

Original Paper

Challenges Head Start Teachers Face with Dual Language Learners

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Abstract

In the Midwestern state, there are 164,000 of the 1,064,000 children enrolled in Head Start programs are dual language learners. Although the number of dual language learners is increasing in the United States, there is a gap in educational practice about challenges Head Start teachers and education coordinators face in working with this population. An exploration of Head Start teachers' and education coordinators' perspectives regarding the support teachers need to meet the challenges working with dual language learners is presented. This study was grounded in Jim Cummins's language acquisition framework, which suggests that dual language learners' benefit from instruction in their native language and the language of the classroom. A basic qualitative study design was used with a purposeful sample of 8 Head Start teachers, 1 Head Start education coordinator, and 1 Head Start site manager. Using semi-structured interviews, results revealed that Head Start teachers realized they need additional support to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners. Three themes emerged from the data: (a) participants had a positive outlook on using native language both in the classroom and at home, (b) perspectives on support needed to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners varied from teacher to teacher and from teachers to education coordinators, and (c) participants had a positive outlook on teaching dual language learners while recognizing the need for support in working with these learners.

Keywords

dual language learners, language instruction, head start, preschool instruction, early childhood education, and preschool

1. Introduction

Dual language learners are increasingly prevalent in the United States (U.S.) and around the globe as societies have become more diverse (Strobbe et al., 2017). In the Midwest state, where the study took place, 15% of the population between the ages of 0 to 5 are dual language learners (Park et al., 2017). Preschool attendance for multilingual students has been shown to enhance student success in elementary school (Ansari et al., 2017). In the U.S., the population of dual language learners is rising, both overall and for young children, the latter of whom account for an increasing number of enrolments in Head Start programs. As of 2017, 28% of all children enrolled in Head Start were dual language learners (National Head Start Association, 2020). The current high enrolment of dual language learners in early childhood programs is noteworthy (Lewis et al., 2016). A 2017 report from the United States Department of Education showed an increase in dual language learners in Head Start (Choi et al., 2018). Olivia-Olson et al. (2017) determined that dual language learners make up 30% of the population and are distributed across 87% of all Head Start classrooms. According to the Office of Head Start (2017), there are over 140 different languages spoken in Head Start Classrooms.

Due to the increase of dual language learners, teachers may require additional support to meet the needs of the dual language learners in their classrooms (Choi et al., 2018). Olivia-Olson et al. (2017) suggested that preservice training is an important part of teachers being prepared to meet the educational needs of dual language learners. However, Chapman de Sousa (2017) found a need for continued ongoing professional development about dual language learners. Green (2019) highlighted the need for teachers to receive professional development regarding dual language learners, and their culture to understand how to teach them better. Furthermore, as Harrison and Lakin (2018) noted analyzing teachers' beliefs about instructing dual language learners is important in improving teacher preparedness and efficacy.

The problem is that many teachers are not prepared to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners (Spies et al., 2017). There are many challenges for early childhood teachers in the U.S. at the current moment especially with early childhood teachers lacking an understanding of how a second language is acquired (Harrison & Lakin, 2018), or of different cultures and languages (Green, 2019). An additional challenge for early childhood teachers in the U.S. is navigating mandates for increased accountability regarding school readiness (Piker & Kimmel, 2018).

The focus of this study was on Head Start teachers in a Midwestern state where 164,000 of the 1,064,000 enrolled children are dual language learners (Park et al., 2017). According to Park et al. (2017), the total population of dual language learners in this Midwestern state grew from 147,600 to 164,000 from 2000 to 2017. At the Head Start Program where this study took place over 1,000 students enrolled in the program. Various languages are spoken at the Head Start program including: Spanish, African languages, European Slavic languages, East Asian languages, Middle Eastern languages, South Asian languages, and English.

In their study of 72 early childhood classrooms in the U.S., Sawyer et al. (2018) concluded that teachers required additional support with dual language learners in their classrooms. In a previous study by

Sawyer and others, preschool teachers, including those who spoke both English and Spanish, used few responsive practices to support dual language learners and needed additional education on second language acquisition (Sawyer et al., 2017). According to Spies et al. (2017), with the continuing rise in the number of dual language learners enrolled in U.S. early childhood programs, it is imperative that instructional practices shift to meet the needs of these young learners.

