

2023 Dual Language Learner Celebration Week: Day 1

January Contreras: [Speaking Spanish] Hola amigos y colegas el familias de Head Start. Soy January Contreras, January como enero. [Speaking Spanish] Soy el the Assistant Secretary for the Administration for Children and Families, or ACF for short. The Office of Head Start is a part of ACF, and I'm so happy to be delivering this message to you today as we celebrate Dual Language Learners Week together.

The importance of how children learn and how language affirms children's identities motivates me in the work I do at ACF. Growing up in a Mexican American household, I remember with great joy watching telenovelas in Spanish and "The Price is Right" in English with my Nana, my grandmother. In all seriousness, children hearing and learning more than one language is a strength that should be nurtured. I'm so proud that Head Start is a leader in embracing language-affirming practices and providing quality services for hundreds of thousands of children who are dual language learners across the country.

Of course, children are at the heart, the corazón, of what Head Start stands for, and I know this work would not be possible without you. The rich diversity and knowledge of our Head Start staff, including the more than 35,000 Head Start staff who speak and teach every day in multiple languages, are what makes this celebration possible.

I'm honored to invite you to join us in this week for our fifth annual Dual Language Learner Celebration. This year's focus is on how language can foster a sense of belonging and promote children's learning. Thank you for the work that you do, and I look forward to celebrating our shared vision for children to develop deep connections across languages. Gracias, Head Start.

Lisa Wilson: Hello and welcome to Dual Language Learners Celebration Week. Thank you so much Assistant Secretary January Contreras for your beautiful, heartfelt message. My name is Lisa Wilson, and I am the Director of Equity and Outreach at the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning. Joining me today is the lovely Jennifer Amaya and Dr. Xigrid.

Before we get started, I just want to talk about where we're at today. Ladies, why don't you say hello first and then we'll get into like where we're actually at because it's a cool space. You can see behind us this great globe, I'm sure you're wondering, what's that? We're going to tell you all about it. Jennifer.

Jennifer Amaya: Thank you, Lisa. Yes, hi, Xigrid. It is so great to be with you here today. Thank you, everybody, for joining today's celebration of dual language learners. It is truly an honor to be here with all of you celebrating our Head Start families, our friends, our colleagues, and everyone who's here today. It is truly a pleasure to be here.

I am Jennifer Amaya from the Office of Head Start. I am the content lead on areas related to equity, inclusiveness, culture, and language, and I'm truly honored to be the Federal Project Officer for the Tribal colleges and universities Head Start partnerships. I am the daughter of Salvadorean immigrant parents who came to the United States many, many years ago to make sure that we have a better life and a better future. And that my brothers and I had the opportunity to succeed.

I'm also honored to be the mother of children who are African American El Salvadoreans, in which our culture and our language are part of our lives every day. Thank you, Lisa, and I can't believe, Lisa, this is our third year of celebrating Dual Language Learners Live on Facebook!

Lisa: It's exciting, Jennifer.

Jennifer: And every year just gets better and better!

Lisa: It does.

Jennifer: Thank you, Lisa, back to you.

Lisa: Thank you. And Dr. Xigrig!

Xigrig Soto-Boykin: Hola, everyone. I am Dr. Xigrig Soto-Boykin and it's truly an honor to join you, Jennifer, and Lisa, at this beautiful Planet Word. I'm a big nerd around words, so this is my happy place. And just to add, this is my second DLL Celebration Week, and I agree, it gets better every year. I can't imagine what we're going to do next year.

But before I get into all the things we're going to talk about today, I really want to start about who is Xigrig and why is she here, and why does she do this work? I came from Puerto Rico when I was 11 years old, and at that moment I didn't speak English. It was honestly really, really hard. I didn't have dual language supports like what we do in Head Start. And I promised that 11-year-old girl that one day, if I could learn English, I would try to do my best to give back. It truly is a wild dream for me to be here and do the work with you all. Thank you so much for the honor of inviting me.

Jennifer: Xigrig, can I say something? Sharing your personal story is very powerful. Because many of the Head Start families that we serve share your story. Many of the families came here for a better life, they came here in the early stages to learn English. Some of them didn't know, but look where we are now? And we have the opportunity to continue to make a difference. Thank you for sharing the story.

