

PREPARING YOUNG LATINO CHILDREN FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS: BEST PRACTICES IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

By Karen Hopper

Summary

Effective professional development is a key component of successful early learning programs, especially as the population of Latinos* and English language learners (ELLs) continues to grow. Early childhood education (ECE) educators need the knowledge and skills to work with culturally and linguistically diverse children and families—a knowledge set that is often not provided in traditional training courses and certification processes. This policy brief examines the importance of professional development as it applies to high-quality instruction for young Latino and ELL students and how it can be provided within the context of current workforce constraints.†

Introduction

Early childhood professionals are encountering increasing numbers of Latino students; numbers will continue to climb as Latinos are the largest and fastest growing minority group in the United States.¹ In the past 20 years, the Latino population under 18 has doubled, and by 2035, one in every three children will be Latino.² Today, Latino children make up a quarter of American children under the age of five.³

Latino children, 39% of whom are English language learners (ELLs), often lack access to early childhood programs that adequately address their cultural, linguistic, and developmental needs.⁴ This is a growing concern, given that

* The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

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40% of all ELLs, the vast majority (75%) of whom are Latino, are concentrated in the early grades (PreK–3).⁵ Evidence shows that participation in high-quality early education is directly related to improved student achievement outcomes, including high school graduation rates; however, Latino children are less likely to be enrolled in a center-based program than their White or Black peers.⁶

To address the achievement gap found between Hispanic children and their peers, it is essential to begin their formal schooling with quality early educational opportunities that are culturally and linguistically appropriate. Doing so requires educators to be more aware and sensitive to diversity among their students. However, teacher preparation courses and early childhood certification programs often do not adequately train providers in cultural competency or second-language acquisition.⁷ While there are several programs implementing effective bilingual and culturally responsive instruction strategies, those programs are few and far between. The vast majority of programs are faced with ensuring that their staff are prepared while balancing available time and resources with the needs of their early childhood workforce.

Background

A recent study on ECE programs by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina found that ECE providers identified that the “most urgent challenge” in serving the Latino population was the lack of sufficient preparation and training of early childhood professionals.⁸ For Latino children, early learning programs are often a child’s first sustained encounter with a new language and culture.⁹ Therefore, whether or not an early childhood educational program is successful largely depends upon the interaction between the teacher and the child in the classroom.

While there are varying views in the early education field about the best ways to address this challenge, many providers identify that increasing the diversity of early childhood professionals to better reflect the population served and revising professional development standards to include content associated with serving a culturally and linguistically diverse population are places to start.¹⁰

As minimum qualifications for early childhood teachers and providers continue to increase, programs must ensure that their staff have the proper credentialing and that professional development (PD) programs function as a bridge to help providers respond to the challenges of an increasingly diverse classroom.¹¹ Traditional degree programs often lack requirements for educators to acquire appropriate skills, attitude, and knowledge for dealing with a culturally and linguistically diverse student population—competencies that can only be attained with hands-on experience and specialized instruction.¹² While there is no one correct approach to PD, researchers, practitioners, and advocates agree on a few basic components, including basing PD programs in research and data, emphasizing collaboration between leadership and staff, providing content-rich instruction, and being financially viable for the long-term.¹³

To ensure a successful early childhood education environment for Latino students, programs must find a way to encourage the completion of degree components while being flexible to the challenges presented by staff’s personal, financial, and family life—or risk losing their experienced staff to professions requiring fewer hours of supplemental training and additional educational requirements.¹⁴

Best Practice: Youth Development Incorporated

Youth Development, Inc. (YDI), established in 1996, provides Head Start and other services to more than 1,600 New Mexico children and their families, 76% of whom are Hispanic. YDI employs a 50/50 dual-language model in 21 classrooms; instruction and program time is split so that children are immersed in English for half a day and Spanish for the other half. Conceptual knowledge in literacy, math, and science are introduced and reinforced in both languages. Since the classrooms serve both native Spanish- and English-speaking students, the children are able to interact with the educators and their peers in both languages, allowing for further language and social development. This model allows children the opportunity to develop their primary language while acquiring a second language. In addition to these formal dual-language classrooms, 72% of its teaching staff are bilingual and 100% have a minimum of an associate's degree in ECE.

