

Holistic Multilingual Early Learning: Lessons From Families, Educators, and Administrators in a Preschool Program

Lilly Padia, Luisiana Melendez, and Sandra Osorio

Abstract

The Reggio Emilia approach, including the concept of the hundred languages that children use, offers expansive opportunities for affirming and sustaining the multilingual identities of young children (Fyfe et al., 2023). This paper counters the authoritarian culture of power (Delpit, 1988) in schooling that privileges monolingual, monomodal English as superior and dominant. We examine the intersections of multilingualism and a Reggio Emilia approach in the early childhood context. We draw on data from a study with a public, Reggio-inspired preschool dual language program in a large Midwest city in the US, created and operated in close collaboration amongst administrators, families, teachers, and staff. Through individual interviews and focus groups, families, educators, and administrators shared their perspectives on the history and the current implementation of the program's curricula, the program structures that sustain the quality of the educators and staff, the impact on children's development and learning, and the contributions of families and community. We analyze bilingual identity development for young children and their families in the context of dual language schooling, as well as the necessity of uplifting and amplifying multilingualism within foundation pedagogical approaches like Reggio. Finally, we identify ways that multilingual pedagogies, including but not limited to translanguaging and translanguaging universal design for learning (TrUDL) (Cioè-Peña, 2022), are inextricably linked with other seminal approaches to early learning, rather than an afterthought or appendage that must be squeezed into preexisting learning structures.

Keywords

multilingualism, early childhood education, dual language, family partnerships

Introduction

Dual language programs have increased dramatically across the United States. Research from the American Councils Research Center (ARC) found that forty-four states report dual language and immersion (DLI) programs. ARC counted 3,649 programs in 27 languages. Spanish programs were eighty percent of all programs (DLI Research Alliance, n.d.). However, research on the programmatic features of dual language programs at the preschool level are few (Zheng et al., 2021). More needs to be known about the characteristics of programs

that serve young emergent bilinguals and multilinguals and their families so these programs may grow in number and effectiveness.

This research examines a preschool in a public school district in Chicago to get a better understanding of how key stakeholders - administrators, teachers, caregivers/families - viewed the transition process to a dual language model. The program was chosen for several reasons: its long presence in the community; a history of parental activism in alliance with school administrators, teachers, and staff; and

the demographics of the children and families the program currently serves. Additionally, the program also had previously collaborated with the institution of higher education where the PIs of the study presently work. The program's history, in particular its long-standing record of equitable collaboration between administrators, teachers, staff, and caregivers, its demographics, and its intentional decision to effectively serve young multilinguals provided favorable conditions for the exploration of how program administrators, educators, and families describe the principles guiding the study. Specifically, we were guided by the research question: How do administrators, teachers, families, and staff describe the impact of the program on children's development and learning?

Our study was framed using three of the five principles proposed by Melendez & Syc (2021) for capturing essential features of programs serving young emergent bilinguals/multilinguals: 1) Creating and sustaining a climate that embraces bilingualism as an asset, not only for individual children and families, but also for all children and larger society; 2) Developing strong partnerships with linguistically diverse families that center explicitly on emergent bilingualism; and 3) Integration of families' cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge into every aspect of the program, including its curricula. The following section outlines theoretical perspectives that inform each of these principles. We ground our theoretical framing and findings in the context of these three principles.

A Review of Relevant Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

We offer a critical, but admittedly far from comprehensive, overview of how research and empirical literature inform the three principles at the center of our case study. We

have selected literature that spotlights practices in early care and education and young multilingual children and their families. The principles discussed should not be considered in isolation, as their intersection and synergy is genuine, not only conceptually, but also in regard to their practical application. We return to this point in the discussion of our findings.

Principle 1: Creating and sustaining a climate that embraces bilingualism as an asset, not only for individual children and families, but also for all children and larger society.

Multilingualism in early childhood education requires attention and intention to support the holistic growth of our bi/multilingual young learners. In the United States, more than 25 percent of children in Early Head Start and Head Start programs nationwide come from homes where the primary language is a language other than English (McNamara, 2016). In addition, these young emergent bilinguals are diverse in their countries of origin, racial/ethnic backgrounds, languages spoken at home, family income, family structure, and parental educational attainment, which has motivated the notion that they must be considered 'superdiverse' (Park et al. 2018, p.6). Despite this substantial population of multilingual children and families, the dominant schooling system is governed by a culture of power (Delpit, 1988) that privileges monolingual, monomodal spoken "standard" English as superior (Cioè-Peña, 2022)—and as the ultimate goal and marker of children's success.

