

ELs and Linguistically and Culturally Relevant Early Learning

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Illinois has some exemplary practices toward promoting educational reforms that support and value early childhood education. **Research shows that thinking about child development holistically from birth to age 8 helps to ensure that the benefits of early education carry over into the early grades.** When educators are thoughtful and purposeful about the entire continuum it has significant benefits for the state's rapidly growing EL population.



Benefits of Early Childhood Programming

Research shows that early childhood programs have a range of benefits for young children. It strengthens their vocabularies, math skills and social-emotional development. A 2016 “Early Learning User’s Guide for Illinois School Boards” shows adverse outcomes for children experiencing multiple risk factors who do not participate in early learning.

25% more likely to **drop out of school**

60% more likely to **never attend college**

40% more likely to **become a teen parent**

70% more likely to **be arrested for a violent crime^{xvii}**

50% more likely to **be placed in special education**



The early learning contexts begin with prenatal care and continue to third grade. Children and families are served in a variety of ways along that continuum of care, including at home, centers and/or school. This programming is particularly beneficial for children who come from poverty. Research shows that achievement gaps between children in poverty and those from higher socioeconomic circumstances can begin as early as the first few months of life. Given that this is a critical time of early brain development, such gaps can be substantial as early as 1 or 2 years old. Early childhood differentiated services are vital to ensuring that these gaps are not perpetuated and widened as children continue to progress into the elementary years.⁴⁸

Early Childhood and English Learners

A disproportionate number of ELs are in early childhood programs, and a high percentage of those ELs face economic hardships. What do educators in early childhood programs need to consider in order to be linguistically and culturally responsive to this large segment of the population?

Early Learning within Linguistically Diverse Communities

The earliest years of life are the building blocks for later success. These initial environments and relationships in a child's life establish the foundation for future emotional, social and academic learning. Children depend on them for a safe place to learn and grow.⁴⁹

For young children a positive, stimulating environment that involves predictable routines, safety and respectful interactions

with adults is critical to child development. Equitable access to quality birth-to-3 services is important for the growing population of young children born to linguistically diverse and to immigrant families.⁴⁹ There is a tremendous need for qualified bilingual and bicultural staff that can effectively work with families. Many of these families are facing economic hardship and a high-pressure immigration political climate.

Bilingual staff who are well-prepared to work with families and children, whether through home-visiting or center/home-based care, can encourage parents and caregivers to impart ideas and have fruitful communication in their native language. The staff can also foster meaningful relationships that build bridges between school and home learning. In the infant-toddler years the human brain is most capable of learning multiple languages. This early language exposure and learning in the native language does not postpone the acquisition of English; instead it catalyzes increased neurological activity in ways that enhance future cognition in multiple languages.⁵⁰

Given the increased climate across the nation of hostility to immigrants, it is worth noting the impact this has on young children who come from immigrant families and their ability to learn. Millions of undocumented parents suffer from intensified and chronic anxiety and depression as a result of fear, powerlessness, isolation and uncertainty due to the current political climate. Research indicates that their children—while mostly US-born citizens—are not immune to their families' trauma and psychological stress. The chronic fear of being separated from their parents that children experience can cause detrimental toxic stress. Toxic stress is defined as an "intense, repetitive or prolonged adversity without an adult's intervention." These circumstances pose lifelong adverse consequences for young children.⁵¹ The threat of family separation and deportation coupled with the lack of knowledge about social

service eligibility often inhibits undocumented families from seeking help from government services. Subsidies for childcare and food, along with insurance to receive mental health supports, are often not accessed by families most in need. Such fears are only exacerbated by punitive immigration policies, increases in immigrant arrests and hostile political rhetoric. By the age of 2,

children who come from families that have undocumented family members including one or both parents and experience chronic anxiety and fear demonstrate lower levels of language and cognitive development. These are two essential precursors to literacy and later academic success.⁵³ Birth-to-3 services and supports can prove critical interventions for young immigrant families.

LOCAL CONVERSATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- ✔ How might your district offer birth-to-3 services or connect to another agency that provides those services?
- ✔ What is the local capacity of the district or center to serve linguistically diverse and immigrant families?
- ✔ How many bilingual/bicultural staff do you have and how many does the district need? Is there a gap?
- ✔ Is there a strategy in place to ensure an adequate number of bilingual and bicultural staff that can provide outreach to this community?
- ✔ How might you garner local support for professional learning specific to birth-to-3 programs?
- ✔ How might your community coordinate services and programs to maximize the use of all existing services?

High-Quality Preschool Programming for ELs

Preschool services are offered primarily to children ages 3 to 5. Illinois currently does not have sufficient funding for universal preschool, so, by law, it must prioritize programs serving children with risk factors. Because of their language needs, ELs are considered a high-priority population. Preschool programming designed to meet the needs of ELs is especially beneficial to boost kindergarten readiness.