Lisa: I do want to say, when we talk about dual language learners, we're really talking everybody that speaks a different language, whether it's like multi-language learners, home language, heritage language, ASL, and BASL learners. We see you, we honor you, and we hold space for you. Our theme this week is all about belonging. One word at a time.

This space here at Planet Word is a place really for belonging. And cultivating language and understanding where language comes from and celebrating language. I just want to read a little bit about the museum because it's pretty amazing. It's in the DC area. If you ever have an opportunity, you should come out and join. If you don't, you can still go to PlanetWord.org and you can find out more about the museum. But it opened in 2020, and it's actual an interactive and self-guided museum. As you come in, you see this big globe behind us.

There's these little like iPads all spread throughout. You can choose different languages and actually explore and learn languages. If you're a person like me, I only speak one language, which is English, I try my best in Spanish at times. But it's difficult. That's what we're going to really talk about today. How do we still hold space for families at times that maybe we don't speak another language in our programs. But how do we make sure we're also affirming their identity through the language development and how we can help support language development when we do not speak more than one language?

That is where you come in. Because you're an expert in that. I really value like your level of experience and your lived experience I think blends really well to this conversation. And all the years that you studied. Just talk to us about like let's say I'm a home visitor. I'm going into a home. I do not speak the language. How do I connect with the family, what can I do? What tricks do you have?

I know there's some wonderful stuff, too, on ECLKC, Jennifer, that you're going to talk about, Jennifer. With great resources. And as I'm talking about resources, we're going to pop in the chat right now a resource link that will give you not only like what we're doing for this whole week to celebrate and honor – today's Mother Language Day as well – but it's also going to give some additional resources on the ECLKC website. You're going to want to look at that. That's the early center, the early knowledge center. Early Childhood Knowledge Center? It's an acronym. Anyways, there's a lot of acronyms in Head Start, we know that. But it's in the resource links, check it out.

Okay, back to my question. I'm a home visitor, I'm going to a home, I do not speak the language, how can I still hold space on our identity, and I do not speak the language? A lot of times I hear people say that they just don't do anything. But that's not a good response. What would be a culturally responsive type of practice that we could do?

Xigrid: Thank you for that question. When I started my journey about 12 years ago as a speech language therapist, I used to really think about only a bilingual provider can provide bilingual services to children that were multilingual, or what we call dual language learners in Head Start. And what I've realized is that that's almost impossible when you think about all the languages that are represented in the United States and how much our nation changes.

Our Head Start program might have started with maybe one or two languages, but if we learned from our practitioners in the field, we realized that demographics quickly change, and like you said, what we don't want to do is say well, I don't speak the language. "Lo siento," I'm very sorry. I don't want to do that.

Lisa: Now, I do know that in Spanish. "Lo siento."

Jennifer: Xigrid, just to add to what you are mentioning too within the Head Start program performance standards, our Head Start programs are required to ensure we are providing full and effective services to make sure that children who are dual language and their families feel like they belong in our program. That they belong in our communities. As we define who are dual language learner children, we know it's a reminder. We've been doing this for a little bit.

But just as a reminder that children who are dual language learners are the children who are learning or acquiring two languages at the same time, or a child who is developing a second language while maintaining and developing their first language. That's very important.

Lisa: That's an official definition.

Jennifer: That's right.

Lisa: That is important. And look, Xigrid's going to share more with us, don't worry, we're getting to the real good tips. But if you have tips too and you're joining us, please share in the chat. Because sharing is caring as they used to say when I was a preschool teacher. Back to the home visiting piece. I'm a home visitor, I'm going in there, I don't know the language, how do I really affirm the identity through language? Sometimes you feel uncomfortable. Because you go into a space, you don't speak the language, you feel a little uncomfortable. Give us some help, Xigrid.

Xigrid: I'm so glad you asked. I think one of the things to think about, it's like we really are well equipped to support children's development regardless of the languages that are spoken. And I want to say modalities, too. Because sometimes children that are dual language learners are using other modalities to communicate. They may use sign language or visuals. Because we also want to include children who are dual language learners with developmental delays or disabilities.

Just expand our thinking of who we are supporting. If our job is really to support like the foundation for development, we know how to do that. Then the one thing that we might need a little bit of support with is the other language or modality that we don't speak. That's when that partnership with family members or cultural brokers or culture guides is so crucial.