Theories and ideas that aim to legitimize practice in early childhood education (Tout et al. 2013), as well as the criteria framing definitions of programmatic quality in ECE (Yoshikawa & Kabay, 2015) are usually entrenched in

hegemonies of white, middle-class values and beliefs regarding child development, parenting, and what defines optimal development and learning for very young children (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2006).

These deficit interpretations support understandings of non-dominant cultures and languages as deficient, and promote compensatory actions meant to address the ‘deficits’ attached to membership in certain groups (Martínez & Rury, 2012; Salazar Pérez & Saavedra, 2017). Discourses that privilege Western and middle-class standards for child development competencies and parenting can also contribute to these deficit perspectives (Garcia-Coll et al, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Martinez & Rury, 2012; Pence & Nsamenang, 2008).

Moreover, deficit views of non-mainstream children and families frame inflexible conceptualizations of quality and best practice in early childhood education that are mediated by social stratification variables such as race, ethnicity, language, and class, among others. In consequence, status, power, and/or wealth are recognized as facilitating or obstructing access to quality early childhood programs that genuinely incorporate the resources of minoritized children and families to effectively support their development and learning (Kerbo, 2011; Simpson et al., 2018). Thus, by categorizing individuals according to group membership, social stratification variables translate into systemic power-differentials that silence or ignore the voices of those lacking social capital (Kerbo, 2011) and what they identify as desirable early learning experiences for children (Canella & Viruru, 2004; Martinez & Rury, 2012). The resulting characterizations of quality and best practice in early childhood education are then situated in dominant discourses that fail to acknowledge the child

development competencies and parenting practices of minoritized communities of color. This is often the case in relation to children and families who use a language other than English at home (Souto-Manning, 2016).

Rewiring our conceptions of what ‘counts’ as language and learning is crucial to challenging ideologically oppressive expectations of child development that are premised on a mythical neurotypical, monolingual English speaking white child (Brown, 2020; Souto-Manning, 2016) and moving towards expansive opportunities for affirming and sustaining the multilingual identities of young children (Fyfe et al., 2023). The aspiration to disrupt prevalent ideas about what counts in language learning to validate and incorporate differences in child development outcomes and/or parenting as associated with the practices of certain cultural, ethnic, and/or racial communities is recognized as foundational to more equitable and socially just early childhood programming (Bloch, 2013; Brown & Grigg, 2017; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Guo, 2015; Robinson & Jones-Díaz, 2006; Salazar-Pérez & Saavedra, 2017; Spring, 2010). As a result, efforts that aspire to erase the inequalities that exist in early learning programs must include acknowledgement of children’s right to their own language. In order to do this, integrating children, family, and community members as linguistic models and resources is a necessary condition.

Acknowledging and responding to young children’s bilingualism has the potential to set in motion a more equitable conceptualization of early development and learning by virtue of encouraging programs and practitioners to challenge prevalent hegemonies that favor the majority language over other languages spoken in the home. Thus, practitioners that understand the language socialization practices of

minoritized families and incorporate these understandings into their work with bilingual children and families may facilitate the scrutiny of larger social and political issues regarding power and voice differentials (Bloch, 2013). This arguably reinforces the identification of programs as engines for effectuating the creation and sustaining of a climate that embraces bilingualism as an asset, not only for individual children and families, but also for all children and larger society.

Our examination of how the center that is the focus of our study enacts the values pertinent to the first principle, also consider the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood, specifically the possibilities and offerings of a Reggio approach in the context of multilingualism. The Reggio Emilia approach identifies a ‘culture of the hundred languages,’ wherein “children, especially very young ones, understand each other without the language of words. They...talk in ways unknown to us...” (Rinaldi, 2023). We argue that the Reggio Approach exemplifies an educational philosophy that incorporates multiple modalities of expression and understanding such as visual, print kinesthetic, gestural, and dramatic in support of language development (Rowse & Collier, 2021).

Principle 2: Developing strong partnerships with linguistically diverse families that center explicitly on emergent bilingualism.