Although researchers in the past have focused on parents' perspectives about dual language learning (Sawyer et al., 2016; Walsh et al., 2016) and bilingual education (Miller, 2017; Pontier & Gort, 2016), few researchers have examined teacher preparedness, or the support teachers need to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners. Although Rizzuto (2017) found that teachers welcomed dual language learners, she also recommended further research on how early childhood teachers perceive their instruction skills with dual language learners. Piker and Kimmel (2018) ascertained there is an achievement gap evident between English language learners and their monolingual English-speaking classmates in kindergarten. Beliefs about the role of dual language learners in the school environment continue to reflect dominant negative thinking patterns among beginning teachers (Garrity et al., 2016). This is problematic because, as Green (2019) stated, teachers need to be leaders to change the communication designs of the modern world in which their students live. Due to the increase of dual language learners in Head Start, there was a need for increased understanding of Head Start teachers' and education coordinators' perspectives regarding the support teachers need to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners (Olivia-Olson et al., 2017; Sawyer et al., 2017).

Head Start is an early childhood preschool program that is federally funded in the United States for low-income families (Morris et al., 2018). Head Start was developed in the mid-1960s as part of the Johnson administration's War on Poverty focusing on serving preschool age children (Morris et al., 2018). Of the enrollment of children in Head Start 30% are dual language learners, of those 80% are Spanish speaking (Lewis et al., 2016). More than 86% of the Head Start programs in the United States serve dual language learners (Jacoby & Lesaux, 2019).

The following research questions guided this basic qualitative study:

RQ1: What are Head Start teachers' perspectives regarding the support teachers need to meet the challenges working with dual language learners?

RQ2: What are Head Start education coordinators' perspectives regarding the support teachers need to meet the challenges working with dual language learners?

2. Method

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore Head Start teachers' and education coordinators' perspectives regarding the support teachers need to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners. The high number of languages spoken in Head Start classrooms, according to the Office of Head Start (2017), 140 different languages are spoken throughout the program, reinforces the

value of this study. Furthermore, as Harrison and Lakin (2018) noted, analyzing teachers' beliefs about instructing dual language learners is important in improving teacher preparedness and efficacy. There is a need for increased understanding of Head Start teachers' and education coordinators' perspectives regarding the support teachers need to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners (Olivia-Olson et al., 2017; Sawyer et al., 2017). Beliefs about the role of dual language learners in the school environment continue to reflect dominant negative thinking patterns among beginning teachers (Garrity et al., 2016). This is problematic because, as Green (2019) stated, teachers need to be leaders to change the communication designs of the modern world in which their students live. This basic qualitative study attempted to fill the gap in practice by exploring Head Start teachers' and education coordinators' perspectives regarding the support teachers need to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners in a Midwestern state.

2.1.1 Participant Selection

The participants in this study were eight Head Start teachers, one Head Start education coordinator, and one site manager. Eight Head Start teachers agreed to be interviewed for this study. Their teaching experience ranged from two to 30 years. Three teachers had two years of experience, one teacher had five years of experience, two teachers had 10 years of experience, one teacher had 17 years of experience, and one teacher had 30 years of experience. At the time of this study, there were three to 24 dual language learners in the Head Start classrooms of the Head Start teachers who agreed to be interviewed in this study. There were six individual classrooms with the following number of students in each respective classroom: three, four, six, seven, eight, and 10. Two classrooms had 24 children who were dual language learners. The inclusion criteria for Head Start teachers was that they have at least one year of experience teaching and at least one student who was a dual language learner in their classroom. The Head Start teachers who participated in this study had degrees ranging from associate degrees in early childhood education to Master of Education degrees. One participating teacher had an associate degree, six had bachelor's degrees, and one had a master's degree in education.

The Head Start education coordinator sample for this study consisted of one education coordinator and one site manager who had been in their roles nine to 16 years. The education coordinator had nine years of experience in this position while the site manager had 16 years of experience. The education coordinator supported 50 teachers while the site manager supported 22 teachers. Both participants had Master of Education degrees. The inclusion criteria for the Head Start education coordinators was that they have at least two years in their position and currently support at least two classrooms with dual language learners. Table 1 illustrates a summary of the participant demographics.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant code	Gender	Years in position	Degree level
T1	Female	10	Master's
T2	Female	2	Bachelor's
T3	Female	2	Associate's
T4	Female	2	Bachelor's
T5	Female	5	Master's
T6	Female	17	Bachelor's
T7	Female	10	Bachelor's
T8	Female	30	Bachelor's
EC1	Female	9	Master's
EC2	Female	16	Master's

Note. Items are derived from the demographics gathered during the interviews.

2.1.2 Data Collection

The participants for this study were those currently employed at a Head Start program in a Midwest state. When collecting the data, an interview protocol was used for interviewing the Head Start teachers and Head Start education coordinators. All participants were interviewed in person. The participants were interviewed individually and only once. Interviews were open-ended and semistructured. When meeting with the participants in person, the consent form was gone over with them and was signed by them. Any additional questions were answered, and they were told that they could stop participating at any time and for any reason. In addition, an additional copy of the consent form was offered to them to keep for their own records.

Although the plan was to have the interviews take from 45 to 60 minutes, the interviews only lasted from 20 to 35 minutes each, including the time spent reviewing the consent form. Each interview was recorded on a Sony digital voice recorder. It was explained to each participant that the interview would be recorded at the time consent was reviewed and obtained from them. Each participant was told that they could withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. Finally, it was explained that participant names, consent forms, and digital voice recordings would be stored in a file separate from the list of pseudonyms and that only the lead researcher would have access to these items.

After the interviews were completed, each participant was provided with a transcript of the interview for verification of accuracy. Participants were able to check for accuracy to ensure that any of their thoughts they had not been misinterpreted during the interviews and provide any additional clarifications. Each participant was asked to reply via email to the accuracy of the transcripts, and only one participant felt their answers were not accurately interrupted. This transcript was adjusted according to their response.

3. Results

After each of the semistructured interviews were conducted with the participants, the digital recording of the Sony digital voice recorder was reviewed and analyzed. The interviews were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document and then emailed to each participant to verify the accuracy. All participants were assigned a pseudonym in which they are known in the study. The Head Start teachers were assigned the letter T with a number after it such as T1. All the Head Start education coordinators were assigned the letters EC with a number after it such as EC1. Numbers were assigned in the order interviewed for both the teachers and education coordinators.

The data from the open-ended semistructured interviews were used to answer the research questions. After checking for the accuracy of the transcriptions, themes began to emerge using in vivo coding. The data that was collected through the semistructured interviews was analyzed using in vivo coding in the first round of coding. Once all transcripts were read, in vivo coding assisted in looking for words and phrases that were similar such as: nouns that had impact, verbs with action, expressive language, metaphors, astute phrases, and similes. The themes and categories were listed in an outline format. In between each round of coding, a break was scheduled to minimize any biases that might occur and allowing fresh eyes to review the data.

Three themes emerged from the data. The first theme was that the participants all had a positive outlook on using native language both in the classroom and being used at home. A second theme that emerged was the perspective on support needed to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners varied from teacher to teacher and from teachers to education coordinators. Finally, the third theme was the positive outlook that participants had about teaching dual language learners, while recognizing the need for support in meeting the challenges of working with dual language learners.

Theme 1: Positive Perspective on Using Native Language

Interview data from both Head Start teacher and Head Start education coordinators showed a positive perspective on using native language in the classroom as well as in the home. When asked, “*What is your perspective on using children’s native language in the classroom*” T1 said, “Oh, it’s key it is important it is useful it helps me to learn more about them.” T4 linked importance to a child’s sense of identity sharing that, “I think it’s important for the child’s identity. I think it’s important for all kids to become diverse in every aspect, language, culture they need to learn about other cultures. I think it’s culturally important for them to learn other languages as well, internationally.”

T3 discussed the importance connecting it to a child’s feelings of value, “I think that it is very important, not only for the children to feel valued and be able to express themselves but for the educators as well. America is this huge diverse place; I enjoy hearing different languages and getting to know my kids and their families and their culture. So, I think that it is very important continue to use their language and culture in the school.”

EC2 and T6 discussed talking to parents about how children need to keep their native language as well,

EC2 said, “I think it is very, very important. So, we need that support of the family because a lot of families want the child to learn English and forget about the home language. We need to educate the families that we want the child to learn the English, but we also want them to keep their home language. I don’t think families understand how wonderful it is for their child to be a dual language learner.” T6 said, “I feel that it is awesome we have kids that speak more than one language and I keep telling the parents don’t stop speaking that home language at home. Because they learn like a sponge and they could learn more than four languages if they could. Some parents come to me and say maybe we should just speak English and I encourage them to speak their home language.”

When asked, “*What is your perspective on children speaking their native language at home,*” the responses were equally positive and unanimous from both Head Start teachers and Head Start education coordinators:

EC 1 said, “I think they should, absolutely because if you don’t speak it at home you won’t learn it and you will lose it, you will lose it.” T5 and T3 shared that the importance of being able to communicate with family members. T5 said, “I think that is important for them to speak their native language at home. Especially if they don’t have an opportunity to do it anywhere else. So, they need to keep that, because it’s important for their culture to communicate with their other family that doesn’t speak English. So, it’s definitely important.” T3 said, “I think that is important too, I know in the training we had they said that children who are learning a second language are more intelligent because they are hearing two different things. Some of them go to their homelands, and they don’t speak English there, so it is good for the kids to communicate with their other family members in that way too.”

T1 discussed the importance of children speaking their native language in connection to culture. “They have to keep doing it, they have to, I wouldn’t say once they learn English that’s it. Keeping the culture that’s you know the parents are their first teachers, so they have to know where they come from. They have to know everything they can about their culture. You know so they can’t become so Americanized that they do it anymore, so they don’t have those values. Because they have some strong values those families. They do some things I think wow this would have been great coming up with these values, I would have loved to have taught my own child these values. I think it is important.”

Theme 2: Prospective on Support Needed Varies

Interview data from all Head Start teachers showed that they have a varying perspective of what support they need to be successful when teaching dual language learners. All participants interviewed realized that support was needed; however, their perspectives of what support is needed to successfully teach dual language learners were different. When asked, “What support do you feel you need to be successful teaching dual language learners?” These were their responses:

T3 said, “different reading materials, we try to put some of their words around the room. It would be so much easier if we had extra support.” T1 believed that parent support and translation is a needed support. “Parent support is key, because we have to know what is going on with the kids and then we need the support of the translation, to make sure that the parents understand what we are trying to do.”

T4 and T7 echoed the belief that a translator is needed to be successful. T4 said, “having a translator in the room. Learning some other language, a little bit, for example I don’t speak Spanish. Learning some words to help with the care of that child.” T7 said, a translator, “if we could come up with a system on the computer or an iPad or something.” While T8 shared that more trainings on culture is a needed support. “I would like to attend more trainings to learn more about other cultures.”

When Head Start education coordinators were asked the same question of, “*What support do you feel you need to be successful teaching dual language learners,*” their responses were similar in some aspects of Head Start teachers needing translators or training in culture. However, both Head Start education coordinators pointed out the need for teachers to have additional curriculum training:

EC2 said, “more translators, translators that are in the culture and understand what we are trying to get across and an understanding of the curriculum. I think that teacher’s need support in implementing the curriculum. The curriculum itself supports dual language learners; so, if teachers are supported and coached in it, they in turn can support dual language learner students. EC1 said, additionally, teacher’s need cultural sensitivity and awareness training throughout their career.”

Theme 3: Positive Outlook with a Need for Support

Interview data also showed a positive outlook from Head Start teachers and Head Start education coordinators on what else they wanted me to know as a researcher about dual language learners. However, participants expressed the need for extra support with dual language learners. When asked the question, “*Please share anything else you want me to know,*” the following responses were provided:

T8 said, “it’s a good opportunity for the kids to be around other kids who speak a second language.”

