explained and utilized to generate questions about a children’s story. For example, for remembering, the most basic level of questioning, the teacher can ask what happened in a particular passage of the story. For evaluating, which requires more critical thinking, the teacher may ask, do you think the main character made good choices? Why or why not? Examples included the use of all levels of Bloom’s taxonomy.

Making Inferences. Children use their prior knowledge and information from the reading to make predictions, pursue answers to questions, develop conclusions, and create interpretations that expand their understanding of the text. The process of making inferences allows the children to go beyond what is written on the text. The children’s book *Maria had a Little Llama* by Angela Dominguez (2013) was used to walk participants through the process of making inferences based on their prior knowledge, context clues, and the reading. Some real items, such as a benny hat, a flute, maracas, a globe (to show where Peru is in relation to the US) were brought in for the participants to compare and contrast with the ones in the story. Thus, modeling how to encourage children during a read aloud to draw inferences.

Building Mental Images. Readers create a wide range of visual, auditory, and other sensory images as they read, and they become emotionally involved with what they read. Visualizing is an important strategy that children can use to create mental images or movies in their minds to represent the ideas that are presented in the text. Images help children/readers understand the content at a deeper level. Asking the children to close their eyes, turn on the imaginary camera that plays a movie inside their head and listen attentively while the educator reads encourages visualization. A follow up activity where the children are asked to draw a scene from the reading further strengthens the development of this important skill. The following passage from the book *Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin* (Tonatiuh, 2010) gave the participants an experience in drawing a mental image:

Dear Primo Carlitos,
I live in a city. From my window I can see a bridge and cars zooming by. I can see skyscrapers, too. Skyscrapers are buildings so tall they tickle the clouds. At night all the lights from the city look like the stars from the sky (Tonatiuh, 2010, p. 4).

The drawing exercise was followed by sharing and discussing the images, and a comparison with the actual images of the story. Drawings from young children who had engaged in the same

exercise in the past, allowed for a discussion of prior knowledge. For example, a boy who had lived in San Francisco drew a bridge that resembled the Golden Gate. This activity was later identified as one of the favorites by the workshop participants (further discussion is included in the results section).

Expanding Activities. As a way to provide effective modeling in the four key areas of comprehension addressed in this workshop, the authors read the children's book *Maria had a Little Llama* (Dominguez, 2013) both in English and Spanish. The authors showed the cover of the book to set the stage and activate background knowledge. Questions such as "Do you know this animal?" and "Is this animal common here in this area?" were asked. The introduction of Maria as the main character of the story who lives in a country far from the US was followed by showing them a globe to show where Peru is in relation to the US (integrating concepts of social studies). Sticky notes with questions were placed on the pages of the book as a reminder of pausing to ask questions during the read aloud. The intention of the book selection and preparation of questions prior to the read aloud was emphasized as an important practice to help the children develop critical thinking. Also, making inferences and having appropriate realia in the classroom are important elements of helping children build vocabulary and comprehension. After the authors had modeled the read aloud, they shared some possible activities to expand from *Maria had a Little Llama*. The activities suggested were: (1) generating a vocabulary list both in English and Spanish with words and pictures from the story and discussing it with the students; (2) creating a comparing and contrasting activity of the various hats illustrated in the story e.g. a "chullo" hat compared to a benny hat and other common hats the US students might wear or know; (3) different types of tracks, an activity to explore kinesthetic and motor skills by having the children walk across a banner paper with paint on their soles or making tracks of various plastic animal toys to compare and contrast their shapes; and (4) mapping, introducing the concepts of maps by using *Dora the Explorer* videos of maps and encouraging the children to draw their own map of a familiar space e.g. from their bedroom to their home kitchen, and from the classroom to the playground.

After modeling the various techniques, the participants had the opportunity to practice book selection from a variety of books the authors brought to the session, including monolingual, multicultural, translanguaging, and bilingual books. Participants worked in small groups by selecting a book with their students in mind therefore being intentional, formulating questions using Bloom's taxonomy, and generating a list of possible related activities to expand on concepts introduced through the books' stories. Afterwards, participants were given the opportunity to share their work with the whole group. This exercise helped put into practice several of the strategies previously discussed. Not only did participants come up with important follow up activities for the books they chose but they also formulated questions to help children develop cognitive skills.

Workshop 4: School and Family Engagement

Workshop 4 was designed to provide resources for educators to build bridges between school and home and to improve communication with families of emergent bilinguals. Participants engaged in several activities that they could replicate with students and families. This workshop demonstrated using the funds of knowledge framework (Moll et al., 1992), stressing that all

individuals and families are competent and have knowledge and experiences, which can be a fundamental resource in the classroom.