Educational partnerships occur at the intersection of early childhood education and care, families, and the surrounding community (Bergroth & Palviainen, 2020). However, differences between the social positions and demographics of families and program administrators and practitioners can result in power differentials that disrupt equitable

relationships with families. The integration of children, family, and community as equal partners demand the intentional intersection of bilingual/multilingual children and families and social justice in early care and education settings (Bloch, 2013). The importance of developing and sustaining effective partnerships with families has been constant in the early childhood literature for many years (Housel, 2020).

However, during the last decade, the examination of how to establish and sustain equitable and collaborative relationships with the families and communities of the children in early care and education programs has increasingly been grounded in the acknowledgement that often these partnerships occur in ways that perpetuate existing power differentials, institutionalized barriers and biases (Brown & Grigg, 2017; Housel, 2020; Moss, 2014; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol 2018).

Bloch (2013) contends that acknowledging and responding to young children’s bilingualism has the potential to set in motion a more equitable conceptualization of early care and education by virtue of encouraging programs and practitioners to challenge prevalent hegemonies that favor the majority language over other languages spoken in the home.

A study by Pacini-Ketchabaw and McIvor (2005) illustrates the challenges programs often encounter in challenging the hegemonies of the dominant language. Findings from focus groups with 54 mothers and caregivers representing twelve minoritized languages revealed that families’ were highly motivated to preserve the home language, and cited reasons that included connections to country of origin and to family members who do not speak the new language, the potential

impact of bilingualism on future job opportunities, healthy identity formation, and promoting and sustaining a sense of belonging to family and community (Pacini-Ketchabaw & McIvor, 2005). In contrast, data from interviews with ten early childhood practitioners serving these families across 10 different programs showed that none of the 10 ECE programs had any language goals for the children beyond learning English as the new language (Pacini-Ketchabaw & McIvor, 2005).

Since the publication of the work of Pacini-Ketchabaw & McIvor (2005) almost two decades ago, research on effective family partnerships with families of children growing bilingually within and outside of the United States has steadily grown and the field is increasingly acknowledging their importance for equitable and effective programs serving multilingual young children (USDHHS & USDOE, 2016; National Institute of Early Education Research, 2016; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2016; National Academy of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017; Office of Head Start, 2018). Nevertheless, the features characterizing egalitarian partnerships with the families of multilingual children demands further examination that sheds light on the contributions of context, program, characteristics, to name just a couple.

Principle 3: Integration of families' cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge into every aspect of the program, including its curricula.

The introduction of the term culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) by Gloria Ladson Billing (1995) marked a critical shift in education, one that highlighted, among many other important points, the importance of the intentional, sustained, and purposeful

incorporation of students' culture and background as an essential element "...to increase the engagement and success of students from culturally diverse and minoritized backgrounds (Walker, 2019 p. 1).

A few years after the original publication of the CRP framework, Ladson-Billings (2000), refers to "systems of knowing" (p. 957) that frame scholarly discourse, including the discourses that guide educational philosophy and curricular choices, are positioned in Eurocentric worldviews that favor a particular way of understanding and being that are often intentionally detached from those of minoritized communities and families. Therefore, if we recognize the types of knowledge that dominate early childhood research and practice as rooted in Eurocentric thought and worldviews, it follows that these may prompt perceptions of non-mainstream childhoods, development, and learning as lacking.

Thus, we argue that culturally relevant pedagogy, in particular the intentional adoption of families' culture into all aspects of programs serving multilingual children and their families, is vital to both the success of the children and the effectiveness of the program. Below is a brief discussion of some of the conceptual underpinnings that justify this characterization.

Although the definition of the term funds of knowledge introduced by Luis Moll and colleagues (Moll et al. 1992) has evolved over time, currently funds of knowledge in education refer to ways to acknowledge and use the "existing resources, competences, and knowledge" of a particular cultural community in educational settings to promote learning and strengthen connections between students and schools (Anderson et al., 2017, 21). Recently, Alfaro & Bartolomé (2023) explicitly argued that language variations are important expressions of

families' and communities' funds of knowledge. Therefore, deliberately tapping and incorporating families' culture and language into program actions and practices is a one way to effectively incorporate the funds of knowledge of the families and communities.

