DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

*Research on Early Learning and Development in the Context of the
Educare Learning Network*

Dual language learners (DLLs) are one of the fastest growing populations in the United States.[1,2] It is estimated that DLLs make up nearly one third of the early childhood population and 24.3 million children reside in homes where a language other than English is spoken.[3,4] Moreover, the number of DLLs in early care and education programs has continued to rise over time.[5] More than four million DLLs are enrolled in early childhood programs nationally and make up approximately 30% of children who attend Head Start programs, with 80% of those children living in Spanish-speaking homes.[6,7] Research shows that high-quality center-based care is particularly beneficial for DLLs, promoting positive development and reducing the socioeconomic opportunity gap, especially for Spanish–English DLL children.[8,9,10]

For children who are learning a second language while continuing to develop their home/first language, fostering both second- and home-language skills has been found to be important in order to prevent language loss and promote positive development in a variety of areas.[11,12,13] In fact, for young children

from homes in which a language other than English is spoken, research shows that development and proficiency in a child's home language positively impacts and is impacted by English-language learning in an early care and education setting.[8,14,15]

Despite potential concerns that classroom instruction in both English and children's home language may negatively impact children's language proficiency,[16,17] many research studies have shown that **instruction in both languages is associated with higher vocabulary skills in English as well as children's home language compared to English-only learning opportunities.**[18,19,20]

DEFINITION OF DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS (DLLS)

Although a number of different terms and definitions have been used for DLLs, most frequently, DLLs are described as children under the age of five who are exposed to and learning two (or more) distinct languages during a time of rapid developmental change. For the purpose of this research brief, we refer to DLLs as children who are primarily exposed to a language other than English in the early years of life either prior to or while simultaneously being exposed to English.*

Children's Language Development is Impacted by Experiences in and Outside of the Home

Children are constantly surrounded by language and this continual exposure influences development and learning throughout the early years of life. Children's language development is impacted by experiences within the multiple environments that they navigate[21,22] and early learning occurs in multiple settings that are continually shaped by caregiver, family, educational, and community experiences.[23] These varied contexts are strongly interrelated and jointly influence the developing child.[24] Accordingly, children's early language experiences with a variety of individuals and across a range of settings lay the foundation for development across the life span including learning, self-regulation, social skills, cognitive development, and academic achievement.[25,26]

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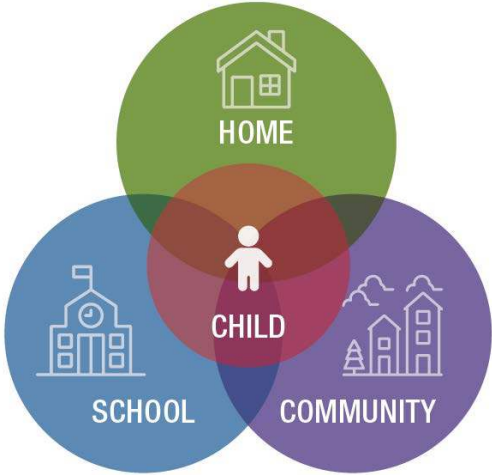
* This brief is focused on DLL children who speak a language other than English at home. It should be noted that some DLLs in Educare speak English at home while learning a second language (e.g., Spanish) outside of the home.

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DLLs in the Context of the Educare Learning Network

As the number of DLLs enrolled in early care and education programs continues to rise, it has become increasingly important to further investigate the development and learning of young children who are DLLs as well as the factors and experiences in early learning contexts that may contribute to these children's learning. Educare serves as a primary environment where children's development unfolds and where language skills are cultivated.

Nearly one third of Educare children are DLLs. Thus, for many children in Educare, one of the languages used in their school environment often differs from the language(s) used in their home context. Studying DLLs who are enrolled in Educare can therefore illuminate the distinct experiences of DLLs in high-quality early care and education settings, provide a stronger understanding of developmental outcomes, and offer insight into effective classroom practices in schools where young children speak a variety of languages.[†]

Data Utilization	Embedded Professional Development
High-Quality Teaching Practices	Intensive Family Engagement

WHAT IS EDUCARE?