It is important to know that preschool programs are included in Article 14C of the Illinois School Code and therefore bilingual education is mandated for young ELs. As preschool intends to augment kindergarten readiness, it is critical that early learning be aligned with elementary instruction. Given that one of the goals of

preschool is to augment kindergarten readiness, it is critical that early learning be aligned with elementary instruction. Article 14C of the Illinois School Code stipulates that schools with 20 or more students enrolled who speak the same language other than English must receive instruction in their native language for the majority of their day.

If a child is well-rounded in their native language, they will begin the transition to English more effectively. Academic English as a second language is typically achieved after five to seven years, so an EL who starts in preschool would typically achieve proficiency between third and fifth grades. ELs who receive quality instruction in their native language for several years accelerate their progress in achieving high levels of academic English. Long-time researcher on ELs in early childhood Linda Espinosa (2013) contends:

“ While English can be successfully introduced during the preschool years, if it replaces the home language and children do not have the opportunity to continue to learn in the language they know, their future linguistic, conceptual and academic development in English is at risk. Systemic, deliberate exposure to English during early childhood results in the highest achievement in both the home language and English by the end of third grade and beyond.

It is important to also begin English as a second language development in preschool through specialized second language instructional approaches. Research indicates that Latino ELs who start kindergarten with little exposure to English rarely catch up to their native English-speaking peers.⁵³ Espinosa (2018) also draws important attention on how the language development of ELs will likely be different from monolingual children. ELs, she explains, “may take longer to learn some aspects of language that differ between the two languages.” An example might be the use of word order; in English the adjective precedes the noun, such as “the blue house.” Other languages use different ways of conveying description, like putting the adjective after the noun (e.g. “la casa azul”). Therefore, an EL’s level of English expression will be influenced by their native language. They are likely to vary in the amount and quality of language they are able to understand and produce. These differences in most cases are normal and not an indication of delay or disorder.⁵⁴

Particularly in the early years, systematic and contextualized vocabulary development can foster the necessary basis for language and literacy development. Classroom strategies, such as read-alouds, story retellings, or dramatic play that are centered on specific content themes are some of the many practices used to help children learn new words in ways that deepen understanding of their meaning.⁵⁵

Measuring Quality in Early Learning

Illinois has defined quality in early learning programming according to language and cultural standards and descriptors. The Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is based on research-driven indicators that centers/ schools demonstrate. Centers/schools can be rated at four different levels: licensed, bronze, silver or gold status. In the past, staff could pursue the Linguistic and Cultural competency award. Centers that desire to provide linguistically and culturally responsive practices can use professional learning opportunities to study the standards and descriptors in the former Linguistic and Cultural Diversity credential. Centers can begin a planning process to improve their practices. Listed below are some of the best practice principles for serving ELs. Please note these are also aligned to Article 14C of the Illinois School Code that pertains to ELs and bilingual education.

Listed below are some of the state-determined criteria which preschool programs can use to evaluate their competency in serving young ELs.

Evidence of Illinois Standards in Language and Cultural Diversity	
Learning Environment	Evidence of respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, such as lesson plans, books, play centers and videos of children's interactions. Copy of action plan goals and documented outcomes related to inclusion of culturally relevant materials that reflect a variety of socio-cultural contexts across all learning environments. Lesson plans inclusive of the language of instruction and language objectives and consistent with language allocation plan.
Instructional Quality	Evidence of developmentally appropriate bilingual and English instruction that includes toys, games and materials that support children's language development. A curriculum that includes units of study aligned to standards. Examples of how diversity is addressed explicitly as part of instruction (e.g. culture, race, gender, ages, abilities, family structure and economic class).
Child Assessment	Procedures and guidelines for gathering information in a culturally and linguistically responsive manner (e.g. gathering of evidence in both languages). Documentation of how families and community resources are used to assist in assessments for all children, including children who speak languages of lower incidence. Assessment administered to children in order to identify special needs are developmentally, culturally and linguistically appropriate to plan services and supports.
Family and Community Engagement	Evidence that staff works with families in a way that is linguistically and culturally responsive to enhance their capacity and confidence to support their children's learning (e.g. parent cafes, family support groups, English as a Second Language classes, teen-parent playgroups, etc.). Documentation that programs make every effort to have all communications and meetings with families translated in their native language. Parent and family conferences are conducted in the family's native language. Program schedule demonstrates frequent and ongoing opportunities for parents to participate in activities related to leadership, advocacy, parenting and supporting learning and attendance lists to document participation over time. Examples of two-way reciprocal communication to engage families.
Transition to Kindergarten	Evidence of programs which help families and children prepare for the transition to the K-12 system. Provides information about language services and supports available in the receiving programs. Initiates communication between the preschool and kindergarten programs. Staff helps families and children prepare for transitions in ways that are responsive to the family needs and preferences.
Linguistically and Culturally Appropriate Practice	Program seeks to promote both a child's native language and English language development. The program also has hiring practices to recruit and retain culturally, racially and linguistically diverse and competent staff members that reflect the children and families being served. In classrooms where the majority of children speak a language other than English at home, at least one classroom staff person is a proficient speaker of that language.