Freire & Valdez (2017) in their study of 8 elementary teachers working with emergent bilinguals suggested that lack of knowledge about their students was one of the explanations of teachers' failure to practice culturally relevant pedagogy. In particular, the lack of familiarity with the communities and families where students came from made it difficult for educators to utilize materials that represented the lived experiences and the understandings that these students brought to the classroom. In a recent study exploring the intersection of the constructs of funds of knowledge and funds of identity, D'warte and Woodrow (2022) affirm that intentionality in their application to the curriculum and pedagogy of early childhood programs may enable a "move towards curriculum and pedagogy that recognizes and acknowledges the complexity of teaching, learning and assessment in our globally diverse settings" promoted by a recognition of "what children and families bring to the classroom, and building on their strengths rather than starting with what they might lack" (D'warte & Woodrow, 2022, 1). The findings will include a discussion that illustrates ways in which families and caregivers speak to the inclusion of funds of knowledge and identity into various aspects of the program.

Methods

Context

The Tiny Seeds Early Childhood Center where this research took place is located in the city of Chicago. The center has always been

located within the working class neighborhood that, in 1836, housed Irish immigrants working on the Illinois and Michigan Canal.

The preschool serves children ages three to five years old. The demographics of the children and families served by the center in the 2022-23 academic year attest to the ethnic and racial heterogeneity of the neighborhood as 70% identified as Hispanic or Latine; 13% as White; 12% Asian or Pacific Islander; and 5% as two or more races. In addition, half of the students classify as low-income and 50% of the children had an IEP.

The Tiny Seeds program has been operating in the same working class neighborhood for close to five decades. In the 1980s, it was a K-6 school where novice teachers could be mentored and supported by more experienced educators. In the early 1990s, Tiny Seeds transformed into a Child-Parent Center, serving primarily neighborhood children between three and five, a focus that it maintains until today. The program affiliated to a large urban public school district in 2005. Through its close to five decades of existence, Tiny Seeds faced imminent closing on more than one occasion and in every instance survived due primarily to parental activism implemented in alliance with school administrators, teachers and staff.

The central role families have played throughout the history of the center is exemplified by a quote from a senior administrator, who has been at the center for 28 years: *"So, we owe this center to parents, and it's always been my belief that their role in the school is absolutely essential."*

Data Collection

Data collection for Phase 1 of the study took place across four months in the Spring of

2023. All teachers, administrators and families/caregivers were invited to be part of the study. The authors attended a staff meeting at Tiny Seeds to invite teachers and administrators to participate. A follow-up email was then sent to teachers and administrators. Families and caregivers were invited through an announcement on the parent board outside the school, followed by conversations with families during the after-school program pick-up time. These efforts recruited three teachers, four school administrators or individuals in leadership roles, and twenty-four caregiver interviews. Six caregivers were interviewed individually. The rest participated in one of four focus groups held in Spanish, English, and Mandarin, according to the participants' preference. The questions across the interviews and focus groups were the same and developed using the tenets of Melendez et al. (2021). Caregivers included not only parents, but grandparents and other caregivers. Participating teachers included a lead teacher, an assistant teacher, and a special education classroom assistant.

Data Analysis

All interviews were fully transcribed, which resulted in approximately 100 pages of transcriptions. They were then uploaded to the data analysis software, Dedoose, where all three members of the research team conducted qualitative analytic coding. This was a two-phase process which began with open-coding and then focused coding was employed (Emerson et al., 1995). Initial codes included 'cultural connections,' 'familiarity/trust,' 'program components,' 'parent involvement,' and 'supporting bilingualism.' Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, and Chinese. As all three of us are Spanish-English bilingual, we coded the original transcripts from English and

Spanish interviews, and coded Chinese transcripts that had been translated to English.

Findings

We present the findings focusing on the first three principles of Melendez et al. (2021): 1) Creating and sustaining a climate that embraces bilingualism as an asset, not only for individual children and families, but also for all children and larger society; 2) Developing strong partnerships with linguistically diverse families that center explicitly on emergent bilingualism; and 3) Integration of families' cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge into every aspect of the program, including its curricula. The other two principles: 4) Adopt and implement practices that align with the language development goals adopted by programs in partnership with families and 5) Offer ongoing professional development efforts to support practitioners' understanding of early bilingual and multilingual language development, and the application of this knowledge, in order to support programs' language allocation practices are explored in Phase Two of the ongoing research that centers on the program. The quotes from family and caregivers are presented in both English and Spanish, in keeping with the school's ideology of dual language, translanguaging, and pushing back against linguistic hegemony in ECE.

Principle 1: Creating and sustaining a climate that embraces bilingualism as an asset, not only for individual children and families, but also for all children and larger society

In speaking about the creation and maintenance of a climate that embraces bilingualism as an asset, many families referred to this as a strength of Tiny Seeds Early Childhood Center. Some families shared that

one of the main reasons for enrolling in the program was the program's support of bilingualism, its emphasis on multiculturalism, and the strong intersection between dual language and Reggio Emilio. Family members/caregivers indicated that the sense of diversity, global citizenship, and windows and mirrors (as described by Bishop, 1990) into their own identities/cultures/communities and other identities/cultures/communities was a significant aspect of their happiness with the education their children received at the center. This mother's comment illustrates a common sentiment among participants:

"...having kids speak different languages, I think that makes [me] feel that's something that maybe I lacked in my education. which was thinking that it's normal to be different. It's like it's okay, to be different, to look different, to speak different...And you know I just I really compare my daughter's education to my own education....It's just a very different philosophy here." –Mother.

Many families shared similar sentiments. Caregivers who grew up with another language shared their own experiences and struggles with multilingualism. They also spoke about their satisfaction that their child received the opportunity to be multilingual, and in general believed the center provided a better education than they had access to because of the value of their multilingualism.

"Everything in this school is different than I was used to ...it makes me wonder if I had this kind of experience, what kind of person would I be?" –Mother

The caregivers' appreciation for Tiny Seed's support for multilingualism aligns with studies like Surrain's (2018), which found that families agreed being bilingual was an advantage that

enhanced family connections and economic opportunity.

We interpret these participants' experiences as reflective of a collective disruption of the culture of power (Delpit, 1988) that privileges monolingual, monomodal spoken "standardized" English as superior (Cioè-Peña, 2022). In contrast, this program provided their children with the opportunity to speak to various members of their families since some might be monolingual in the non-English language. The following caregiver quote illustrates how this was expressed by families:

"[...]Jestá muy bien el programa exactamente porque les ha ayudado a comunicarse en dos idiomas."

One grandfather shared, describing what he considered Tiny Seeds to do well,

I think it's successful in the fact that it lets kids express themselves. I only can compare to how I went to grade school, it was book learning mostly. You didn't get to express yourself. [...] the school [lets] them express themselves [...] even to dream.

And even if their answers come out... patchwork. ...as you grow, you know all those pieces come together. [...] Playing and learning go together. You create....And...that helps your brain grow like a tree and its roots.

This grandfather recognized the center's approach to teaching children in a way that honors their full selves. And when he referenced answers coming out 'patchwork,' he spoke to what Kaiser (2024) and Wei (2011) refer to as the multimodality of translanguaging; children were provided the space to utilize their full meaning-making toolkit in order to expand their minds, engage with the world, and become their fullest selves. The concept of multicompetence

was embodied by the center, according to this grandfather; not only was the center affirming the use and identity/ies of named languages like Spanish and English, but of the ways playing, learning, and creating are forms of legitimate languaging and expression that the center honors for both children and their families.

Principle 2: Developing strong partnerships with linguistically diverse families that center explicitly on emergent bilingualism

Parents and caregivers expressed their views on how strong partnerships were developed between program staff and the children's families. Overall, the data sustains families' recognition of administrators, teachers, and staff as strong partners. Participants also spoke of a sense of familiarity and trust with Tiny Seeds, paired with a strong commitment to the program and pride in the growth they saw in their children. Many caregivers indicated they felt that the school community was an extension of their own families. Others shared that the center staff felt like a part of a team there to support not only their child, but also them as a family unit. A mother spoke of this partnership by saying, *"They make sure to notify me. They try to work with me like, OK try this at home. Let's work together and that's what I do."*

Caregivers also shared they felt everyone, from administrators to support personnel, took time to get to know their child and family. One father shared, *"I feel so comfortable. I love all the teachers... there is not one person in this building that doesn't know my daughter."* Another mother said *"I love it. I love coming here."* The fact that families and caregivers reported feeling comfortable, welcomed and seen at the school bolstered the home-school relationship. Families felt they could come to the

center staff for support and that their child's needs were recognized and addressed.

Families also expressed a strong commitment to the school, partly grounded in the fact that some of their older offspring had also attended Tiny Seeds. The frequent word-of-mouth promotion of the program, mentioned by several caregivers, also speaks to connections outside the program that enable families to hear about Tiny Seeds from others in their social network. One caregiver, acknowledging the value of this kind of referrals, talked about the length they traveled to get to the school, recognizing that it was out of her way, but worth it. This mother was driving over forty five minutes each morning to drop off her child at Tiny Seeds. She shared, *"Me ha sido pesado. Pero te digo, lo hago porque la escuela vale la pena."*

Families identified the school as a place that values children's bilingualism. A number of families also opined that although the school was officially subsumed under the monolingual English ideology that governs US schooling (Kroll & Mendoza, 2022), it is challenging this language supremacy through the intentionality of their programs for multilingual students, including the dual language program and its embrace of the multiple cultural identities of the children and families who are a part of Tiny Seeds.

