

Linda Espinosa: Scaffolding the Assets of Dual Language Learners

Jan Greenberg: Linda, I am delighted to be sitting here with you, having a conversation about the Head Start Early Learning Outcome Framework, or ELOF, and its applicability to children who are dual-language learners. So, I'd like to start by asking you to introduce yourself.

Linda Espinosa: Certainly. Well, it's my pleasure to be here, and I'm always happy to talk about dual-language learners. So, a little bit about my background. I spent almost 20 years in the state of California, running programs, so I had some experience running programs during a time when the demography changed from primarily serving monolingual English speakers to primarily serving -- about 90 percent of our family and child population eventually became Spanish speakers from rural Mexico. [Chuckling] That tells you how old I am.

In the last 20 years, I've really had the privilege of being a professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia and able to study the issues of designing environments that promote the best in terms of long-term outcomes for children when they come from a home where English is not the native language. So, I would say I've had the privilege of being on both sides of the equation both from the practitioner program administrator level to now being more of an academic, more of a scholar, if you will.

Jan: That's terrific because that leads in to the next question I want to ask you. So, the ELOF helps to establish what children should know and be able to do in preparation for school and later life. So, can you tell us some research about the progression of learning for dual-language learners and important considerations when establishing those effective learning environments for young children?

Linda: Well, and I'm happy to say I think that Head Start has been a leader on this issue for at least the last 15 years and identifying what are the important principles when children do not speak English as their native language. How do you adapt environments?

So I'm really pleased to be able to comment on the new Early Learning Outcomes Framework because there are some very strong statements in there that do very explicitly recognize that home language, that home culture as an asset. These children are not deficit because they don't speak English. This is not a "problem to be solved." It's really an asset brought into our programs that we need to capitalize on.

So, within the new outcomes framework, I think that's stated very clearly, and one of my goals at this point in my life is really to change perceptions about the capacity of dual-language learners. Because from everything we know with the brain science, long-term academic outcomes, et cetera, the importance of multicultural identities, these children in my mind are

potentially gifted. And it's how we as early care and education providers respond to these assets that determines what their academic trajectory will look like.

Let me just say one more thing--actually two more things about the Early Learning Outcomes Framework. The other thing that framework does in very clear terms is talk about the need for programs to support the home language. So, not only is it an asset, but we as a country, in this field, need to identify how all early-care providers, even monolingual English speakers, understand and apply that principle even though you may not speak the language of the child in the family. There are strategies--and we've found that our practitioners are extremely resourceful and creative when it comes to figuring out even new and different and expanded ways of identifying home languages, incorporating them into the classroom, and making sure that they're integrated into our activities and our lessons.

One more thing that I just do want to say that Head Start really was the leader on is this area of assessment, because Head Start requires -- and was the first to do so -- requires that young dual-language learners be assessed not just in English, but that their home-language abilities and language competencies also be assessed so you could have a true profile of what these children know. Just because they don't know it in English doesn't mean they don't know a lot of things.

So, we need to not see them as deficient because their English skills are not on par with monolingual English speakers, but we need to see them as potentially gifted. And I'm not making that up. That really is the literature, that when you support both those languages, the academic long-term outcomes are superior to those of monolinguals.

Jan: So, are there some important guiding principles or concepts about this, thinking about dual-language learners in relationship to learning and development as outlined in the ELOF?

Linda: Major principles that will shift our perceptions of--like I said earlier, about how we judge the competencies of these children and the abilities. That's central to everything that we do with the child, and so we have to help families understand that that home language is an asset. Keep using it.

So, all the enriched language interactions should be happening in the language that the family is most comfortable with. In no way does that interfere with acquiring English. In fact, it provides that stable base upon which the acquisition of English can happen and is facilitated. What you have, what you use in your everyday communication and the cultural implications of that and the values that that represents and the family dynamics that that allows to happen--all of that needs to be continued and strengthened. Huge message to families.

[Chuckles] Secondly, I worked with one Head Start program, and it was 12 different languages, and, actually, it was birth to 3. And they said, "We can't possibly teach in all those languages," and they became somewhat paralyzed about being responsive to them because they felt it was overwhelming. And, initially, it can seem like an overwhelming task. You're never going to learn all those languages. You're never going to be an in-depth expert on all those cultures.

But it doesn't mean that all early-care practitioners can't support all those languages, and what we have now are a set of strategies that will help all early-care providers bring that language into the classroom in ways that value it, in ways that attach it to academic content, and in ways that promote our learning outcomes in more than one language. But in order to do that, teachers have to have in-depth conversations with families about what --and Head Start, again, has been a leader in this arena--but about what are the language experiences this child has had so the teacher knows, "Has this child been exposed to English?" If so, when and how and how much?

And that helps you understand where to start, you know, as you start to design your instructional activities and what not. So this close alignment with families whose home language is not English, ways to do that, ways to bring that into the classroom. I think all of those are very possible right now, and I'm...optimistic [chuckles] that we're on the threshold of really seeing this being implemented in very creative ways.

Jan: Linda, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today about how the ELOF both supports and shines a spotlight on the importance of home language and family culture. One thread that I heard throughout our discussion was that of relationships between professionals and children and professionals and families and how the information we learn from these relationships can enrich our ability to meet the needs of dual-language learners.

Supporting children who are learning more than one language and providing them with the learning experiences they need to not just succeed but thrive is such a critical part of our work within Early Head Start and Head Start. Thanks so much for your time today and for sharing your expertise.

The Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, birth to 5, shows the continuum of learning for young children. It provides us with information about what children should know and be able to do in preparation for school and beyond. For more information, visit the ELOF page on the ECLKC.