The program has been successful in improving student outcomes (see Box 1). YDI's Head Start program is nationally recognized as a Center for Excellence and continues to maintain high levels of student achievement among both native Spanish- and English-speaking students.¹⁵ One contributing factor to YDI's success is its excellent professional development system. YDI has implemented a unique professional support network for its educators and maintains high standards for its staff. Furthermore, YDI incorporates its own institutional values into all aspects of its training, allowing for increased program cohesion.

Box 1. Fundamentals of the YDI Professional Development Program

1. Cultural awareness
2. Second language acquisition
3. Academics and curriculum implementation
4. Structural practices and classroom management
5. Assessment tools for dual-language students
6. Ability to engage children and parents

To ensure excellence in all classroom teaching, YDI provides ongoing training for staff during pre-service and in-service days in various aspects of early childhood education. YDI goes beyond the federally mandated professional development requirements for Head Start providers by incorporating additional measures of staff readiness such as Tools of the Mind training*, dual-language training, mentor-coaches, and continuing education for its staff (see Table 1). YDI is able to require these trainings and maintain financial viability and sustainability.

Ongoing Trainings and Evaluation

Since cultural and linguistic competencies are an essential part of all YDI professional development programs, YDI goes to great lengths to make sure teachers are prepared as they enter the classroom and as they develop as educators. YDI recognizes that data-based evaluation and proper teacher preparation are especially important to teacher performance in the classroom. This approach is founded on evidence demonstrating that supportive

* Tools of the Mind is a research-based early childhood program that promotes intentional and self-regulated learning. Visit the Tools of the Mind website at www.mscedu/extendedcampus/toolsofthemind/index.shtml.

Table 1. Training provided by YDI

| Professional Development | Mandatory? |
|--|---|
| General training provided by YDI | Yes |
| Tools of the Mind pre-service training | Yes |
| Dual-language training provided by Dual Language Education of New Mexico | Yes, if implemented in classroom |
| Observations and meetings with mentor-coaches | Yes |
| Continuing education through local community college, online classes, or four-year program | Yes, if teacher has not yet met federally mandated requirements for minimum certification; optional for all other staff |

teaching policies, teacher characteristics (including personal ideologies, pedagogical feedback, and educational histories), and the nature of instruction all influence the quality of classrooms when Hispanic ELLs interact.¹⁶

In addition, the strength of YDI’s program can be partly attributed to its dedication to continuous improvement. Each staff member has a formal annual evaluation conducted by an immediate supervisor and multiple observations throughout the year. Within the context of the evaluation, the supervisor creates a professional development plan where goals, obstacles, and opportunities for additional education are identified and a plan of action is enacted. Furthermore, each of YDI’s Head Start center directors and area managers is certified as a Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)* observer. These teaching assessments are integrated with YDI’s assessment and data collection tools† to ensure that both students’ personal and academic needs are being met.

Mentor-Coaches

YDI’s mentor-coach approach is perhaps one of the biggest assets to the YDI professional development program. Each teacher is paired with a mentor-coach to aid in implementing and monitoring the teacher’s progress toward professional development goals. Mentor-coaches are experienced teachers who are trained in early childhood education and are familiar with dual-language programs. Furthermore, many of the mentor-coaches contracted by YDI are also bilingual, enabling them to interact with and evaluate the classrooms they serve more effectively.

Depending on the caseload and the experience of the teacher, coaches visit classrooms anywhere from once a week to once every two weeks, spend a few hours observing the class, document what they see, and meet with the teacher afterward to discuss the observations. The coaches are able to provide immediate feedback to the teacher about what went well in addition

* Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is an observational tool to assess classroom quality in pre-kindergarten through grade 3 based on teacher–student interactions in the classroom.

† YDI employs the Learning Accomplishment Profile, 3rd Edition (LAP-3) assessment program to track students’ progress and gauge teacher efficacy.

to what the teacher could implement in the future with regard to curriculum or classroom management. The coaches then work with the site manager to identify which teachers need more “coaching,” and then implement more frequent visits to those classrooms.

Continuing Education

YDI also has policies in place for continuing education, educational leave, and career development plans. Since it is expected that the staff meet the federal Head Start certification requirements, YDI has invested significant time and resources in providing educational opportunities for its staff. For example, YDI provides up to six hours of paid educational leave per week and reimbursement for books and tuition if staff receive a C or better in the class.

