National Academies' Report Series:
Early Childhood Podcast

Host:
Welcome to this podcast hosted by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA). We are here with Celeste McLaughlin, NAM Team Lead and Grants Management Coordinator at OELA and Dr. Pamela Spycher, Senior Research Associate at WestEd. Today's discussion will focus on the *National Academies Report Series Topic Brief: Early Childhood Education*, produced by OELA. This teaching brief draws upon recommendations from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine report *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*. The brief highlights some promising instructional practices that are relevant and important for teachers of young children ages 3-7 who are identified as dual language learners or English learners.

Today, we're going to explore the four key practices presented in the brief: Embracing an assets orientation, promoting multilingual development, providing frequent interaction with complex texts, and teaching foundational literacy skills.

With growing numbers of dual language and English learners in U.S. schools, preschool and early elementary grade educators are in need of practical and effective instructional approaches that can help them create educational access and equity for this population of students. It is our hope that this podcast and teaching brief can support educators as they design quality classroom instruction for young children who are dual language or English learners.

Let's get the conversation started….

Celeste:
Welcome to the podcast, Dr. Spycher and thank you for talking with us today about this important topic.

Pam:
Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Celeste:
Before we go any further, can you explain the difference between the terms "dual language learners" and "English learners?"

Pam:
I'd be glad to clarify. The term "dual language learners" is typically used to refer to children up to age five who are learning two or more languages at the same time, or who are learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language. The term "English learners" is used in K-12 education when referring to students who speak a language other than English in their homes and have been identified according to ESSA definitions as having limited English language skills that affect their ability to participate successfully in school and achieve high academic standards without specialized support. English learner students are a legally protected group of students under federal laws, including Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In the brief, which focuses on children ages 3-7, we use the combined term dual language learners and English learners to indicate that we're talking about both groups of children.

Celeste:
Why is this particular teaching brief needed?

Pam:
Teachers of young dual language and English learners have a lot of questions about how to best serve their students, and they need research-based solutions to answer them.

The brief is designed to provide clarity and support for teachers and educational leaders in understanding the best research-based instructional practices that take into account young dual language and English learners' unique learning assets and needs.

The brief also provides some tips for immediate classroom implementation and is a useful springboard for launching a deeper inquiry into the recommended practices. It includes a number of useful resources from which educators can learn more on their own, or in a community of practice with their colleagues.

Celeste:
Let's get into some of those questions teachers have. The first one has to do with the perception that dual language and English learners have big gaps in their language and content knowledge when they first come to school. Is this perception accurate?

Pam:
This is one of those myths that has been quite damaging for students from immigrant backgrounds, so I'm going to bust it. This belief—that children come to school lacking something or having gaps that need to be filled—stems from what we call a deficit orientation. In other words, viewing students as having deficits.

An alternate perspective is that all children come to school with strengths and assets. They come with language and they come with content knowledge, and they come with rich cultural knowledge and experiences from their homes and communities. All children deserve opportunities to develop a sense of pride and value in what they bring to school, and they benefit from teachers who support them to leverage their cultural and linguistic assets for school learning.

This is what we call an assets orientation, and embracing it is the first recommended practice in the teaching brief. An assets orientation capitalizes on children's home languages, cultures, knowledge, and experiences, and promotes meaningful partnerships with families and communities. An assets-orientation is really the foundation for quality teaching because it shapes educators' beliefs and perceptions about dual language and English learners and how they structure their classrooms and plan instruction. If you believe your students come with assets, your instructional program and the instructional practices you implement will reflect that mental model.

Celeste:
How can teachers demonstrate they embrace an assets-orientation? Can you give a concrete example of this practice from the brief?

Pam:
Certainly. The example I'll share is one I really love.

The *Early Authors Program* in Florida provided bilingual literacy experiences to preschool-aged dual language learners. More than 1,000 children participated in the program, and they were

mostly from Latin, African American, or Caribbean/Haitian families and mostly from economically under-resourced homes.

In the program, children and their families wrote and illustrated dual-language books, which they called “identity texts.” The children were the protagonists in the books, and the stories were based on the children’s family histories, their lives, and their interests. More than 3,000 dual language books were produced in the program, and these were books that could then be used for ongoing language and literacy development in both languages.

This is a lovely illustration of how both the content of the books and the language used was directly capitalizing on the children’s cultural and linguistic assets. They were honoring children’s home and community experiences, which served as the content of the books. At the same time, because the books were bilingual, the children were expanding their proficiency in both English and their home languages. This was a really successful program. Its evaluation demonstrated that as a result of their participation, dual language learners showed significant growth in language expression, comprehension, literacy engagement, and self-esteem.

One reason I love sharing this example is that it can be replicated by early childhood programs, elementary schools, community centers, or even by a group of interested teachers and parents.

Celeste:
That sounds like an innovative example of how teachers can simultaneously leverage the assets children bring from home and improve their academic and social-emotional learning outcomes. It’s interesting because another comment I’ve heard is that it’s good for dual language and English learners to speak only English at school so they can learn it faster. The example you just gave about the *Early Authors Program* seems to contradict this idea. What else does the brief say about it?

