

**Language as a Barrier to Career Development for Child Care Providers  
Palm Beach County, Florida  
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**Introduction**

Increasingly, early childhood teachers are serving children who are from culturally and linguistic diverse backgrounds. In addition, early childhood teachers, themselves, are more likely than ever before to speak a language other than English as their primary language. Both create challenges for teacher preparation.

Hispanics/Latinos are moving in large numbers to Palm Beach County. In 1990, 7.7% of the population was Hispanic, with the percentage increasing to 12.4% in 2000. West Palm Beach is among the top cities in the United States in Hispanic growth (Pew Hispanic Center, 2002; Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, 2002). In 2000, three cities (West Palm Beach, Lake Worth, and Lake Park) no longer had white majorities.

Examination of data from Palm Beach County School District in August 2003 underscores this. Overall, 5,456 children in elementary school speak Spanish as the primary language; 2,679 speak Creole; and 209 speak Portuguese. Spanish as the primary language was most prominent in the West Palm Beach area (Area 3) with 2,052 children speaking Spanish. Area 1 (South County) and Area 2 (Lake Worth area) combined had 1,769 children who spoke Creole. Area 1 (South County) had the most speakers of Portuguese. This change in county and city demographics is reflected in the child care provider population.

**Child Care Providers**

All individuals working in child care centers in the county are required by licensing to successfully complete the forty-hour entry level course within one year of date of employment. Palm Beach Community College is the primary provider of this training. Completer data was examined over a three-year period. In 2000-2001, 673 people successfully completed the forty-hour entry level course; in 2001-2002, the number increased to 1,477; and in 2002-2003, the number was 1076.

A study of ethnicity of completers showed that White completers of the 40-hour course decreased over the three year period from 50% to 44%; Hispanic/Latino completers increased from 19% to 25%; and African American/Black completers remained at 28%. During this same period, English as the primary language dropped from 85% to 75%. Spanish increased from 9% to 18%; Creole increased from 1% to 3%. As a point of

comparison, the 2000 census found that Whites comprised 75% of the population; Black/African Americans comprised 14%, and Hispanics comprised 12.4% of the population. Thus, Blacks/African Americans and Hispanics/Latinos are overrepresented in child care provider population. Whites are underrepresented.

The statistics from PBCC do not tell the whole story. Maria Almestica from Quest for Knowledge offers the forty-hour and CDA training in Spanish. Spanish-speaking providers often elect to take the training at Quest for Knowledge. The 40-hour training is incorporated in the CDA training. Between September 2003 and February 2004, a six month period, 24 people received SEEK scholarships to participate in CDA training at Quest for Knowledge. Quest for Knowledge trained 232 individuals between 2001 and 2003.

In addition to data from Palm Beach Community College and Quest for Knowledge, child care providers from the 42 centers participating in the Quality Rating System at the end of 2003 completed a survey on professional development. English was reported as the primary language for 75% of the providers. Twenty-one percent of the providers reported Spanish as the primary language, and 2% reported Creole as the primary language. These figures agree with those from PBCC and Quest for Knowledge that are cited above. It appears that 20% to 25% of child care providers speak Spanish as their primary language.

Adults who speak English as a Second Language (ESL) are more likely than others to be assigned to infant/toddler classrooms. In the QRS survey, 33% of teachers in infant classrooms reported Spanish as a primary language as compared to 32% in one-year-old rooms, 24 % in two-year-old rooms; 14% in three-year-old rooms; and 13% in four-year-old rooms.

The number of Hispanic/Latino providers is increasing. Unknown is the language used by the providers in the classroom, the degree of English language proficiency possessed by the providers, and the number of young children in the classrooms from Hispanic/Latino families and from English-speaking families. Also unknown is the richness of the language environment whether in English or in another language.

### **What the Research Says About Serving Children Who Do Not Speak English as Their Primary Language**

Children who enter kindergarten and who do not speak English are one of the most vulnerable groups for poor educational outcomes. Prekindergarten programs that target children with limited English proficiency can improve their achievement in later grades, but the research on the effectiveness of different approaches to teaching English to preschool children is limited. What we do know is that exposure to a rich language environment during the preschool years is an essential building block for future literacy, regardless of the language spoken.

There are three primary approaches to teaching English-language learners.

- First language classrooms use only the child's home language. English is not spoken.
- Bilingual classrooms use both the child's home language and English. These programs vary greatly in terms of emphasis they place on learning English, which may account for the variations in outcomes.
- English-language classrooms immerse children in classrooms where English is the main language.

