Supporting early-literacy and language acquisition among bilingual children in Head-Start

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Introduction

• This talk is about an early language and literacy program being developed in a Head Start program at The Shield Institute, Bronx, N.Y. We create our own literacy materials to use in the native language at home and in English at school. We also strive to determine what are the parents’ and children’s needs. The aim is to one day expand this program to all the children and their parents in the school.

• The parents involved are Spanish-speaking and with limited English proficiency. On average, they have lived in the US for over 5 years. They come from Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Mexico and Ecuador. We report data on 30 children. The Parent intervention group (N=20) consisted of parents who wanted to participate immediately. The Control group (N=10) consisted of parents who wanted to participate but could not attend meetings and delayed their participation in the program.

• The children have a range of moderate to severe language impairments, primarily in the areas of vocabulary acquisition, syntax and phonological processing. 5 children are diagnosed with autism.
Outline

• Why train bilingual parents?
• What is the framework of BELLA?
• What kind of materials are used?
• Results
• Future directions
Project BELLA (Bilingual Early Language and Literacy Acquisition)

Goals of the BELLA program:

1. To promote language development and early literacy concepts
2. To promote parent participation in their children’s early education
3. To support use of the home language
4. To increase communication between the parents and the school
Why the Bilingual Early Literacy and Language Acquisition program (BELLA)?

• This program is designed to work with Latino parents of children in Head Start
• Children from bilingual backgrounds often find little support to meet their language needs at home
• Parents are often confused about using the home language with their children
Why work with bilingual parents and their children?

• Spanish-speaking parents with limited English proficiency are often counseled to only use English with their children
  – “Children with language impairment cannot handle the cognitive demands of learning two languages.” (from a psychologist evaluating children at the Head Start)
  – Parents are often denied bilingual placements for their children (both when entering Head Start and when they transition to school)
  – Parents are often told that their children learn English better or are more proficient in English than in the home language
Why work with bilingual parents and their children?

• Children tend to be placed in classrooms where English is the only language spoken
  – even when bilingual teacher assistants are present in every classroom, the tendency is to only use English
  – classroom materials and activities to support language development at home are only available in English
Why work with bilingual parents and their children?


• Non-English-speaking parents of children in Head Start described having limited communication with schools
• thinking that learning two languages at once would slow their child’s ability to acquire English
• worried that their children rapidly lose the native language and only speak English
• report trying to speak to their child only in English even though the parents’ English was limited
Why work with bilingual parents and their children?

• “Over time, this stunted the richness of their conversations since these parents did not have the vocabulary and fluency to engage in subtle or enriching conversations with their child.” Head Start Dual-Language Report (2008)
Why work with bilingual parents?

• Not using the native language limits language and early literacy practices at home during sensitive periods of language acquisition
• Many parents stop talking with their children because they are unable to use English
• The television and older siblings become the communication partners
Why work with bilingual parents and their children?

• Young children with language impairment have the capacity to learn two languages (Genesee et al. 2004)

• Significant effects for transfer from L1 to L2 have been found for **vocabulary** (Genesee and Nicoladis., 2006),

• Significant effects for transfer from L1 to L2 have been found for **phonological awareness and concepts about print** (Durgunoglu et al., 1993, Goswami, 1998; Branum-Martin, 2006)
Literacy practices among Latino parents and their children

• Federal data from 2001 reveal only 45% of Latino families read daily to their 3-5 year old children

• Figures are lower for children with language impairment:
  – 8 out of 30 families (27%) in our sample reported reading daily 15-30 minutes with their child
What are the literacy practices among Latino parents and their children?

• There is a scarcity of research on the factors that limit early-literacy practices in Latino families
  – confusion as to what language to use
  – limited access to materials in the home language
  – unfamiliarity with reading in English
  – school support only provided in English
  – inappropriateness of the reading materials available for the needs of children with language impairments
  – not knowing how to interact with the child or how to engage the child when reading
  – parents who have limited literacy themselves
Why work with bilingual parents and their children?

- Studies reviewed by the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth (2006)
  - revealed that promoting Spanish home literacy activities had a positive effect on English preliteracy achievement in kindergarten bilingual children, whereas promoting English home literacy activities had no effect on their English literacy achievement in first grade
  - Why?
Why the Bilingual Early Literacy and Language Acquisition program (BELLA)?

