

English in the Early Years





Rebeca Valdivia and Ann-Marie Wiese explain the work that WestEd is undertaking to maximize the opportunities for English language learners in preschool

Throughout the U.S., there is currently an unprecedented focus on early childhood education at federal, state, and local levels. It comes in varied forms including increased attention to development in the first five years of life, initiatives in several states for universal preschool, and accountability and effectiveness studies of the Head Start and Even Start programs.

Within the broader attention to early childhood education, particular attention has been drawn to the needs of English learners. This is not surprising given that in last 25 years, the number of children who speak a language other than English at home has grown dramatically from nine to 19 percent of all children. Looking more closely at this group of children, the majority is of Hispanic background and Spanish is the language most frequently spoken at home (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

The truly disheartening news is that school is not a successful experience for most of these students. On average, Hispanics continue to achieve at much lower levels than the non-Hispanic White majority, as well as Asian-Americans. This trend begins at kindergarten and continues throughout the school years. Contrary to what one might expect, the trend is not limited to Hispanic children from economically and educationally disadvantaged circumstances (Garcia et al., 2006). It is not surprising then that these children have become part of the current national focus on early childhood education, and preschool in particular.

Preschool as a Window of Opportunity

Recent research has pointed to preschool as a precious “window of opportunity” for English learners. As the argument goes, preschool can serve as a foundation for future academic success. It can boost early cognitive and language development (Garcia & Gonzalez, 2006; Loeb et al., 2004; Shonkoff & A., 2000). Yet, in all these studies the quality of the preschool programs is the crux of the promise they hold for children’s long-term academic success. And the fact of the matter is that the majority of preschool programs in the U.S. are not of “high quality” (Love et al., 1996; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999).

Well-qualified teachers must be front and center in any conception of a quality preschool program. The nature of teacher-child relationships plays a key role in the ultimate experience of each child (Barnett, 2004). Despite the recent public attention focused on the professional qualifications of preschool teachers, most still lack a basic grounding in theories of second language acquisition, the skills, and strengths of English learners. For example, in a recent survey, state administrators of early childhood programs found the lack of sufficient preparation of preschool professionals as one of the most urgent challenges in serving Latinos (Buysse et al., 2004).

Professional Development of Teachers of Preschool English Learners

To address the need for professional development opportunities available to preschool teachers already in the field, the Center for Child and Family Studies at WestEd has developed resource and training materials to offer guidance teachers of the growing number of children attending preschool whose home language is not English, or who are growing up bilingually or multilingually.

In particular, WestEd collaborated with the California Department of Education to help update and