The administration at YDI has also partnered with local community colleges to bring in professors to teach classes on-site. The YDI administrators consult with staff to bring in professors and provide classes that are responsive to staff interests and needs. Furthermore, YDI also has an on-site Child Development Associate (CDA) advisor to help staff put together their portfolios and observations, and otherwise help them prepare ahead of taking the CDA certification test. As a result of YDI’s investment in its staff’s education, the program is on pace to meet the minimum education and certification requirements for its teachers, teaching assistants, managers, and service specialists.

As teachers reach higher levels of education and certification, they often see a pay scale increase—an essential element for retaining experienced staff and ensuring the financial viability of a program. As ECE educators acquire higher certifications, especially

in ELL education, they are often recruited to elementary schools where the pay and benefits can be better—causing the ECE provider to lose both the experienced staff and the dollars that were invested in that staff’s training. YDI has made a concerted effort to be an excellent employer, offering a generous benefits package, paid time off to complete courses, financial incentives for earning degrees, and a pay scale increase for achieving a new level of certification. As a result, YDI only sees about 4% of its teaching staff turn over every year, well below the industry average of 33%.¹⁷

Funding

As with all programs, resources play a key role. Since YDI is a recipient of federal Head Start funding, it is required to spend a portion on training and professional development for its teachers. YDI elects to spend that money on tuition reimbursements, books, and materials for its teachers’ continuing education. YDI is also the beneficiary of a Center of Excellence grant which provides an additional \$200,000 every year that YDI puts toward Tools of the Mind curriculum and training, Dual Language Education of New Mexico training, and NCLR *Preschool Parents as Partners (PreK-PAP)** materials and trainings. In addition, the five mentor-coaches are all funded with various grants provided through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Beyond these federal monies, a state-funded scholarship program for early childhood educators, Teach New Mexico (TeachNM) provides scholarships, bonuses for completing credits and degrees, and funding for substitute teachers while YDI staff are on educational leave. Many YDI staff members who seek funding for educational opportunities also qualify for federal Pell grants.

* NCLR’s Preschool Parents as Partners curriculum supports early childhood programs, schools, and community-based organizations to respond to the issues that keep Latino parents meaningfully engaged in their children’s education.

Policy Recommendations

NCLR believes that federal and state ECE policies play an important role in helping Latino children and families access high-quality early learning programs. Below are federal and state policy recommendations that would strengthen professional development programs to better meet the needs of young Latino children.

Federal Policymakers

Require that states establish a strong infrastructure for culturally responsive and effective ELL instruction. Federal policymakers must ensure that there is a broader infrastructure in place to generate more culturally and linguistically appropriate instruction. This includes early learning guidelines, which provide educators with a road map for developing instructional strategies and outcomes for ELLs and help identify professional development needs, and strong educator core competencies that demonstrate what educators should know about working with ELLs. Both serve as a guide for PD and drive the creation of coursework, trainings, and instructional strategies.

Require states to create pathways for culturally and linguistically diverse providers to obtain credentials and certification in early learning as part of its professional development plan. In many states, the ECE workforce is more culturally and linguistically diverse than the K–12 workforce. However, data suggest that rates of bachelor's degree attainment are highest for White, non-Hispanic, center-based teachers and lowest for Latino/a providers. Although there is a higher proportion of minorities in the ECE workforce, providers of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds tend to be assistant teachers, rather than lead teachers or directors. The Early Learning Challenge Fund presents a unique opportunity to challenge states to

develop career pathways for providers who reflect the diversity in the classroom and help minority providers achieve high levels of training and credentialing.

State Policymakers

Partner with institutions of higher education (IHEs) to develop innovative coursework.

IHEs play a critical role in the professional development of the ECE workforce. A recent study shows that only 7% of ECE teacher training programs require students to complete an internship in a multicultural setting. State agencies, such as the Departments of Health and Human Services and Departments of Education, should work with IHEs in their states to develop coursework to help ECE educators better understand how a second language is acquired and how to work with diverse populations of children, as well as offer credit-bearing coursework and training in languages other than English.

Develop career ladder programs that attract and retain culturally and linguistically diverse educators. The most promising strategies for recruiting and retaining the ECE workforce include programs that provide scholarships, tuition assistance, flexible schedules, and increases in compensation. As states reexamine their professional development systems, it is important that these types of programs have sufficient resources to grow and expand, and that they are accessible to ECE educators who speak languages other than English.

Endnotes

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