• Parents have limited access to literacy materials in the home language

• 21 out of 30 families reported only having books in English at home
  – Only 2 families reported obtaining books in Spanish from their public library
  – Most parents described difficulty reading books in English
The need for appropriate literacy materials

• There is a need for interactive picture books specifically designed to the needs of children with language impairment
  – 23 out of 30 Spanish-speaking parents of children with language impairment reported that their child cannot sit still or pay attention when they try to read a book to their child
  – parents often described reading with their child as a highly frustrating experience
Literacy materials used in BELLA

Focus on meaningful topics for the children and families

• Language, literacy and play are unified
• Promote joint attention and participation
• Can easily be modified into the home language or English
• Target specific vocabulary, grammatical structures, phonological awareness, narrative discourse and concepts about print
• Target pragmatic aspects of language
• Help the child to understand and to express emotions
Framework for parent training

Language Development and Early Literacy
Three areas

Language
- Phonology and print
- Vocabulary and syntax
- Extended discourse

Social-Emotional
- Self-regulation
- Attention
- Motivation

Teaching-Nurturing
- Strategies
- Curriculum
- Environment
Language building strategies

• Promoting joint attention and intentional communication
• Selecting meaningful vocabulary
• Promoting repetition of target words
• Simplifying grammar and syntax
• Extending or developing a theme within multiple activities
Sample literacy activity

Teach while shopping for food  (1st book that parents are given)

Objectives:

• To develop vocabulary for fruit

• To promote extended discourse by using scripted language for shopping activity

• To integrate literacy by having the child elaborate a shopping list by drawing some of the items
  – One mother reported her child learned every fruit in the market within one week
Voy de compras.

(from the “Voy the Compras” book)
Compro una manzana.
Compro una banana.
Compro un limón.
Me gusta comer...
Fig. 1

Results showing improvement in word learning for fruits category when parents work with their children at home vs. the vocabulary growth of children in the control group after three months.
Sample literacy activity

Parents learn to play with their children
(2nd book that parents are given)

• Objectives:
  – To develop vocabulary for actions
  – To develop vocabulary for nouns
  – To facilitate joint attention
  – To increase communicative interactions
Pelotas, roja, azul, amarilla.

(From the “Mis Juguets” book)
Rebota mi pelota.
Bloques
Hago una torre con mis bloques.
Hago una torre.
Carros
Empujo mi carro.
Empujo mi carro.

O velcro dot
Fig. 2
Results showing improvement in word usage for toy category (nouns and actions). Columns 1 and 2 are the Control group (N=10). Columns 3 and 4 are the Parent intervention group (N=20). Results are based on pretest and post-test after 3 months of intervention (p=.000).
Sample literacy activity

Teaching letters through songs

**Objectives:**

- **To identify first letter in names and words**
- **To increase auditory discrimination for beginning sounds in words**
- **To promote production for beginning sounds in words**
- **To establish sound-to-letter associations**
- **To build phonological awareness by using rhymes and repetition**
Araña

La arañita sube y sube.
La arañita baja y baja.
La arañita se fue.
¿Dónde se fue?
Aquí está.
Insectos
Insectos que vuelan
Insectos que caminan
Insectos con alitas
Insectos con patitas
Insectos con boquitas
Oh...no...no...no!
Insectos en mi sopa...no!
Supporting narrative discourse and shared reading

- Use of scripted dialogues
- Use of pretend play
- Establishing a dialogue while reading
- Manipulating concepts
- Organizing space, materials, visual support at home
- Limiting background noise
Sample literacy activity

Using pretend play and rhymes while reading

- **Objectives:**
  - to develop vocabulary for nouns and actions
  - to facilitate focused and sustained attention
  - to extend communicative interactions and dialogue through shared reading
  - to promote phonological awareness
  - to improve length of utterances by using scripted language
Microwave, microwave,
What do you crave?

Microondas, microondas
¿Qué me das?

(from the book “Microondas”)
I crave empanadas sprinkled with bananas.

Te doy empanadas y te doy bananas.
Microwave, microwave,
What do you crave?