Pam:
It may seem counterintuitive, but according to research, investing in strengthening the home language while also building English language proficiency can be more effective for dual language and English learners than English only approaches. In other words, bilingual education is beneficial for developing English. At the same time, it cultivates a precious gift that dual language and English learners bring to school: their home language.

Promoting multilingual development is the second suggested practice in the brief. The strongest way to promote multilingual development is, of course, through quality dual language programs, and many states are now focusing on increasing the number of these programs. It’s really exciting to see policy makers commit to multilingual education and to see educators collaborating with families and communities to create so many new multilingual programs.

What some educators may not realize is that promoting multilingualism can also occur in programs where English is the primary language of instruction. Because being multilingual has so many benefits to individuals and to society, any way it can be promoted should be encouraged.

Celeste:
Can you talk about how a teacher who doesn't speak the home languages of the children in the classroom can promote multilingualism.

Pam:
Sure. First, though, I want to make clear that I'm not suggesting that teachers need to be proficient in all the languages represented in their classroom, though educators' ongoing language learning is always a plus.

I'm going to give you a few concrete examples of actions that can be taken to promote multilingualism in both dual-language and English-dominant classrooms, though how the approaches are carried out will look different, depending on the program model.

- One thing that all teachers can do is to take the time to understand their students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and day-to-day experiences in the home and community. Teachers can meet with parents early in the school year to get to know families better. Home visits are ideal, but families can also be invited to the school. Then, teachers can intentionally incorporate this knowledge into daily classroom life. For example, they might use photographs from children's homes as they study families in the classroom, or they might teach the class familiar songs in children's home languages, or they might have the class recognize important cultural traditions or significant events in children's communities.
- A related idea is to make children's home languages visible in the classroom. For example, with help from families or community volunteers, teachers can post phrases and words, such as greetings, how to say thank you or I'm sorry, color words, words for numbers, or labels for objects in the room.
- Creating strong family-school partnerships is critical for promoting multilingual development. Throughout the school year, teachers can routinely invite parents and family members into the classroom to be partners in learning. Family members can read books to children or sing songs with them in their home languages. This shows children that their cultural and linguistic assets are valued in the school curriculum, and it also helps them to maintain their home languages.

Celeste:
It seems that these are also ways of helping family members feel a greater sense of connection to the school community.

Pam:
Absolutely. It validates families' strengths and demonstrates that they are valuable contributors to all children's school learning. These are actions that really don't take much effort when you really think about it, but the return on investment is huge for children, families, and teachers.

Celeste:
How about school administrators or school librarians? What are some things they can do?

Pam:
Administrators and librarians play really critical roles in this area because they are sometimes the gatekeepers to quality resources, such as bilingual books. They have the power to stock the school library and each classroom with culturally relevant books that accurately represent each child's culture and community and that are available children's home languages and in English. This access to quality resources increases the likelihood of quality shared book reading experiences at home and in the classroom.

Another important recommendation I'd like to highlight from the brief is language revitalization programs that include culture-based education. This is where dual language and English learners have an opportunity to reclaim the language of their communities and deepen their knowledge of their cultural heritage. For example, for American Indian and Native Alaskan groups, language is a key to cultural identity. Efforts to revitalize the heritage language by teaching it to young tribal members are important for sustaining and strengthening tribal culture. For children living on tribal lands whose languages are in danger of extinction, language revitalization is a matter of extreme urgency.

Celeste:
I'm so glad you brought up how language is inextricable from culture. It's really wonderful to hear about all these ways that teachers can help to honor and nurture both. I want to turn to another question now. We've been hearing a lot about the importance of academic language development beginning in the early grades. What does this look like for young dual language and English learners?

Pam:
All students need to develop the language of schooling, or academic language, in order to thrive in school. If done well, academic language instruction provides students with an expanded linguistic repertoire, and they become curious about how language how works.

One of the most critical things to keep in mind is that children aren't going to develop academic language if they are not immersed in a language- and content-rich environment. By that I mean that children need to be engaged—on a daily basis if possible—in rich content learning across the disciplines, including science, literature, math, social science, and the arts. And, they need many opportunities to talk about what they are learning. Talk is how content learning and language learning happen.

In the early grades, a lot of this talking happens during quality interactions with books, largely through teacher read alouds, where children are exposed to new ideas and new language and are encouraged to discuss both. The third recommended practice in the brief—Providing Frequent Interactions with Complex Texts—addresses this idea.

Using complex texts in teacher read alouds is critical because these are the books that expose children to conceptual knowledge and rich language. Some of my favorite complex stories are "Last Stop on Market Street" by Matt de la Peña and "A Bad Case of Stripes" by David Shannon. These are stories that can be read over and over again because they have an engaging plot line with some unexpected twists and well-crafted language. Children don't get bored with them because they are cognitively engaging and there's a lot to talk about.

A complex story would also typically have sophisticated language that's novel for many children, language that differs from the language used in everyday life, words like "delighted" or "encountered," figurative language like "her heart soared, and she tasted freedom," and complex syntax. Complex texts expose young children to this sophisticated language, and through repeated exposures they will start to use it in their own speaking and writing.