Educare schools provide full-day, year-round early education for children from six weeks to five years of age and their families from underserved communities. There are currently 24 operating Educare schools in diverse communities across the country, serving nearly 4,000 children and guiding the professional development for over 2,000 early childhood professionals in those schools. Educare schools are Early Head Start, Head Start, and/or public Pre-K providers. All Educare schools leverage public-private partnerships, bringing together local school districts, philanthropic organizations, researchers, policymakers, and families. These dynamic partnerships comprise the Educare Learning Network.

Educare's comprehensive model is grounded in research and includes four core features: 1) data utilization; 2) embedded professional development; 3) high-quality teaching practices; and 4) intensive family engagement. These features, in the context of strong leadership and community partner linkages, aim to enhance achievement and overall well-being among Educare children and families.
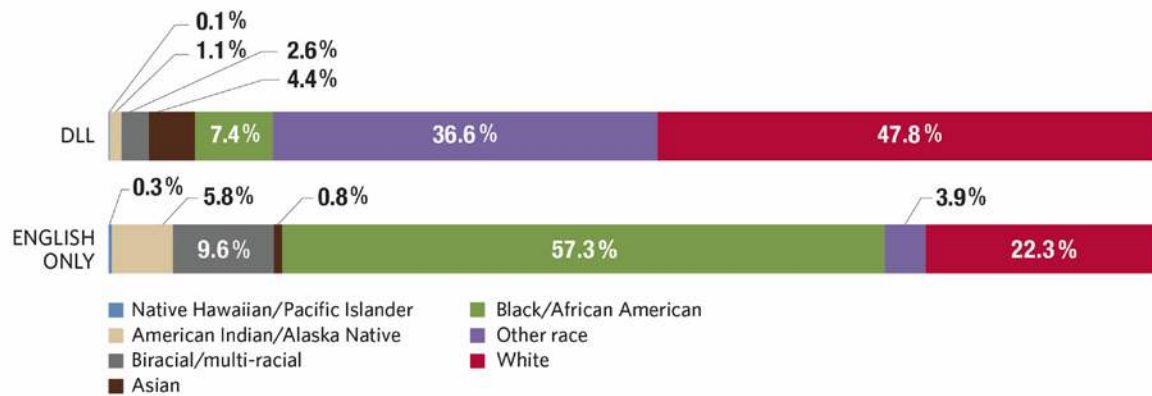

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† This brief focuses primarily on Spanish-English DLLs but 14% of DLLs in Educare speak a language other than Spanish at home.

What Do We Know About DLLs Enrolled in Educare Schools?

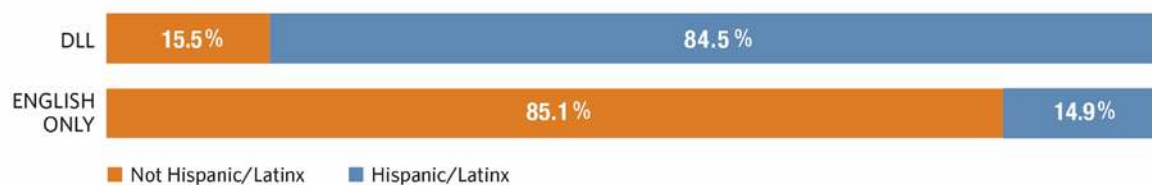### Characteristics of DLL Children and Their Families in Educare

Although differences exist across Educare schools and to a lesser extent across school years, data across all years[‡] show that **approximately 30% of children enrolled in Educare are DLLs, and over half of Educare schools serve 20% or more DLL children.** The primary language of 74% of children in Educare is English, 22% is Spanish, and 4% is a language other than English or Spanish. For DLLs in particular, the primary language of 86% of children in Educare is Spanish.[§] In addition, researchers have reported that more than 70% of DLL Spanish-speaking children are in a classroom where at least one staff member speaks Spanish.[27] On average, the age of entry in Educare for DLL children is nearly three years of age and children spend approximately two years in Educare schools.

