

Linda Espinosa: Scaffolding the Assets of Dual Language Learners

Announcer 1: Welcome to "Head Start Talks," where big ideas support your everyday experiences.

Announcer 2: You are listening to "Understanding the ELOF: Stories from Experts," where, each episode, we interview a leading researcher associated with the ELOF domain.

Announcer 3: Welcome to the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning podcast series on the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework. In this podcast, we will hear from Linda Espinosa about the applicability of the Early Learning Outcomes Framework for children who are dual language learners. We hope you enjoy this broadcast.

Announcer 2: From the ELOF — "programs must promote language and literacy goals for all children. Children who are dual language learners need intentional support for the development of their home language, as well as for English acquisition."

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 monolingual Spanish speakers from rural Mexico. 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 home 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: 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 in identifying what are the important principles when children do not speak English as their home language. How do you adapt environments?

So, I'm really pleased to be able to comment on the 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. 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 the — how we, as early care and education providers, respond to these assets that determines what their academic trajectory will look like.

Jan: 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 the families understand that that home language is an asset. Keep using it. So, all the enriched language interaction 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.

Second, I worked with one Head Start program, and they had 12 different languages, and actually, it was birth to 3. And they said, "We can't possibly teach in all — in all those languages." And they became somewhat paralyzed about being responsive to them, because they felt it was overwhelming. 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, 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 whatnot.

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 things 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.

Announcer 2: You have just listened to another episode of "Understanding the ELOF: Stories from Experts." Make sure to check out our other interviews with ELOF experts and download the free "ELOF to Go" app for even more engagement with the ELOF.

Announcer 1: Thank you for joining "Head Start Talks." For more information on what you heard today, visit the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, or ECLKC, at eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov.