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Supporting the Linguistic Needs of Young Language Learners: A Guide for School Leaders

Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Susana DeJesús, EdD, Scholar in Residence, NYU, researcher, writer, educator, consultant, Language Acquisition, Early Childhood, Dual Language, Literacy. She was professor of Education at the University of Puerto Rico; Graduate Faculty and Early Childhood Bilingual Consultant at Bank Street College; Federal Monitor Head Start, Early Head Start; Peer Reviewer FIPSE at OELA. She designed and implemented \$1.5 million K-4 Dual Language program, participated on NYS Committee on Bilingual PreK, NJ Pre-School ELL Group, projects by CAL, NIH, White House Initiative on Educational Excellence, and was public school teacher NYC and PR, school district administrator, with doctorate from Columbia University, and MA from NYU.

Book Review

Supporting the Linguistic Needs of Young Language Learners: A Guide for School Leaders

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Book Reviewed:

Nemeth, K. N. (Ed). (2014). *Young Dual Language Learners: A Guide for Pre-K-3 Leaders*. Philadelphia, PA: Caslon. ISBN 978-1-934000-14-4 Paperback: 192 pages. Print: \$34.95; eText Purchase: \$27.95

This book for school leaders is a user-friendly “how to” guide that makes an important contribution to administrators who work in schools with linguistically diverse student populations from pre-kindergarten to third grade. It is especially useful for leaders who are not familiar with the instructional strategies, educational programs, or academic requirements for early childhood or bilingual children. When effective programs need to be developed quickly, this reference book will help school leaders advance their understanding.

Many school leaders have little experience working with young, multilingual children. Federal and state departments are increasing their focus on early childhood education and school administrators may assume that working with young, multilingual children is the same as working with older multilingual students. This is not the case. With regard to the young child, there are developmental, social, emotional, and cognitive differences between very young learners and older children. This reference book provides valuable information that school leaders need to know: resources, professional organizations such as The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and Head Start, educational policies, and program guidelines. It summarizes early childhood research and reviews critical concepts about the growth, progress, and development of the young child.

With regard to multilingual children, the pedagogy that succeeds with English speakers is not the same as effective strategies for young emergent bilinguals. Children from linguistically diverse families, where English is not spoken, or is not the only language spoken, are often new to schools and districts. Even seasoned administrators need information on how to work effectively with language diverse children and families. Specifically, this volume provides information needed to set up and supervise

programs, defines terminology, explains legal definitions, administrative codes, and regulations governing bilingual education. It summarizes pedagogy, describes program options, explains how to identify children who are speakers of languages other than English, how to positively interact with parents and community, and how to select and supervise appropriate staff.

The organization of the book works well by including six broad chapters, each led by two sections, one on “Key Considerations for Language Plan” and the other an “Introduction”. Each chapter contains between 9 and 16 short, one or two page articles, on subtopics, written by 45 different practitioners, including 19 articles written by the Editor, Karen Nemeth. These short articles summarize important concerns that any administrator must consider in setting up or supervising a program. Following each chapter there is a helpful section on “Resources and Questions”, which includes items for self-assessment, reflection, planning, and organizational resources. At the end of the book, there is a glossary, which defines some terms and offers a list of additional references.

The book’s organization is highly convenient. It allows administrators and staff to quickly target areas they may need information on, and it provides a quick overview of the main issues in each area. For the administrator who must quickly establish or supervise a program, this format is especially helpful, since it can provide rapid access to key concepts, responsibilities, regulations, and laws that must be addressed.

Chapter 1 is entitled Leadership and Professional Development and among its useful discussions there is Linda Espinosa’s overarching statement on how children acquire language and the research and policies that school leaders need to know (pp. 5-6). Janet González-Mena summarized developmentally appropriate practice for very young children. While short and to the point, she emphasizes the importance of play as a “vehicle for learning and development”, how a child’s experiences affect their “disposition” toward learning, the importance of positive relationships with “responsive adults”, and how to challenge children “beyond their current mastery” (p. 16). Also B. J. Frank’s brief, but extremely thorough statement on professional development, with key topics to be covered, advice on who should be involved, and the need for on-going professional development for all staff and teachers, in order to develop adults who can work effectively with young multilingual children and families (p. 20). Karen Nemeth’s explanation of how administrators can effectively supervise staff when languages do not match. This is a useful discussion since many school leaders wonder how they can supervise instruction in another language (p. 33-34).

Chapter 2 includes discussions on issues of “Identification and Planning”. Sandra Barrueco wrote a section where she cautions against prematurely judging the language proficiency of very young children who are only just acquiring language, in general, and who now may be acquiring two languages or more (p. 42). In addition, in that chapter, Sonia W. Soltero discusses what administrators need to know regarding bilingual service options and expectations. She touches on the need for administrators to understand second language acquisition theory, common misconceptions, and the cognitive benefits of “learning more than one language” (pp. 43-44). Barbara Tedesco discusses the decision process for entering or exiting a program (p. 47).

Chapter 3 focuses on “How Young Children Learn in Two or More Languages”. Patton Tabor provides an overview of how young learners develop first and second language (pp. 58-60). Anita Pandey expands on these processes by describing the role of home language learning and the role of oral language in first and second language acquisition (pp. 61-69).

Chapter 4, entitled Developing Instructional Programs for Young Dual Language Learners, includes descriptions of best practices. Zoila Tazi recommends some effective instructional practices for early childhood bilingual education (pp. 84-86). Nancy Cloud’s reviews developmentally appropriate practice, focusing on vocabulary expansion (pp. 99-100).