For example, if I am a home visitor, and this could apply for a preschool teacher as well, and I'm working on producing a sentence with two or three words at a time, I can model the English sentence, and then I can say Mom, Dad, can you show me? Or if I'm reading a book, I can read the book in English, and then encourage the families to then provide that modeling in their home language. And they don't have to read the words on the text, they can actually just make up stories.

Because the thing that we're really trying to get is get that strong language foundation to help children become their best bilingual selves. We can all do that and I think one thing that's important to remember, too, is that it is okay, I don't know if we're all learning. I'm learning that it's okay not to be perfect. And that's crucial for language learners. When you are becoming that language model in English, it's also good to let yourself not be so perfect and remember that we're all language learners.

I can learn as much from the parents or the families or community members as they can learn from me. And that's how we create belonging, too, because this idea of English only, English is superior, get dismantled. We all have something to learn and it's okay that I'm not perfect. I'm learning.

Lisa: Exactly! You said that last year. And that was permission for me to start to really try. And I do. I try to speak in Spanish and my accent's not that great, but I do my best. And because of you last year saying release yourself from perfection. I think that that's so important.

Jennifer: And Xigrid, I also think that the message that you are giving us today is very important because in Head Start programs, we have to work very hard to develop and create a culture of diversity, the inclusiveness. And the sense of belonging. What you mention is absolutely right and we hear from our teachers, we hear from our programs, and they say well, we cannot serve the children because they speak so many different languages in the classroom. But you are giving us the skills, you are giving us the practices. And it's true. It's the basics and how you build on that that really serve all children and ensure their full participation in the classroom, into the program. Thank you for that.

Lisa: I wanted to say, too, it's really just about centering humanity. Like creating pathways of love. Like making sure children know that they are loved, they're seen, because just like you said earlier, different modalities. You might not speak the language, but a smile goes a long way. It's also like our body language and how we come into a space. And just practicing that culture of humility. I know Head Start, we're big on that. Practicing that culture of humility and really responding with care and love.

Really, if you have any questions for Dr. Xigrid, please pop it in chat. Because we're going to give some time towards the end of our livestream and we want to make sure we elevate it to you and get you to answer some questions.

I have something else I was just going to ask you about. When it comes to just really creating spaces of belonging and communicating with families, do you know of any apps that people can utilize? I use a translation app. My sister-in-law speaks fluent Chinese. I don't. I've had to use this language app to like really help me. And I know we have something that we've developed, actually. We have a great app. And you can find it in the resource link. I'm going to keep saying that because that resource link is full of wonderful things for you. And on our MyPeers community too.

Jennifer: What is the name of the app, Lisa?

Lisa: The name of the app is actually Ready DLL. That's the name of the app, it's the Ready DLL.

Jennifer: Different languages, right?

Lisa: There's a couple different languages. It's Spanish, there's seven now. Oh, wow. There's seven languages now. That's exciting. You can go ahead, and you can download that app. You can go to the app store, download it, and you can do it on an iPhone or Android, whatever you use.

Jennifer: And Lisa, that highlights what we're doing today. Creating belonging word by word. And that is important. The app is very simple, very basic, and it helps us to communicate with our families. That's perfect, thank you for adding that.

Lisa: You're welcome, Jennifer.

Xigrig: I think in addition to that, technologies always such a valuable tool. Like Google Translate could be used. We actually have some of our on demand trainings that really talk about the specifics of what can we do in an applied level. But one thing that I really do value about Head Start, it's dual language learner program assessment. Because I think I want to encourage people to maybe expand our thinking a little bit. That it's not just the educator's role to support dual language learners. And yes, relying on apps is really valuable and important. But it really takes a village and a coordinated approach.

We have tools, like the Dual Language Learner program assessment that I would love for Jennifer to talk a little bit more about. That we can do. It's not just a teacher, a home visitor, but really, it's up to all of us that as soon as a child enters the Head Start program, children and families feel like they belong, and they don't have to deny part of their languages or their identities to be successful. Can you tell us more?

Jennifer: Xigrig, thank you so much, and that is so interesting. That was the first Dual Language Learners Celebration that we did five years ago when we launched the Dual Language Learners program assessment. And truly, we put it together because we wanted to make sure that programs, as you mentioned, were looking at the staff.