The research on teaching English during the early years is limited, but some studies support the following knowledge base. A rich language environment during the preschool years is an essential building block for future literacy, regardless of the language spoken. In addition, programs must pay attention to a child's home culture to ensure a partnership between parents and teachers in providing a rich language environment. Supporting the home language does not dictate the approach to teaching, but it does acknowledge the importance of engaging parents and collaboratively designing appropriate language and literacy goals for their children.

We know that individuals who are literate in one language can transfer this literacy to another language, but it is unclear how to best teach children who are not yet literate in any language. Children with a strong foundation in their primary language can achieve high proficiency levels in a second language. This approach does not delay the acquisition of English. Research also indicates that infants and toddlers from families speaking Spanish as Language 1 will benefit from care provided by adults who only speak Spanish to them. Children who have a solid foundation in their first language quickly learn English when exposed to it at age 3 or 4. Finally, bilingualism has been associated with higher levels of cognitive attainment.

### **Career Pathways for Child Care Providers**

Is language a barrier to career pathways in early childhood education and student success? Research on the adult learner clearly indicates the importance of learning content in the students' first language and the difficulty of acquiring academic language proficiency in English. Conversational proficiency should not be interpreted as a valid index of overall proficiency in the language or proficiency in the more complex academic language needed to engage in many classroom activities. While conversational proficiency may develop within two to five years, an academic proficiency may take as long as five to ten years. If college students are learning new concepts, new processes, and new vocabulary in Language 2, the understanding is not as complete and in fact may be inadequate than if they were learning the concepts and processes in their Language 1.

Palm Beach Community College (PBCC) offers classes to increase the academic proficiency in English. For instance, PBCC offers three levels each of reading and English courses and two levels of speaking and listening courses designed specifically to meet the needs of nonnative English speakers who need to learn English for academic purposes. Students are placed into the appropriate level based on CELT scores. PBCC

also offers ESOL for Child Care Workers, a course designed to teach English to those who are in the child care field. The goal is to improve the child care provider's skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking in English.

PBCC discontinued offering the forty-hour training in Spanish in 2004 when the State of Florida added a required competency-based test offered only in English. Quest for Knowledge continues to offer the forty-hour training and course work for the CDA in Spanish. This coursework, however, unlike the CDA coursework in English at PBCC, does not articulate to 9 credit hours in the AS degree in Early Childhood Education. PBCC does offer training leading to a bilingual CDA, but English proficiency is a prerequisite.

Offering the 40-hour course and testing only in English will have a severe effect in child care centers who hire non-English-speaking minorities. One consequence is large turnover. Centers will hire individuals whose L1 is not English. These individuals must pass the 40-hour competency test within one year of date of hire. Most likely, they will not pass, will resign, and another group will take their place, and the cycle will be repeated. This is most likely to happen in the infant and toddler rooms where non-English speaking providers are usually placed, and where continuity of care is the most important.

This information highlights important questions. If children need high quality child care now, what steps should be taken, if any, to provide introductory training in Spanish? What other training, if any, should be provided in Spanish? How are other communities addressing second language issues? What would a successful career path look like? What kind of action, if any, should be taken to ensure 40-hour training and competency-testing in Spanish? Should CDA training be provided in Spanish, and by whom? What supports do ESL students need to be successful completers of the 40-hour competency examination?

### **Future Initiatives**

Future initiatives for the community include:

1. A needs assessment or focus groups to investigate language used by providers in classrooms with different ages, primary language of children served in these classrooms, degree of English-language proficiency and primary language proficiency of the providers in these classrooms.
2. Review of the research on influence of language of provider and child on the language and cognitive development of children birth to five.
3. Investigation of resources in the community to help non-English speakers learn both conversational and academic English.
4. Investigation of child care training in the community for non-English speakers.
5. Investigation of how other communities are approaching the training of child care providers who do not speak English as L1.

6. Development of a set of recommendations for child care center directors when making class assignments.
7. Development of a set of recommendations for developing a career path for people who do not speak English as a primary language.
8. Assessment of the richness of the language environment, regardless of language used.

In conclusion, early education professionals increasingly are encountering children and families from a variety of cultures, yet early childhood programs are largely unprepared to address these diverse educational and linguistic needs. In a 1999 national survey of colleges and universities with early childhood professional development programs, only 11 percent required coursework on teaching children who are bilingual or who have limited English proficiency.

Colleges and universities also have not succeeded in recruiting, retaining, and supporting large numbers of racial and ethnic minorities into their early childhood personnel preparation programs. Likewise, institutions have been slow to address the needs of child care providers with limited English proficiency for training in early childhood education. Child care provider training in the State of Florida must consider both of the above if a goal is that no child will be left behind.