**For a complete understanding of standards and descriptors, refer to: <https://www.excelerateillinoisproviders.com/overview2/awards-of-excellence/linguistically-and-culturally-appropriate-practice>*

Kindergarten Assessment and ELs

The Illinois Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS) is an observational assessment tool that helps teachers, administrators and families better understand a child's developmental readiness for kindergarten. The goal of this tool is to demonstrate the skills that children have mastered and exhibit over time. The tool is designed to enhance the understanding of kindergarten readiness and the need for investment in high-quality early learning opportunities (see: <https://www.isbe.net/kids>). KIDS focus is on four domains considered fundamental to student success:

- Approaches to Learning and Self-Regulation;
- Social and Emotional Development;
- Language and Literacy Development; and
- Math.

Teachers must have proper training on how to observe and collect student artifacts as evidence of each of the domains related to various measures. Note that this evidence can be collected in any language or combination of languages. ISBE requires KIDS administration only once per year within the first 40 days of school. This snapshot can be useful to communities and districts to see what is happening in the birth-to-5 context. It may be used two or three times per year as a tool to inform practice.

Where ELs are concerned, it is critical for the teacher

to have the linguistic skills to be able to gather the data in the child's native language. Again, having bilingual staff is critical to this process. In some cases, however, ELs are placed with monolingual English-speaking teachers and data must be uploaded for these indicators. These results are not valid or reliable because ELs may have the skills in their native language but are not able to demonstrate them in English. Districts should weigh using these results against the child's level of English language acquisition so teachers can use the information to scaffold learning.

Prioritizing early language and literacy development continues to be at the forefront of early education efforts. There is a unique opportunity for consistency and coherence in early language and literacy development offered by the birth-to-8 approach, which facilitates a highly effective integration of standards, instruction and assessments.

For more in-depth considerations on early childhood, consult the Early Learning User's Guide for Illinois School Boards, which encourages districts to create a vision for incorporating early childhood services with well-defined objectives and goals.

District Highlight

Naperville SD 203: High-Quality Early Learning for Diverse Learners

Dr. Marion Friebus-Flaman, Director of Language Acquisition

District 203 is a shining example of linguistically and culturally responsive practices in early childhood. Below, district leaders articulate the steps they took to achieve the former Language and Cultural Diversity Credential along with how they thoughtfully planned for the administration of the KIDS assessment. Naperville SD 203 offers public preschool programs funded with federal and state dollars.

Standard	How District 203 met the Linguistic and Cultural Diversity Credential
Learning Environment	<p>We purchased culturally relevant materials that reflected a variety of sociocultural contexts that children could access across all learning environments. These included toys for dramatic play, such as foods from the students' home cultures, books and posters reflective of students and their lives, virtual resources, etc. We also created recordings of stories read aloud in various languages by parents and bilingual staff members. We used money from a foundation grant to purchase a device called a PENpal, which is a "pen" that students could use to touch a book, poster, learning chart or label and hear the content read to them in their home language. Whenever possible, students who have the same home language are placed in the same classroom so they have the opportunity to talk with each other in their home language if they choose. We have two TBE classrooms with the 80-20 model for Spanish-English.</p>
Curriculum	<p>Our units are planned in collaborative teams consisting of teachers, occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech language pathologist, social worker and school psychologist. Our unit planning sheets include Illinois Early Learning Development Standards (IELDS) and WIDA Early ELD and SLD standards. Since achieving this credential, we have gone on to develop language arts and math curriculum maps that include language objectives in addition to the standards.</p>
Instructional Quality	<p>We submitted our language allocation plan for the TBE classrooms, a lesson schedule for our language arts instruction in the TBE classrooms and artifacts from the districtwide professional learning in Culturally Responsive Practices.</p>
Child Assessment: Dual language approach for ELs	<p>We have screening information readily available in Spanish as well as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire that we ask all parents to complete. We also work with the Language Access Resource Center to translate documents and provide interpreters as needed for languages other than Spanish. We have a bilingual speech pathologist and bilingual social worker on staff at the early childhood center and a bilingual psychologist in the district.</p>
Child Assessment: Individualized learning plans to reflect dual language goals	<p>A portfolio is developed for each student, which includes assessment data as well as anecdotal data and videos of students performing tasks. Teachers' lesson plans include specific language scaffolds to be integrated within the lesson. All lesson plans include language objectives for dual language learners.</p>
Family and Community Engagement	<p>We conduct conferences in the family's home language. We work with the Language Access Resource Center to provide interpreters for languages other than Spanish. Our TBE teachers communicate with families in both Spanish and English regularly.</p>

