

# A Study of the Early Childhood Language Development Institute

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This brief shares findings from a formative evaluation of Early Childhood Language Development Institute (ECLDI) programs at two early learning sites. At each, ECLDI provided training and support to program leadership, teaching teams, and families. The brief provides a summary of the report and discusses lessons for the field.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Teachers:

- Described increased knowledge of and commitment to meaningful family engagement and culturally and linguistically responsive practices.
- Adopted new practices to engage families in their children's learning and integrate children's home languages and cultures into the classroom.

### Families:

- Expressed greater knowledge of dual language learning and implemented practices to share home language and culture with their children.
- Described positive home-school connections.

Shifting program culture and classroom practice requires consistent commitment and a comprehensive

set of strategies. Ensuring staff and family participation can require significant investment from programs, including time and organizational resources.

## BACKGROUND

In San Mateo County, where ECLDI operates, about 70% of all low-income children age five and younger are children of immigrants (Gerstein et al., 2016). Many speak a language other than English at home, and dual language learners (DLLs) face particular academic vulnerabilities. They often enter kindergarten and first grade



behind their grade-level peers, and these gaps often persist through middle school, high school, and beyond (Beltran, 2016; Espinosa, 2013; Gandara et al., 2003). Despite an increasingly heterogeneous child population, the educational workforce and systems are under-prepared to meaningfully engage DLLs and their families.

Extensive research establishes that culturally and linguistically responsive classrooms—which provide home language continuity and support for dual language learning—play a beneficial role in closing this achievement gap (Stipek et al., 2001; Burchinal et al., 2012; Espinosa, 2013). Despite this knowledge, many schools and

classrooms reflect the dominant culture. Families and teachers alike often believe that quickly assimilating children to the dominant language and culture is the best way to assure academic success.

Further, while engaging families in children’s early learning is associated with long-term academic success, schools often struggle to connect with diverse and immigrant families in meaningful ways (Zarate, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Best & Dunlop, 2001; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). The result is a missed opportunity for home-school partnership that could set the foundation for the child’s elementary years and beyond. (For a more

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When we started with ECLDI, it was just the head teachers participating. They didn't have a lot of buy-in. Last year we also brought in the assistant teachers [and that has] started a larger conversation.” — Director

detailed review of relevant research, see accompanying brief, *Why It Matters in Early Education*.)

### ECLDI MODEL

ECLDI aims to redress the readiness gap by supporting quality early learning experiences for DLLs.

To this end, ECLDI works to bolster early learning professionals' skills in and commitment to:

1. Preserving and encouraging children's home languages and cultures.
2. Developing teaching and learning supports for dual language learning.
3. Creating early learning experiences, practices, and policies that are culturally and linguistically relevant.
4. Cultivating meaningful partnerships with families of DLLs.

ECLDI's multi-tiered approach includes:

- Advocating for including DLL practices and strategies<sup>1</sup> in the County's early learning planning and policies.

- Coaching program leaders to reflect on current practices and explore opportunities to grow.
- Facilitating trainings for teaching teams to introduce new strategies and practices.
- Offering families a training series on dual language learning and developing partnerships with teachers.

By working with multiple stakeholders to adopt practices and policies that are responsive to DLLs and their families, ECLDI aims to ensure equitable high quality early learning experiences for all children in San Mateo County. (For more detail about ECLDI, see the accompanying brief, *A Theory of Change*.)

### THE STUDY

In 2015, ECLDI partnered with the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities at Stanford University (Gardner Center) to assess its current programming and support future development. Initially, the Gardner Center worked with ECLDI to develop the organization's theory of change. The theory of change



articulated goals, key strategies, and desired outcomes for ECLDI. From 2016 to 2017, the Gardner Center conducted a qualitative study to better understand how the ECLDI model was working in practice. We focused on two state-funded preschool sites where ECLDI had operated. We interviewed 35 program staff and participants, and observed three ECLDI sessions. (For more details on research methodology, see [full report](#).)