Policies, Accountability, and Program Effectiveness is the title of Chapter 5. Kate Mahoney provides a thorough discussion of assessments and curriculum (p. 121) and content learning and core content standards for children who are not proficient in English (p. 124). In addition, Karen Nemeth specifies a list of national professional associations that can assist administrators in guiding practice and implementing pre-school assessments, and measures (pp. 118-121).

Finally, Chapter 6, Working Effectively with Families, the Community, and Volunteers, explores issues of school, parental, and community engagement. Sandee-McHugh-McBride and Judie Haynes, both ESL specialists, lay out strategies for involving diverse families (pp. 135-137). Karen Nemeth offers a final summary statement on the value of growing up bilingual. She writes “the more we support the child’s ability to use information they have stored in either of their languages, the stronger foundation they have for future learning in both languages” (p. 148).

The book does not endorse one specific program option. Schools and districts are different, and student populations are never identical. Notwithstanding that caveat, as a whole, the authors of the different sections in each chapter emphasize two key points: First, very young children have specific developmental needs, and go through biological, social, and emotional stages. They are not just younger, smaller versions of older children. The pedagogy and strategies that help them flourish are not the same as the strategies used in upper grade classrooms. Second, with regard to young children from homes where diverse languages are spoken, the school must respect and value the family’s language and culture and support the child’s home language development among other instructional accommodations to enhance the child’s learning.

This reviewer, however, has some concerns regarding the impact and messaging of the book. Although the volume is informative, its succinct format does not allow for elaboration of certain concepts. Some essays are too brief to fully inform a topic, explain complex issues, or describe the nuances that a good administrator may also need to know. In some cases, some terms are not defined, and may not appear in the glossary.

The book is like a delicious smorgasbord, offering tiny morsels of information. This leads to another concern. Many school leaders, especially those who lack expertise in bilingual or early childhood education, may not go beyond these “appetizers” to develop deeper understandings. For instance, this is especially important in the process of language acquisition, given that it is complex and longitudinal. Some

administrators may use this book only as a “how-to” guide, a means of cutting to the chase, to quickly get essential facts on specific topics.

Another example of an important topic to develop more fully is Moll’s (1992) *Funds of Knowledge*, the notion that educators must recognize, value, and utilize the great reservoir of information and wisdom that resides in neighborhoods and is brought into the classroom by children and families of diverse cultures. The importance of the concept is to remind educators that while children may not speak English, they are not ignorant; they have knowledge relatable to the academic curriculum to share – knowledge about the world, their countries, their cultures, and their experiences. By utilizing the student’s home language and *Funds of Knowledge*, the teacher can integrate children new to the school or community into the instructional life of the classroom, thus helping the children feel wanted and not feel like outsiders.

Although well stated in the initial essay by Espinosa and final essay by Nemeth, the book seems to offer a highly generalized notion of support for the home language. Missing, for the most part, is a robust statement, reinforced often throughout the book, that on-going development of the home language is the ideal, as well as specifics about what that might entail. Because the book focuses on setting up programs for young multilingual learners, it might be beneficial for administrators to be frequently reminded that developing the child’s home language is the best foundation for English language and academic achievement.

Karen Nemeth, and other contributors in the book would certainly agree that support in the home language should neither be temporary, nor should it only be to help children in the initial stages of language learning. Yet, what kind of support children may need, or how long it should be maintained, is left somewhat ambiguous.

Considering that this guide may well be the only book on language acquisition that some administrators read, it could have provided a great opportunity to introduce a paradigm shift, through a clear and robust statement on what constitutes “support” for the home language, and why first language development, not just support, is needed, while English is being acquired. Many administrators can accept an undefined, general notion of support for the home language, without realizing that developing it, while the child is learning English, is the best way to develop English and high academic achievement.

Dual Language (DL) programs are ideal in that they do sustain support of the home language for several years, while English proficiency is being developed (Thomas & Collier, 2012). But there are challenges and obstacles administrators face when designing and implementing DL programs (Collier & Thomas, 2014). Therefore, it is important to describe to school leaders the overarching principles informing an ideal option – instruction in the home language, for as long as possible, while English is being learned – and ways to achieve it, even under difficult circumstances (Collier & Thomas, 2014; Hunt, 2011; Magruder, Hayslip, Espinosa, & Matera, 2013). Understanding these principles, it is also possible to design strategies for an English-only teacher to bring the child’s home language and the child’s *Funds of Knowledge* into the classroom environment. For instance, in my own professional experience, I have observed English-only teachers using the following activities to achieve this goal: reading stories

in the home language and in English, teaching songs in the home language, teaching about the history and culture of all children in the class, inviting children and families to share their customs, music, and holidays.

The book includes many important insights. For instance, Chapter 1 begins with a clear statement from Espinosa: “new scientific evidence compels us to revise our policies” (p. 6). She refers to “practices...constrained by outdated beliefs” where linguistically diverse children “*need support for both assessments, and culturally sensitive engagement with families*” (p. 6, her italics). Later, Nemeth concludes in Chapter 6 stating, “cognitive advantages are augmented by the social and emotional advantages of having support for the home language and the breadth of experience that comes from learning a new language” (p. 148).

These are strong, clear, and forthright statements. However, administrators who are only focused on the how-to aspect of the book may miss these insights. That said, it is still important that the book advocates for home language support, since many districts only offer ESL or English instruction. While a more vigorous position might have been very helpful, we ought to acknowledge that any support for the home language makes a contribution.

In summary, this is a helpful book, a practical guide, which provides easy access to information, an overview of critical topics, and responsibilities that school leaders need to address. As a growing number of young children who speak languages other than English enter our schools, administrators will be pressed increasingly to quickly develop effective programs. This *Guide* will give them the basics on what to do and how to do it.

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