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# DIALOGIC READING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS' EXPERTISE WITH DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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**CHILDREN NEED TO BECOME PRESENT AND INVOLVED IN EVERY ASPECT OF LEARNING TO ENGAGE AND BECOME PROFICIENT READERS AT A YOUNG AGE.**

**- TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN TEACHER**

In the midst of financial and policy crises, California public school educators are being presented with a novel approach to teaching a particular segment of children under age five as a result of the passage of the Kindergarten Readiness Act of 2010. This law changes the kindergarten entry date from December 2 to September 1 and mandates a new grade level called Transitional Kindergarten (TK), requiring schools to serve four-year olds whose fifth birthday falls between September and December.

The state's strategy to support early learning and development in TK is to adopt a modified curriculum approach that bridges the preschool and kindergarten standards, taught by a credentialed teacher. There is consensus in California that this effort provides a unique opportunity to promote the implementation of high quality instructional practices that connect early childhood teaching

and primary school instruction. Vital to the success of TK programs is the need to contextualize early learning practices that build on the continuum of learning, which means that classroom experiences need to respond to the developmental needs of young children and the instructional needs of children who are Dual Language Learners or English Learners (DLL/ELs). This article presents highlights of professional development efforts for teachers in TK classrooms occurring throughout the state and through a collaborative effort by researchers from the Center for Equity for English Learners at Loyola Marymount University. Our approach follows the research on building and expanding Dual Language Learners' linguistic and cultural strengths through the use of Dialogic Reading practices by their teachers. We begin by identifying the varying statewide efforts for professional development of TK teachers, followed by a brief review of the literature on early literacy

development for diverse learners. Next, we describe our project and highlight a few of the participating teachers.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN

Districts and individual schools face unique challenges in implementing TK programs and making decisions about how to support credentialed teachers who have little or no early childhood education training. Notwithstanding the fiscal challenges of the time, schools across the state are tackling professional development differently. For example, the Fresno, Orange and Santa Clara County Offices of Education have been instrumental leaders in supporting individual school districts with professional development for TK teachers. Early-implementing districts included Fresno Unified, Kingsburg Elementary Charter, Gilroy Unified, Oakland Unified, San

Diego Unified, Long Beach Unified, Franklin-Mckinley, Sacramento City Unified, and Los Angeles Unified. These school districts developed formal initiatives that encompass ongoing professional development to build capacity and teacher expertise in curriculum and instruction. Others are struggling with decisions about how to provide support for teachers in unfamiliar territory and with limited or no external funding.

TK implementers are searching for affordable professional development resources to support teachers' growth and expertise in early learning. Preschool California established the TK California initiative to support districts by providing operational and programmatic guidelines developed by education experts and school/district leaders. TK California describes TK instruction as integrated, individualized and differentiated, involving family, and culturally and linguistically responsive (Preschool California, 2012). While there are no formal TK standards, the California Department of Education provides an alignment of the California Preschool Learning Foundations, the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework, Kindergarten Content Standards, and Common Core State Standards for TK programs to differentiate TK from traditional kindergarten and to build a continuum of learning from preschool to the early grades (California Department of Education, 2012).

### **FRAMING EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT FOR CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE LEARNERS**

To meet the needs of young DLL/ELs, TK teachers need clear guidance on how to provide meaningful and explicit instruction to promote the use of effective and innovative approaches with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. We know from research that oral language plays a vital role in students' success in school and in life (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). We also know that we need to support the development of both conceptual and vocabulary knowledge in the early years, and, more specifically, that we need to facilitate development of both skill-based and knowledge-based competencies in young DLLs (Lesaux, 2012).

In early childhood, classroom instruction must be meaningful and based on real life and authentic practices. Through direct participation and exploration of con-

cepts, young students learn words and develop skills and knowledge. Teachers then capitalize on students' interests and motivation to purposefully and directly teach vocabulary that expands their conceptual understanding of the topic. This means that in early childhood settings, including TK, we need to go beyond merely teaching new words; we also need to elaborate on spontaneous conversations with children and carefully design language-learning opportunities that elicit talk and discussion that permits them to learn about the world and about their relationship with the world and its complexity.

Teachers who do not speak the languages of the children can effectively provide systematic support through continuous implementation of dual language strategies. These strategies include (but are not limited to): encouraging the child to use his/her home language to activate prior knowledge; using photographs, gestures, movement, and realia to teach vocabulary and concepts; extending children's language production; and supporting students' comprehension and narrative skills.

### **DIALOGIC READING IN THE WORKS!**

Literacy development approaches have traditionally been labeled as "top-down", focusing on meaning and interactions with texts (Goodman, 1967; Rumelhart, 1980) or "bottom-up", focusing on the forms and elements for early literacy development (Adams, 1990). Dialogic reading incorporates a sociocultural approach to literacy development in the extent to which young readers interact with storybooks with adults through the use of a 3-level framework that develops oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension skills through the use of questioning strategies (Lonigan, Bloomfield, Dyer, & Samwel, 1999; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998).

Dialogic reading is an instructional practice that begins with a thorough planning process. This process involves creating heterogeneous groups of four or five children, selecting books, structuring a time and space for implementation, and integrating the scope of the activity into the curriculum framework, thematic unit(s), and overarching curricular goals.