**This research allowed the Gardner Center to address the following research questions:**

1. How is the ECLDI model implemented in practice?
2. What factors support or inhibit families' and providers' participation in ECLDI offerings?
3. What conditions support or inhibit families' and providers' implementation of what they have learned through participation?

**FINDINGS**

The research suggests that ECLDI programs are associated with desired early outcomes in teacher and family attitudes, beliefs, and practices. The research also revealed multiple challenges that are important to consider in future development. We describe both below.

**Promising Trends**

Overall, we found indications that teacher attitudes and beliefs aligned with ECLDI priority areas for culturally and linguistically responsive practice and meaningful family engagement. While this was not an outcomes study and we cannot assert causality, we find these trends promising.

**Knowledge of and Commitment to Family Engagement.** Teachers described increased knowledge of and commitment to meaningful

family engagement. This included viewing families from a strength-based approach. They also described specific strategies they employed to engage families, such as creating a welcoming environment and integrating families into classroom learning. For example, teachers often invited families into class to share their culture through food, music, stories, and pictures. In some cases, teachers integrated families' home cultures into specific art projects or activities such as creating cultural dolls from recycled materials. Additionally, some teachers were active in supporting families with at-home learning practices. For example, one teacher led workshops with families providing tips for engaging children with books through storytelling. Another teacher regularly shared with families how they could strengthen their child's numeracy with everyday activities, such as counting fruit at the grocery store.

**Knowledge of and Commitment to Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Practices.** Teachers also described increased knowledge of and commitment to culturally and linguistically responsive practices. Many made efforts to incorporate children's home languages into the classroom. Teachers often learned a few words of each child's home language, or labeled their classroom in different written languages. They also spoke with families to encourage home language use at home. In addition, teachers were working to incorporate children's cultures into the classroom. Teachers used books, stories, music, singing, and food preparation that reflected children's home cultures. Some teachers included culture-specific artifacts into the classroom environment. For example, empty food materials such as tortilla flour sacks or rice boxes from children's homes in the dramatic

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Meaningful transformation of program practice and culture requires consistent effort and prioritization.

play area. While many teachers had adopted new practices, some indicated they still wanted support in figuring out how to incorporate families' home cultures in ways that went beyond stereotypes and holiday celebrations.

**Knowledge of Dual Language**

**Learning.** Families also reported greater knowledge of dual language learning and increased commitment to preserve home language and culture. For example, families reported teaching their children to value and speak in their home language. They perceived this as a key ingredient for maintaining connection with their family culture or extended family. They also described at-home activities they engaged in to support their children's cultural identity. This frequently included cooking, dancing, listening to music, and telling stories.

**Home-School Connection.** Families also described enhanced home-school connection. Many families actively participated in their child's classroom and school. For example, they took part in multicultural celebrations, brought items from home into the classroom (at the teacher's request), and volunteered in the classroom. Some families also described the tremendous emotional support the school-parent community provided. This was especially important for immigrant adults raising children far from their own families of origin. Parent experience with their child's school and learning also varied by classroom. Some felt highly supported by their classroom teacher, and others less so. This underscores the importance of the teacher-family relationship.

**Challenges**

This research showed that ECLDI programs are associated with



desired early outcomes in teacher and family attitudes, beliefs, and practices. The research also revealed multiple challenges that are important to consider in future program development.

**Uneven participation of teachers and families.**

We found that teacher and family participation in ECLDI programming was at times uneven both within and across program sites. Teachers described being oversaturated with professional development opportunities. They also reported professional or personal obligations limited their ability to take part in trainings held outside typical working hours. Families also described oversaturation with competing activities for families. Further, programs did not always schedule sessions at times that were convenient for families (e.g., right after drop-off) and in the case of multiple languages, programs did not always have the capacity to provide adequate translation. Lastly, sometimes program staff had limited

time and capacity to outreach sufficiently to families. These trends highlighted the substantial investment needed from program sites to implement ECLDI programs effectively. Given these constraints, programs may require more guidance and support to ensure staff and family participation.