The majority of DLL children in Educare identify as White or "Other" race and are Hispanic/Latinx.

Child Race

- 0.1%
- 1.1%
- 2.6%
- 4.4%

DLL: 7.4% | 36.6% | 47.8%

- 0.3%
- 5.8%
- 0.8%
- 3.9%

ENGLISH ONLY: 9.6% | 57.3% | 22.3%

- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Biracial/multi-racial
- Asian
- Black/African American
- Other race
- White

Child Ethnicity

DLL: 15.5% | 84.5%

ENGLISH ONLY: 85.1% | 14.9%

- Not Hispanic/Latinx
- Hispanic/Latinx

[‡] Based on 12 years of data collected from 2007 to 2019
[§] Spanish-English DLLs in Educare speak a variety of Spanish dialects that are not differentiated in these data.

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Moreover, roughly 36% of DLL children come from single-parent families and 10% of mothers are teen parents. DLL children are reported by their parents to be in very good to excellent health and on average, 11% of children have an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Program (IEP). When comparing DLL children to English-only children in Educare, DLLs were more likely to identify as Hispanic and less likely to have a single parent. Their primary caregiver also reported fewer years of education compared to English-only families.[27]

Classroom Language Use and Children's Language Outcomes

Educare researchers have explored the role of classroom language use in relation to children's language outcomes for Spanish–English DLLs in Educare schools.[28] In order to gain a stronger understanding of the ways in which DLL children's classroom experiences influence their acquisition of Spanish and English language skills, researchers studied:

- DLL children's language development over time

- How the level of Spanish language exposure in Educare classrooms related to the development of children's home language skills

- How the level of Spanish language exposure in Educare classrooms was associated with the development of English language skills

Language development was studied in three groups of classrooms:

Classroom Language Use

English with little or no Spanish

English with some Spanish

English and Spanish

DATA COLLECTION DETAILS

Each Educare school is part of a research-practice partnership (RPP) with a local evaluation partner. Through these collaborative partnerships, data are collected at the local program level and as part of the Educare National Evaluation to assess child and family outcomes, staff practices, and program quality in a variety of areas. Researchers and evaluators at each Educare school have been studying implementation and outcomes since 2007 to document:

- core features of the Educare model
- unique local features
- dosage, intensity, content, and quality of child and family services
- child and family outcomes
- progress over time

As part of this national evaluation, cross-site semi-annual assessments of children's language skills in both home (only Spanish was assessed) and second languages (i.e., English) as well as annual observations of the amount of Spanish and English used in the classroom are completed.

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DLL children in all three classroom groups showed **gains in both English and Spanish language skills** regardless of the languages used in the classroom.

> DLL children demonstrated **impressive growth in English language skills over time.**
> All three classroom groups had comparable rates of growth to one another yet **exceeded expectations** for growth relative to national norms.

> DLL children in classrooms where **more Spanish** was used had **higher Spanish language abilities** compared to the other classrooms with minimal Spanish instruction.
> When **both English and Spanish** were used in the classroom, DLL children scored **higher on assessments of Spanish language comprehension** compared to children in classrooms using English with only some Spanish.