Standard	How District 203 met the Linguistic and Cultural Diversity Credential
<p>Family and Community Engagement</p>	<p>We make Intentional efforts to solicit input and involvement of all families. In addition to all-school parent outreach events, we hold an EL Parent Outreach Meeting. Instead of holding a meeting to provide information to families, these meetings were designed to hear parent perspective and encourage parent relationships. We arrange seating by tables so families with the same home languages start out sitting by each other. We found that this helped families who felt somewhat isolated to make connections with each other and to feel more connected to the school. Parents helped us to create recordings of books read in some of the students' home languages which are available to all teachers for use in the classroom through Canvas (our Learning Management System).</p>
<p>EC to Kindergarten Transitions</p>	<p>We do a number of things to facilitate the transition to kindergarten. We have a districtwide Dual Language Kindergarten Information Night for parents and have held additional information nights for parents at the Early Childhood Center. The district Dual Language Coordinator works closely with the bilingual early childhood teachers to inform parents about the Dual Language program. We also schedule individualized transition meetings for students with IEPs with representatives from the receiving kindergarten site present to meet the parents and answer any questions they may have. All of our K-5 buildings have a Kindergarten Preview day where parents receive an overview of kindergarten while the students go with the kindergarten team to see the classrooms and interact with the team members. In August, kindergarteners start on the second official day of school. The first day of school is a "Sneak Peek" day for parents and kindergarteners to come in and get a feel for kindergarten. In addition, we worked very hard to align our curriculum in pre-K to the kindergarten maps. We included four kindergarten teachers (two of them from dual language) on our pre-K curriculum development team for Language Arts and Math. This led to great discussions and insights regarding what pre-K teachers emphasize and what kindergarten teachers consider to be important skills for entering kindergarteners to have. We also discovered that kindergarten teachers needed some professional learning on how to read the data collected by pre-K teachers.</p>
<p>Linguistically and Culturally Appropriate Practice</p>	<p>We promote both home language and English language development. The early childhood staff developed a language policy which is posted in prominent areas of the school, shared with parents and posted on the school's website. Teachers reported that going through the process of developing the policy-led teachers to think differently about instruction and language development. There has been an increase in communication with families as well as an increase in parent volunteers. We also looked at how the 80-20 language allocation for the TBE classes was implemented and developed a more strategic approach to bridge more effectively between Spanish and English.</p>

Standard	How District 203 met the Linguistic and Cultural Diversity Credential
Linguistically and Culturally Appropriate Practice	We implemented hiring practices to recruit and retain culturally, racially and linguistically diverse and competent staff members. We submitted the district's history of participation in the Illinois Resource Center Bilingual Job Fair and the plans to work with universities to recruit more culturally, racially and linguistically diverse and competent staff members.
Staff Qualifications	We recruit qualified staff members that are proficient in the languages of the children. We submitted a list of teachers and their credentials, including ESL endorsements and bilingual endorsements.
Staff Qualifications	When the majority of students speak a language other than English at home, at least one classroom staff person is a proficient speaker of that language. In addition to the staff's credentials, we submitted the district's approval form for the ESL/Bilingual Endorsement Cohort Program with National Louis University which was offered at the Early Childhood Center.
Staff Development	We submitted our Professional Development map from 2012-2013 school year through the 2014-2015 school year showing a course of study supporting culturally responsive practices, ranging from book studies to work with consultants on combating implicit bias.
Administration of KIDS Assessment with ELs	We put together a team to plan the training for all kindergarten teachers on KIDS. One of the first things that this team did was to identify what teachers needed to do to collect the data for KIDS. The teachers also developed the understanding that for the observational data, students can demonstrate attainment in any language. Materials and activities for learning stations were created with great intentionality so children could demonstrate and teachers could observe specific skills. The activities were created in English and Spanish.

LOCAL CONVERSATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- Given that bilingual preschool is mandated, how does the district/community offer such programs?
- How does the district meet the needs of non-English speaking parents in family engagement activities at the preschool level?
- What type of recruitment strategy does the district have aimed at securing an adequate number of bilingual-endorsed teachers?
- Are school/agency leaders who supervise these programs knowledgeable about best practice in early childhood and bilingual education? Is there a professional development plan in place?
- How does the district handle preschool-to-kindergarten transitions with in-district preschools, community preschools and with Head Start?