Celeste:
Many teachers are familiar with reading aloud to children, and often this entails reading a book—perhaps a book a child has selected—and then asking a few questions afterward. What you're suggesting seems to extend this common practice.

Pam:
What you just described is a great thing to do. However, teachers can also be more intentional and goal-driven in their read alouds.

Interactive reading, or dialogic reading, is a very intentional way of reading aloud to children. It entails having a dialogue about the book being read. For dual language and English learners, peer-to-peer talk is critical so that all children have an equitable chance to express and process their thinking.

Planning is key for quality peer-to-peer talk. Teachers plan ahead of time at which points they will stop to ask children comprehension questions or to explain the meaning of new language, such as sophisticated vocabulary.

In addition to making sure there's lots of peer-to-peer talk about text-dependent questions, there are three additional key actions that extend the benefits of dialogic reading with complex texts. One is repeated readings of the same book. Reading the same complex text several times over multiple days supports children to engage with increasingly complex comprehension questions, such as "What do you think the author wanted us to learn from this story?" It also gives them more exposure to the sophisticated language in the text. The second action is talking explicitly with children about the language in the text so they will understand it and be excited to use it. The third action is to provide fun and authentic writing activities, for example asking children to write their own versions of the story. After multiple interactions with a complex story, children will have much to say as emergent writers.

Celeste:
I'd like to transition to a question about foundational literacy skills instruction, which has to do with concepts of print, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and oral reading fluency. In other words, the skills that help children crack the code and read printed words with automaticity and accuracy. Obviously, we want all children to learn to do that so they can read independently. Some teachers are wondering about the best way to teach foundational literacy skills to young dual language and English learners. What does the brief say about this question?

Pam:
The fourth and final recommendation in the brief is to **teach foundational literacy skills** explicitly, monitor children's progress frequently, and provide additional support to children who need it, based on assessment results.

Dual language and English learners in a multilingual program typically will learn foundational literacy skills first in their home language and then in English, though sometimes they will learn these skills in both languages simultaneously.

For children who are learning foundational skills in a program where English is the primary language of instruction, the good news is that research indicates that dual language and English learners develop foundational literacy skills in English in much the same way as English-proficient students do. Therefore, teachers can use the research guidance for dual language learners and English learners that they are already using for their English proficient students.

However, there are some key considerations that are specific to young dual language and English learners because they are learning their foundational literacy skills at the same time as they are developing proficiency in the English language. One consideration is whether the child already has foundational literacy skills in their home language. If they do, they may be able to transfer these skills to English, rather than learning them all over again. Another consideration to ensure that children know that when they are learning to decode—even very simple words like "cat" or "mom"—the goal is to make meaning. Learning to decoding is a means to an end, and not the end in itself. The point of reading is meaning making.

Celeste:
That makes a lot of sense. So, how can teachers be sure their young dual language and English learners are getting the appropriate instruction they need in this area?

Pam:
A comprehensive assessment process is critical for ensuring that instruction is efficient and effective and that students are getting the differentiated instruction they need.

Assessing children's foundational literacy skills at the beginning of the school year allows teachers to pinpoint where children are in their learning trajectory and tailor instruction right away to address student needs. Monitoring progress frequently throughout the year is essential. This includes pulling individual children aside every four to six weeks or so to assess their foundational literacy skills to ensure they are getting the tailored instruction they need. Formative assessment is essential, and this can happen just by observing kids as they engage in emergent reading activities and adjusting instruction accordingly. A comprehensive assessment process really allows teachers to adapt their teaching to what students need and provide additional support to children who need it.

Celeste:
It seems like a lot of the strategies that we have been discussing would benefit all young learners. Can you talk more about that?

Pam:
Yes, that's a great observation! Everything we've discussed today—an assets orientation, promoting multilingualism, quality interactions with complex texts, and teaching foundational literacy skills—are indeed good practices for all young children. All teachers, the lifelong learners that they are, would benefit from strengthening their competencies in these areas by refreshing their knowledge of current research-based practices. For underserved groups of students, including students with disabilities or from under-resourced communities, these practices are especially critical to ensure educational access and equity.

However, it's important for educators not to fall into the "isn't that just good teaching" trap. The difference between "just good teaching" and what the brief is promoting, is that the learning assets and needs of dual language and English learners should be taken into account during the planning process, before delivering instruction. That way, teachers can plan for effective scaffolding and be ready to provide that "in-the-moment" scaffolding in the midst of teaching and learning.

The fact that these approaches are beneficial for all learners is a good thing because all teachers have classroom communities filled with students with a range of cultural, linguistic, and academic strengths and learning needs. If these approaches work for all learners, with

appropriate differentiation based on assessment and observation, then teaching can be more efficient, effective, and enjoyable for everyone.

Host:
Thank you for unpacking the *Early Childhood Education* brief with us today. The ideas that you shared will certainly help teachers support young dual language learners and English learners. You have given us many useful teaching tips and ideas to think about as we continue to serve dual language and English learners in classrooms across the country. As this podcast comes to a close, I encourage all of you to visit the NCELA website at www.ncela.ed.gov to download a copy of the early childhood education brief and check out the many other resources available to teachers and administrators.