Comparisons of Educare Children's English and Spanish Skills by Classroom Language Use

These findings show that consistent with prior research, the use of Spanish in Educare classroom instruction and interactions positively impacted DLL children's language proficiency.[28]

Age of Entry, Time in Educare, and Language and Social-Emotional Development

Educare Learning Network researchers have also explored whether the age that DLL children[**] started in Educare as well as the length of time they were enrolled were related to the development of their language and social-emotional skills.[27] Comparisons were also made between DLLs and English-only children in Educare to determine whether these associations differed based on DLL status. In order to investigate the role that age of entry and duration may play in children's developmental outcomes, researchers studied:

💬 Whether age of entry and length of time enrolled in Educare were related to DLL children's language and social-emotional development

💬 Whether DLL children showed similar or different gains in language and social-emotional skills compared to English-only children

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[**] 95% of DLL children in this analysis were from Spanish-speaking homes.
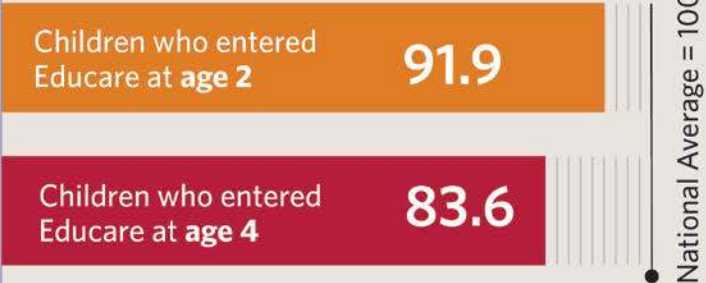
DLL children who entered Educare at **younger ages** and stayed in Educare **longer** scored **higher on assessments of language and social-emotional development** compared to children who entered later and attended for a shorter length of time.[27]

Moreover, results were stronger for DLL children compared to English-only children. These findings show that DLL children in particular may benefit from **earlier entry and longer enrollment** in high quality early childhood programs.

LANGUAGE SKILLS

Earlier entry and more time in Educare were related to higher English language scores for DLLs. Furthermore, DLL children did not lose Spanish skills when learning English and showed gains in Spanish language abilities over time regardless of the age in which they entered the program.

Estimated English language scores at age 5

Children who entered Educare at **age 2**: **91.9**

Children who entered Educare at **age 4**: **83.6**

National Average = 100

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

DLL children were rated as having more behavioral concerns (but still within normal ranges) if they entered Educare at younger ages compared to Educare students who entered at older ages. However, fewer concerns were reported if DLL children were enrolled in Educare for longer periods of time. **Importantly, more time in Educare was related to higher teacher ratings of DLL children's social-emotional skills.**

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Summary of Research Findings

Research findings from the Educare Learning Network on DLL children:

Add to the growing research base demonstrating the benefits of dual language learning opportunities in the classroom[27,28]

Indicate that higher home language use in the classroom was related to positive Spanish language outcomes for DLLs[28]

Reveal the potential benefits of enrolling in ECE programs at younger ages and for longer periods of time for DLL children's outcomes[27]

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

These findings, together with other research literature on DLLs, offer important insights into policies and best practices to optimize the learning and development of young DLLs. Below we provide some recommendations for policy and practice initiatives to support the development, well-being, and success of DLLs in Educare schools and across the wider early childhood education (ECE) field.

1 Promote dual language development and support home language use in ECE settings

Instructional approaches, curriculum, and classroom practices should support dual language learning and promote the use of DLL children's home language in the classroom. Early learning guidelines and standards should be revised to include and better serve DLLs. National, state, and local policies should also support the needs of DLLs, the inclusion of home language use in ECE programs, and the delivery of coordinated and comprehensive DLL services, standards, and practices across ECE settings.

2 Prioritize recruitment of bilingual ECE staff and provide professional development and strategies to support dual language learning in the classroom

Effective classroom and instructional practices that support the development and learning of DLLs cannot be instituted and sustained without attracting and retaining a linguistically diverse ECE workforce and educating and preparing ECE professionals to work with DLL children. Early childhood degree and training programs should increase curriculum and field-based learning requirements related to DLL development, and ongoing training, professional development, and learning opportunities related to working with young DLLs for ECE staff should be readily available. Moreover, it is important to develop policies and strategies aimed at recruiting, selecting, preparing, and retaining ECE staff who are qualified to serve DLLs.