**Culture in the Classroom.** While some teachers showed evidence of adopting culturally and linguistically responsive practices and engagement with families, many found more nuanced and complex interactions of culture in the classroom to be challenging. For example, encountering different cultural norms around communication. This highlights the need for continued and ongoing teacher reflection and learning.

**System-level Barriers.** Teachers also described systematic barriers to engaging with families. For example, strict state policies around immunization records for parent volunteers can be problematic for parents of low income and mixed document status.

**Variability by Teacher.** We also observed variability in families' school experience by teacher. While some families reported their child's teacher actively engaged with them around home language and cultural activities, others did not. Additionally, families stated some teachers were more actively encouraging of family participation and leadership.

**Resistance to Home Language Use.** In addition, many families described struggling with how to encourage home language development when their children were resistant to speaking the home language. This is potentially an area to delve deeper into in future ECLDI trainings.

## **BOOSTING PROGRAM PARTICIPATION**

### **TEACHERS:**

**Factors that appeared to facilitate teacher participation in ECLDI programs were:**

- Building shared planning/development time into teacher schedules. This provided the opportunity for ECLDI to work with teaching teams, without requiring extensive after-hours commitment.
- Fostering program directors' active support and commitment to dedicating adequate resources, such as teacher and administrative time.
- Aligning trainings with staff professional development and/or program accountability requirements (e.g., QRIS). This elevated the priority of participation.

### **FAMILIES:**

**Factors that appeared to facilitate strong family participation in ECLDI programs included:**

- Ensuring program staff schedule ECLDI sessions at times convenient for families (e.g., immediately after program drop-off).
- Encouraging teacher outreach to families to invite participation.
- Offering sessions in families' home languages or having translation available in cases of multiple languages.

## **MAKING PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES WORK FOR TEACHERS AND FAMILIES**

Below, we highlight what teachers and families report works for them.

### **TEACHERS:**

**Teacher practices and strategies to support DLLs are strengthened when:**

- Professional learning opportunities are content-focused (e.g., include specific lessons and activities) and include the teaching team (e.g., assistant teachers).
- Teachers have opportunities to reflect on their own cultural identities and challenging "cultural encounters" in the classroom.
- Teachers have time to plan and reflect in teaching teams.
- Program leadership reinforces DLL practices and strategies with program-wide efforts.
- Trainings supporting DLL strategies and practices align with accountability frameworks and professional standards (e.g., QRIS).

### **FAMILIES:**

**Family practices are strengthened when:**

- Reinforced by skillful teacher support and practices. For example, creating concrete and learning-focused opportunities for families to participate in the classroom or encouraging home language use in and out of school.
- Families have opportunities to discuss real challenges in their lives around language, culture, and their children's learning—for example, parenting away from their family of origin or dealing with a child's reluctance to speak their home language.



## IMPLICATIONS

Creating more equitable, quality early learning experiences for young DLLs is a complex and multi-faceted process. Increasing income inequality and a hostile policy environment have taken a heavy toll on low-income, immigrant families. Increasing administrative demands, inadequate wages, and greater pressure for academic achievement can place heavy burdens on already stretched early learning professionals. Programs are responding to a constantly shifting policy context and increasing accountability measures. Yet the early years remain a critical time in young children's lives. The need to support families

of DLLs and the educational professionals who serve them is great. Meaningful transformation of program practice and culture requires consistent efforts and ongoing prioritization. Further, it should be informed by rigorous research and reflect local teacher and family needs. Programs and families do not always have the capacity to engage in this work on their own. In this way, a program like ECLDI has much to offer. By engaging in multi-level strategies to support early learning programs, professionals, and the families and children they serve, ECLDI is working to create more equitable early learning experiences for all children in San Mateo County.

1 "DLL practices and strategies" refers to culturally and linguistically responsive practices and transformational family engagement strategies

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This three-part series shares findings from a research collaboration between the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University and Early Childhood Language Development Institute (ECLDI), a program of the San Mateo County Office of Education, developed to enhance quality early learning experiences for Dual Language Learners.

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