We're looking at the systems in a coordinated way to provide services across the Head Start program for children who are Dual Language Learners and their families. We look at the communication, we look at the professional development, we looked at planning. And we looked at other systems and really brought together the lens of comprehensive services. This tool is an assessment, an internal assessment, for each program to really assess their strengths and identify the areas of need on how to provide better services to children who are dual language learners. And all the resources are available in the ECLKC, or "e-click," as so many call it.

Lisa: I want to say too, though, I think it's important that the DLL, you talked about it, strength based, it is set up where it's strength based. It identifies where you're doing really well. And then areas that you can improve. Then you can just focus on that. Because oftentimes, I feel like, I mean for me, it's like oh my gosh, I got to do everything right. Sometimes it's nice just to know well what am I doing right already? And then areas I can improve in, I'll improve in those areas.

I have another question for you. Are there any questions coming from chat, by the way? Do we have any people, questions coming at you yet? Okay, that's alright. If anybody wants to ask a question, now would be a good time. You can also reshare this stream. We would love for you to do that. Get the word out there about all these wonderful resources.

Okay, here's my question. Let's say I work in a program. And really, there's only English spoken. And it's for the teachers, for the education staff there, they feel like well, really there's no other languages spoken, so why do we have to even have books like in different languages? Why is that something that's important? Because I think oftentimes, I mean, for me, I know when I was a preschool teacher, it was really important for me to have all different types of books in different languages.

Because I wanted my children to have the exposure to the world and to the globe. I wanted them to see everything. Because I feel like that is really where it takes place. Like the connection. It's all about that connection. What happens in those programs? And can you talk about the value of having books in different languages? Even if your children don't speak it, you don't speak it?

Xigrid: Great question. And to your point, I really like thinking of books and other materials as both mirrors and as windows. Mirrors meaning that you're going to find materials that really represent who you are, and then you're also going to have windows that help you have a broader perspective of the world and those around you. I think it's really valuable to normalize bilingualism and multilingualism. Not just for people that are dual language learners, or speakers of English and other languages, but really for all children.

I think it's a powerful message that we would be sending children that if you have a friend, that you meet a friend that may not speak English at the beginning, like what do you do to build that connection? And going back in time, earlier in our conversation, we said that sometimes as adults, we get very uncomfortable? With like not being able to connect with people. But how powerful would it be if for children, we start sending that message that it's okay that other people might communicate differently than you. Both languages and modalities.

I think that's like the main like primary thing that it makes me think about. The second thing it makes me think about is that bilingualism does benefit all children. The research supports, there's cognitive, economic, social benefits of being bilingual. And of course, we want to really elevate and leverage dual language learners who are heritage speakers to develop bilingualism. But we also want to highlight that it benefits all children. Like why not do what could be best for everyone?

Jennifer: And just to add to what you both are mentioning, when we think about our nation. Our nation is very diverse. Our Head Start represents the diversity of our country. And we know that we are citizens of the world. We know that our children constantly are learning and they are meeting all the children from around the world. And maybe in that period of time in your community, you might only speak that language. But then the time changes. The demographics change.

Then you bring more and more people from different parts around the world, who you need to connect with and belonging begins with the connections. With the relationships. Where everybody feels welcome, where everybody feels like they belong. That's what we do at Head Start. We create those communities.

Lisa: So beautiful. I'm looking at the time. I want to make sure if we have anybody that has a question or anything. Let me look right now. Because we have a little channel here and I'm going to ask a question. And I'm not seeing the question coming up yet, so one moment, everyone. Here's the question, thank you! What is your go-to word to help you connect with children who are dual language learners? That's the question. And thank you for it.

Xigrig: That's a really hard question, I'm not going to lie. I think I'm going to answer nuanced ways, and I'll give you a simple answer. My nuanced way is what's hard about that question and what's brilliant about that question is that dual language learners are – there's one, you know one, you don't know them all, they're so diverse in terms of language, immigration status, like race, ethnicity, and many dimensions of diversity. That's really hard.

But what the research supports is knowing at least 10 survival phrases. Like if you can think of yourself as someone who you don't speak – imagine yourself like not speaking English. What are the 10 words that would help you feel like you belong? If you think about that, it might be helpful.