T5 said, “I enjoy dual language learners; I appreciate how fast they can learn two languages when they are young. I think that it is important for their brain development to learn the languages, both of them, even if they are mixing the two up together, they are communicating and communicating is important.”

T7 said, “we welcome them (dual language learners) into our classroom. The only problem I have is that we need more support in the program.” EC2 said, “different cultures and different children we are all basically the same we just speak different languages.” T6 said, “I love it. I wish I could learn other languages.” T3 said, “we just need more support. Especially when it is me and another teacher and neither of us speak another language. What we are doing at school I want to make sure they are doing at home too and it’s hard when there is that language barrier.”

These themes connected to the research questions address in this basic qualitative study.

4. Discussion

4.1 Research Discussion

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore Head Start teachers’ and education coordinators’ perspectives regarding the support teachers need to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners. Analysis of study data indicated that the participants realized the need for

support to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners. However, the types of support participants said were needed varied from teacher to teacher and from teachers to education coordinators. Participants had perspectives as to what support they needed. It was discovered that all participants had a positive perspective on using a student's native language in the classroom. Additionally, participants also endorsed students continuing to speak their native language at home as well.

4.1.1 Limitations

Limitations that arose from the execution of this qualitative research study were centered on transferability. The study's population was limited to eight Head Start teachers, a Head Start education coordinator, and a Head Start site manager at one Head Start program in a Midwestern state. In addition, all the participants in the research study were female; it would be interesting to have had a male perspective on the challenges of teaching dual language learners. Increasing transferability would require future studies on Head Start teachers' and education coordinators' perspectives regarding the support teachers need to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners at other Head Start programs within the Midwest state. Including participants from early childhood programs that are not Head Start, such as private tuition-based preschools, public school preschools, and state-funded preschool programs, might also increase transferability.

4.1.2 Implications for Future Research and Conclusion

Results from this study showed that the participating Head Start teachers, education coordinator, and site manager realized the need for additional support and training on teaching dual language learners. Participants had a positive perspective on using native language in the classroom. However, Head Start teachers', education coordinator's, and site manager's perspectives varied on the type of support that was needed to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners. Based on these results, it is recommended that future research be conducted into what support is most successful for Head Start teachers, as well as what support increases child outcomes for dual language learners. Another recommendation is to increase the sample size and pursuing perspectives of Head Start teachers and education coordinators from other Head Start programs in this Midwest state. The final recommendation would be to explore teachers' and education coordinators' perspectives regarding the support teachers need to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners within early childhood programs that are not Head Start.

Implications for positive social change, as related to this study, could be improved professional development for teachers about dual language learners; therefore, benefitting the young dual language learners in their classrooms by improving child outcomes. All participants agreed that Head Start teachers needed additional support to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners; however, the participants had a few contrasting perspectives on what was the best support Head Start teachers needed to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners. Additional training and professional development for Head Start teachers regarding dual language learners would be warranted

to teach the Head Start teachers more about how to work with dual language learners. The topic of training and professional development should not only include dual language learners in general, but how to communicate with the children when the teacher does not speak their language along with training for teachers who do speak the languages of the children. Since Head Start children speak so many different languages from many diverse countries, cultural sensitivity training should be part of the professional development for all staff. Some Head Start teachers felt that more translators were needed in the classroom, while others felt a need to understand the culture of the dual language learners in their classroom. Head Start education coordinators also felt the need for more translators, cultural sensitivity training, and additional training in the curriculum of the program. Whatever the perspective of each participant, it is clear that Head Start teachers need additional support to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners in their classrooms.

4.1.3 Conclusion

Results of this basic qualitative research study indicated that Head Start teachers', education coordinator's, and site manager's perspectives regarding the support teachers need to meet the challenges working with dual language learners was varied. Some Head Start teachers felt that more translators were needed in the classroom, while others felt a need to understand the culture of the dual language learners in their classroom. Head Start education coordinators also felt the need for more translators, cultural sensitivity training and additional training in the curriculum of the program. Whatever the perspective of each participant, it is obvious that Head Start teachers need additional support to meet the challenges of working with dual language learners in their classrooms.

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