3 Expand access to ECE programs for DLL children and families including 0-3 services

Given the benefits of ECE programs for DLL children, particularly when children enroll at younger ages, it is important to consider DLLs when prioritizing populations for ECE services, especially children between the ages of 0 and 3 years. Possible policy and practice initiatives to address these issues include (1) translating recruitment, application, enrollment, and marketing materials for ECE services into a variety of languages; (2) expanding the availability of ECE programs/slots and increasing recruitment efforts for infants and toddlers in communities where DLL children and families live and work; and (3) increasing awareness of subsidized child care options and helping families gain access to ECE information and services.

4 Develop engagement strategies to promote continued enrollment of DLLs in ECE programs

ECE programs serving DLL children should develop engagement strategies that involve families in the education of their children, communicate with families about the value of dual language learning opportunities in the classroom, and make efforts to involve DLL families in the school community. Programs should have resources in place so that families can use their home language when communicating with staff, and staff should encourage families to continue using children's first language at home while emphasizing their commitment to incorporating home languages into the classroom and school.

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NETWORK SPOTLIGHT:

Highlighting one example of outstanding practice or innovation in the Educare Learning Network

EDUCARE WEST DUPAGE

Educare West DuPage (WDP) is located in West Chicago, Illinois, a suburban community approximately 40 miles west of downtown Chicago. The community is historically Hispanic, and more than 90% of WDP's students and families identify as Hispanic. While many WDP parents are immigrants from Mexico and other parts of Latin America, many others were born and raised in the United States; as a result, about half of the students primarily speak English at home, and about half speak Spanish at home. In many cases, children experience both languages: for example, a child's mother might speak Spanish with her, while older siblings mostly use English. As a result, many children are already DLLs when they arrive at WDP.

WDP supports language development with a two-way dual language program that considers all children as DLLs. In both the birth-to-three and Pre-K programs, each classroom team includes a designated English speaker and a designated Spanish speaker, and in most cases, a bilingual aide who can use either language as needed. As a result, both English and Spanish are used for all aspects of communication and learning, from routines and behavior management to free play and group activities. Many teachers prioritize leading math, science, and social-emotional learning experiences in Spanish, ensuring that children develop rich vocabularies in both languages.

> **WDP is a dual language environment for families and staff as well.**

WDP is a dual language environment for families and staff as well. Throughout the school, all display items are written in both English and Spanish, and communications such as newsletters and notes on the Remind app are always bilingual. All of WDP's Family Engagement Specialists are bilingual and bicultural, and therefore able to respond to all families' needs appropriately and in a language they understand. In addition, school leadership such as the Executive Director and the Director of School Operations, teaching staff such as Master Teachers, support staff such as the IT Manager, and partners such as the mental health provider and Local Evaluation Partner are bilingual. As a result, WDP provides not only high-quality instructional support for DLLs, but a school-wide environment that embraces communication and community in both English and Spanish.

The following Educare schools have at least one classroom in which instruction or interactions occur in a language other than English: Arizona, California at Silicon Valley, Denver, Kansas City, Los Angeles at Long Beach, Miami, Omaha at Indian Hill, Tulsa at Hawthorne, Tulsa at Kendall-Whittier, Tulsa at MacArthur, Winnebago

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Suggested citation:

Katz, R. C., & Stein, A. G. (2020). *Dual language learners: Research on early learning and development in the context of the Educare Learning Network*. Educare Learning Network, Start Early.

The Educare research findings summarized in this brief are based on the following peer-reviewed research papers:

Yazejian, N., Bryant, D., Freel, K., & Burchinal, M. (2015). High-quality early education: Age of entry and time in care differences in student outcomes for English-only and dual language learners. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 32*, 23-39.

Raikes, H. H., White, L., Green, S., Burchinal, M., Kainz, K., Horm, D., ... & Esteraich, J. (2019). Use of the home language in preschool classrooms and first- and second-language development among dual-language learners. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 47*, 145-158.

Please direct questions about these peer-reviewed research papers to:
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