Lisa: Xigrig is good. Isn't she great? I mean, she is great. I'm feeling educated right now. Because I didn't realize, 10 words, that really makes it doable for me. You know what I mean? Because I'm not bilingual. I can commit to 10 words. Who else wants to commit to 10 words out there, okay? Because I could do 10 words. Okay, keep going. Because this is good stuff.

Xigrig: I'm thinking too, like again, we're going to oversell. Our resource list has really good ideas on how to partner with cultural guides. But what I would do in that case is partner with somebody who speaks the language. We call those insiders in the community, or family members, and ask what are the 10 words you want your child to learn? To feel seen? To feel love? And then put those on the wall or put them on your phone. And practice. And remember that you don't have to be perfect. Like that vulnerability of language learning, it's a great developmental model in itself.

Jennifer: And just to add to that, Xigrig, too, it makes me think about the cultural background. Knowing about the families that we serve, knowing about what matters to them, what are the key languages or priorities or words that they use on a daily basis. From waking up to going to

sleep. Those words that make the child feel like you care. That you want to know more. And that you bring the connection with the families. And I think that that is so powerful, too.

Lisa: Absolutely. 10 words. 10 phrases. We can all do that. I'm going to commit to that. Next year, test me. Okay, looks like our time is coming to an end, unfortunately. I don't think we have any other questions coming through the chat. But that's okay because you can rewatch it and you can reshare this stream. But I want to ask for some final remarks from the two of you. Let's start with you, Xigrid, first.

Xigrid: Sure. I think a lot about what it felt like for me to learn English. I went into an English only program. I never got opportunities to have like formal bilingual education. And over my work, it makes me think a lot about what I did to learn English. If you look at me on paper, I guess I would be considered successful, and I'm grateful for every opportunity I've had.

But one thing that I have just started to realize now is that because I was so focused on learning English, and I didn't really have a lot of people in my educational journey to remind me the value of my bilingualism, I did a lot to shapeshift to sound more "American." To sound more acceptable. To sound less accented.

Even though I've been so honored to have a lot of opportunities, there was a lot in me that I never felt good enough. Because I felt like I didn't sound right, like people were going to not understand me. And I think one of the beautiful things that I've given myself permission to do is to show up for my whole self. It reminded me I was meant to love myself for my entire bilingual background. If we could do that to younger 11-year-old Xigrid and even sooner, our youngest learners, imagine how powerful that can be. Like really creating that bilingualism for belonging, for healing, and for liberation.

Lisa: Wow! I feel like I just went to church or something. Jennifer, you're going to have to follow that. And then I have to follow you, just try to make it doable for me, okay? Your turn, Jennifer.

Jennifer: Xigrid, thank you for sharing that story. And I feel myself reflected in a lot of what you said, too. And one of the things that I learned when I came to this country when I was in high school, and one of the things that I was able to process through my professional growth, and my personal growth, is that because of my parents, the importance of learning English was a priority for them. Which left my culture and my language behind. For many years. Through that, I felt that there was a hole in my spirit and there was a hole in my heart.

And it wasn't until I started to be more conscious and intentional about my language, my culture, that I began to feel like I belonged. That I began to feel honored and proud of who I was. And yet, I knew that I had an accent. But it was okay. Because the accent is what makes me who I am. And I am proud of it. I feel that our stories are similar stories that many of our colleagues and our families and our friends live on a daily basis. And for me, it's just a reminder that being a dual language learner is a superpower!

Lisa: It is a superpower.

Jennifer: That is powerful. And thank you for just being here and celebrating with all of us. Thank you.

Lisa: So beautiful. Well, thank you, ladies. Thank you for sharing. Really appreciate it. Thank you for joining. And I want to invite you back tomorrow. It's going to be the same place, same time, little bit different guests. Jennifer's going to be with me. Xigris won't be with us. This is your last look. Rewatch it because she's great. Lots of gems, everybody, been dropped.

Make sure you follow that resource link because there's other opportunities for you to engage online. If you do not follow the Facebook page for Office of Head Start, would you please follow us? Because we have all kinds of amazing things that we put on there and we don't want you to miss one thing. And I think that's all I really wanted to say. Other than that, we'll see you tomorrow. Thanks, everyone!

Jennifer: Thank you, everyone.