Funds of Knowledge. The participants were asked to complete a simple funds of knowledge form (González et al., 2005) that asked them to comment on their home language(s), family values and traditions (e.g. holiday celebrations, religious beliefs), caregiving (e.g. use pacifier, co-sleeping), friends and family (e.g. sporting outings, visiting grandparents on Sundays), family outings (e.g. shopping, library, beach), household chores (e.g. cooking, dusting, mowing lawn), educational activities (e.g. visiting museums, visiting the zoo), favorite TV shows (e.g. Dora the Explorer, Sesame Street), family occupations (e.g. firefighter, construction, lawyer, educator), and scientific knowledge (e.g. recycling, exercising, healthy cooking). Then they shared with a partner or small group to compare, contrast, and discover the diversity of expertise amongst them. The activity discussion encouraged them to survey the adults in the families of the children in their class to identify the expertise to which they had access.

Family Generated Alphabet. Participants were given a preschool writing worksheet page to send home with instructions in both English and Spanish. The sheet had across the top one line with the first letter of their name in capital and lower case, and a second writing line at the bottom of the page. It had plenty of blank space in between the two writing lines. Participants were instructed to write their name on the line provided at the top. Then draw a picture of something that started with the same letter e.g., Bailey may draw a ball, Luis may draw a limón (a lime). The language utilized can be English or the language spoken in the home. Finally, participants were to write on the bottom writing line the item drawn, e.g., ball or limón. Educators can collect these drawings and create an alphabet display with various vocabulary words for each letter. Missing letters of the alphabet can be completed in the classroom by the educator or family volunteers with the students. Because instructions were written in multiple languages, there is an implicit invitation to use either language as well as an acknowledgement of the equitable value of both languages in this activity. Thus, parents may be more likely to be able to engage with their children in this activity and feel successful in their contribution. Participants discussed how this multilingual display is an excellent way to integrate emergent literacy and translanguaging.

Take Home Pet Journal. The class can have a mascot (stuffed animal) that goes home on weekends with different children accompanied by a journal and a letter of explanation to the caregiver (in English and Spanish or other relevant languages) as to what is the purpose of the activity. For example:

It is your child's turn to take our class pet, (name of stuffed animal) home. (name of stuffed animal) is so excited about spending time with you and your family this weekend. (name of stuffed animal) loves meeting new people, trying different foods, and seeing new places. Please write a small passage in the journal telling (in your child's words) our class what the family did with (name of stuffed animal). Feel free to include a photo or allow your child to draw a picture of their time with (name of stuffed animal). Return (name of stuffed animal) and the journal to school on Monday. We will read the journal aloud so that the whole class can hear what fun things they did together. Thanks for your help!

This activity not only provides an opportunity for the children to share about their family, home, and culture but also provides for an activity that adults and children can do together. Workshop participants valued this activity as a way of involving families that they had not considered. Some generated variations of the same activity concept and professed that they put them into practice.

Family Survey. Participants were encouraged to use a simple family survey to find out the name(s) of the parents or caregivers and the languages spoken in the home. As an example, we suggested the family survey by Celic (2009), which includes questions such as: What do you feel would be helpful for me to know about your child? What are your child's interests? What concerns do you have about this school year? How would you like to be involved in your child's education this year? This last question is divided into two categories: helping at the school and helping from home. At the schools, adult volunteers can: volunteer to chaperon class trips, help with class celebrations, come to class to talk about their country, come to class to talk about their profession, etc. From home, adult volunteers can: prepare book order forms, read with their child, record themselves reading a book in English or their home language for the class to enjoy, or prepare materials that need to be cut out for class activities (e.g., cut 20 apples out of red, green, and yellow construction paper sent home with a sample that can be traced). Discussion with the participants centered around the importance of having choices so that caregivers who cannot come to help during the school day can help from home at their convenience.

Training and Website Logistics. When implementing this workshop series Author et al. (2022) developed a Google Site (<https://sites.google.com/view/languagelearners/home>) to share multiple resources with the workshop participants during the professional development. The content of the website included the workshop presentation slides as well as multiple resources that could be downloaded for use in their practice. Some of the resources included suggested readings, a list of classroom vocabulary in English and Spanish, welcoming letters to parents in English and Spanish, a list of multicultural children's books, home language survey in English and Spanish, and activities to send home to engage with families. Relevant content was uploaded following each workshop.

CONCLUSION

This blueprint of professional development workshops can be followed by administrators wishing to train their staff on strategies to work with emergent bilinguals. Alternatively, teachers may wish to implement some of the strategies on their own. The examples provided are for Spanish speaking learners. Thus, one may need to consider substituting the resources suggested by equivalent ones in the languages represented in their classrooms.

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