As teachers prepare these preliminary elements, progress-monitoring practices are systematized to ensure that they can assess how children respond to the activities within each of the three levels of the Dialogic Read-

FIGURE 1: DIALOGIC READING 3-LEVEL FRAMEWORK\*

LEVEL	PURPOSE
<b>Level 1 – Develop Vocabulary</b> <i>[During initial reading]</i>	Get children talking using the vocabulary of the book to comment on the pictures. Establish labels for objects, actions and elicit details about the pictures.
<b>Level 2 – Prompt Descriptions</b> <i>[During additional readings]</i>	Get children talking more to use longer phrases and provide story details using the vocabulary of the book.
<b>Level 3 – Encourage Retelling</b> <i>[After students are very familiar with the book]</i>	Build oral fluency and encourage children to use the vocabulary of the book to retell the story.

\* Lonigan, Bloomfield, Dyer, & Samwel, 1999; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; For more information on Dialogic Reading, visit the U.S. Department of Education’s Doing What Works website at <http://dww.ed.gov>.

ing framework (see Figure 1). Once teachers have set the stage, they introduce the storybook to each group and ask general questions to assess what children already know about the topic. For example, a teacher using Mem Fox’s *Tough Boris*, a story about a pirate’s true character as he experiences a sad event, can ask what/where/who/why questions by walking children through the pages of the story without reading it (Fox & Brown, 1994). The goal of “story walking” is to engage children in the story and assess their language development, including vocabulary (Wiese & Espinoza, 2011). By encouraging children to use their home language, the teacher assesses whether the child knows that the character is a pirate, even if he or she does not know the word pirate in English. This is critical information for the teacher to individualize instruction and plan differentiated Level 1 lessons.

Teachers continue building oral language skills by planning lessons that move from a Level 1 lesson that focuses on vocabulary development, to Level 2 focused on building com-

prehension skills and expanding students’ responses, and finally to Level 3 focused on children owning the story and retelling the events while making connections with their own experiences.

#### OUR PROJECT: USING DIALOGIC READING FOR ONSITE AND ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Our professional development efforts focused on preparing TK teachers to improve their knowledge and skills about instructional strategies that enhance the school readiness of DLL/ELs, specifically in the development of oral language skills. Our project evolved from a set of professional development trainings that focused on supporting TK teachers in the implementation of the Dialogic Reading practices to the development of stand-alone online modules for use by teachers in a variety of early learning settings.

The first phase focused on using and adapting resources from the U.S. Department of Education’s Doing What Works (DWW) dialogic reading practices for training teachers in

culturally and linguistically diverse TK classrooms. The Doing What Works website describes and elucidates research-based instructional practices vetted by the What Works Clearinghouse. Doing What Works instructional resources include podcasts, videos, sample work, lesson plans, and interviews with principal investigators. This project was a joint venture between Loyola Marymount University’s Center for Equity for English Learners (CEEL) and the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Our professional development on-site (face-to-face) trainings provided support for TK teachers to integrate effective oral language and dual language strategies into their instructional program. The goal was to enhance learning through the context of stories, vocabulary, and oral language production. Monthly training sessions on the dialogic reading framework targeted crucial components such as the use of preschool and kindergarten standards, intentional teaching, development of lesson plans, enrichment activities, and instructional strategies for DLLs.

## RESPONDING TO DIVERSITY IN ECE/TK CLASSROOMS

The second phase in our project responded not only to the need to develop capacity for working with young, DLL/ELs but also directly considered contextual factors and challenges in districts/schools such as decreased “face-to-face” professional development opportunities and resources. Accordingly, we transferred and enhanced the existing professional development trainings to create stand-alone, online modules to support educators in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and TK settings. These modules were implemented in two undergraduate courses at California State University Channel Island’s (CSUCI) early childhood studies program (39 students), a Teach for America graduate course in early childhood literacy at Loyola Marymount University (25 students), and with a cohort of TK teachers and Early Childhood Educators in the Los Angeles Unified School District and other southern California school districts (44 students).

Educators who completed CEEL’s Dialogic Reading Online Professional Development modules reported an increased awareness and use of the 3-level framework in planning differentiated literacy and language development lessons for young, DLL/ELs. The following quotes capture representative comments of professionals engaged in a learning community focused on refining practice and implementing research-based approaches with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

“I will be more thoughtful in the way I create groups and how I pick vocabulary words and questions. Our training has changed how I look at picture books and what I will do with them.”

“The Dialogic Reading training allowed me to understand the difference between an interactive storybook versus a shared storybook.”

“I don’t know why it never occurred to me that English Language Development could be embedded completely within language and literacy instruction.”

These three representative samples provide interesting insights into participating teachers’ perceptions about early literacy practices with young DLL/ELs.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The recent passage of legislation mandating TK in California provides expanded learning opportunities for children with no preschool experience and young fives, including the critical developmental and readiness skills and abilities required to meet the rigor encountered in the traditional kindergarten experience. Our focus on developing teacher expertise in Dialogic Reading practices responds to the call for enactment (Kennedy, 1999)—that is, familiarity with research-based practices like Dialogic Reading to increase teachers’ capacity for working with culturally and linguistically diverse students, particularly for TK Dual Language Learners (National Literacy Panel, 2008).

Finally, it is important to note that the redesign of professional development venues through a collaborative project such as this brought together and capitalized on transformative partnerships across districts, schools, and institutes of higher education. Using innovative approaches such as the development of research-based practices through the Dialogic Reading online modules that could be shared and distributed across these partnerships facilitated the development of TK/ECE Teachers’ expertise with Dual Language/English Learners.

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