Microondas, microondas
¿Qué me das?
I crave tacos sprinkled with tomatoes.

Te doy tacos muy buenos, con carne y tomate
Scarecrow said hello to the crow.

El muñeco de palo le dijo Hola...Hola... al pájaro negro.

(from the book “Muñeco de Palo y Pajaro Negro”)
Hello crow.
I have something to show.

Hola pájaro negro.
Mira lo que tengo.
What?
What will you show?
said the crow.

¿Qué?
¿Qué me vas a mostrar?
Dijo el pájaro negro.
I will show a rainbow.

Te muestro un arco iris.
What a beautiful rainbow said the crow.

Que lindo arco iris dijo el pájaro negro.
Time to go now...

Adios, adios,
me voy...
Wait, wait, please do not go said the scarecrow to the crow.

Espera, espera, por favor, no te vayas le dijo el muñeco de palo al pájaro negro.
What?
What will you show now?
said the crow.

¿Qué?
¿Qué me vas a mostrar?
Dijo el pájaro negro.
Language and literacy

Focus of training

- Social-emotional aspects that influence self-regulation, attention and motivation to learn
Parents and their children having fun

- All the language and literacy materials contain meaningful situations that promote the expression of joy and well-being
- The use of intonation, surprise and smiles is encouraged
Supporting social-emotional growth

• Books with emotional content and meaningful topics
• Peaceful, slow-paced, safe environment
• Communicate in a calm and attentive manner
• Encourage turn-taking
• Encourage sharing and collaboration
• Model a smile
Sample literacy activities

To express feelings of caring

- **Objectives:**
  - to promote expression of emotions
  - to promote turn taking
  - to facilitate focused, sustained attention
  - to extend communicative interactions
  - to increase mean length of utterances by using repetitions and scripted language
  - to develop vocabulary for nouns and actions
(from Toys and Actions book)

Ositos
Abrazo mi osito.
• Parent and child take turns in hugging the teddy bear and saying “Te quiero”
• Activity in a group involves each child passing the teddy bear to one another and saying “I love you”
Fig. 3
Results showing improvement in vocabulary growth (10 word categories) for the Control (N=10) and the Parent intervention (N=20) groups. Results are based on pretest and post-test after 3 months of intervention (p=.000).
Parent involvement

• Building knowledge background about development
• Demystifying therapy and learning: parents can facilitate language and literacy
• Building materials
• Understanding how to use the materials
Parent involvement

- Active parent participation: a growing group eager to attend workshops
- Fathers taking an active role side by side with mothers
- Parent volunteers
- Parents increased contact with the school
Change in parents’ attitudes

(Translated comments)

Parents’ comments:
• “Now I know how to work with my child.”
• “No one had shown me how to talk with my son.”
• “I was not sure if I could use Spanish, so I only used some words in English.”
• “My son loves to play with these books, he pays more attention. His older sister sits with him and plays while they read.”
• “My young child is also using the books. We read and play every day.”
• “My child learned all the fruit names. We now go to the market and point them out. I bought magnets and placed them on the refrigerator and he can now name all the fruit pieces.”
• “My son is using more words and he pays more attention.”
• “I am not correcting my daughter anymore. We just have fun.”
Children’s comments:

• “I play my mommy at home… play ball and blocks and car…”
• “I want the Elmo book… I have Elmo”
• “Quiero libro Elmo.”
• “Mommy have toys…”
• “¡Qué lindo! (referring to pictures)
• “Tomorrow I show mommy and papi.”
• “I have that! Toys!”
• “Me gusta comprar frutas.” (I like to buy fruit.)
Future: Improving the program

- Continued personalized coaching through small parent meetings
- Creating more meaningful materials: owning a library, forming and maintaining reading routines, building a personal place to study
- Increasing parental involvement in the school
- Reasserting parents’ role in educating and planning for their children
- Tracking children’s language and literacy acquisition into the school years
- Expanding the program to other parents
Conclusions

• The BELLA program has been well received by a core group of parents.
• There is a need for continued outreach to other parents.
• Building books has been the most successful strategy to get parents involved.
• Parents also learn language stimulation and literacy practices best when using the interactive picture books with explicit teaching.
Thank you