The following quote exemplifies how one mother perceives the center is challenging institutionalized barriers and biases behind monolingual hegemonies:

¿Pero sí que se supone vinimos a América y debemos hablar inglés, claro, no? Por ejemplo, en el salón de Moisés cantan el buenos días [en] inglés, [...] español, y [...] en Mandarin, y en portugues tambien. Es muy.... A mí se me hace súper padre, verdad?

One teacher noted that the school is strengthened by family partnerships. Families and educators at Tiny Seeds share a commitment to each child's right to their own identity and language and to deliberately integrating children, family, and community members as linguistic models and resources into classroom practices (Bloch, 2013). Our analysis of interviews and focus groups with families and educators show that developing strong relationships with families is highly valued by program staff, as well as by families and caregivers. More importantly, our analysis of the transcriptions of these interviews and focus groups indicate that this is a principle that intentionally drives many of the program practices.

Principle 3: Integration of families' cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge into every aspect of the program, including its curricula.

Throughout the interviews, there were various examples of how families' cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge were integrated into the program and curricula. There were clear connections between the school, program, and household. Many families spoke to how their children came home and shared what they were learning or how they had noticed changes in their children, given everything they were learning at the school. A mother of a child with a disability shared, *"Me doy cuenta lo que le están enseñando, porque él llega a casa y quiere a su manera contarme lo que está haciendo."*

During the interviews with families and caregivers, there were tears shed as individuals reflected on their own experiences and how different and beneficial the experiences of their children were. Their child's education at Tiny Seeds Early Childhood Center impacted caregivers' own sense of identity development

and reflexivity. As one mother who described herself as 1.5 generation (a first-generation immigrants who immigrated to the new country before or during their early teens) shared how she connected to her own identity through her child's education at [school]:

What does it mean to be Mexican? What does it mean to be bilingual? You know the language is one aspect. But culturally what? What does it mean to be Mexican? And how do I define that. And the fact that there is no one definition. If you feel Mexican, you're Mexican, right?

This quote demonstrates how this mother realized through her child's participation in the program that no one else can dictate your own identity, but that it's a process of (re)claiming how you feel and who you are. The curriculum and teacher practices implemented were inclusion of a funds of knowledge approach (Moll et al., 1992) that not only influences the children's sense of self, but those of the families as many saw their cultural and linguistic practices centered for one of the first times.

The caregivers indicated that the curriculum at the school impacted their own understandings of identity, and there was also evidence that this was a bidirectional relationship, with families' identities, values, and strengths influencing the school in turn. A teacher shared strategies the school staff had been implementing to make sure they included all families, which included using interpreters or translators and sending all family invitations and letters in all the languages families use. She said, *"We value all the families' cultures."*

This quote demonstrates how families' languages and identities are incorporated into logistical components like school documents and larger access concerns, like translations and interpretations at meetings. While this is not a

direct curricular collaboration, this is a crucial component of linguistic integration of families into the overall mechanics of the school. The center is integrating a culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) by intentionally and purposefully incorporating children's culture and linguistic backgrounds in order to increase family engagement.

Tiny Seeds administrators provided consensus regarding the importance of acknowledging, incorporating and sustaining the language and culture of the children and families. All administrators spoke to how their practices at the school were grounded in their understanding of the research and literature on this subject and their own professional and personal experiences. Administrators described their journey to embracing multilingualism at the school as a dynamically evolving and expanding process driven by collaborative decision making regarding the program's philosophy and practices on multilingualism. This involved strong communication among all stakeholders (administrators, teachers, staff, families); and by approaching conflict, confusion, or dissent as an opportunity for growth.

The intersection of emergent bilingualism and inclusive education was a theme that signaled a focus on holistic growth. Tiny Seeds as a program challenges the notion that disability and language are separate from cultural considerations in curriculum. The mother of a child in the dual language program who has an Individualized Education Program shared,

"...a mi me recomendaron mucho desde que ella empezó. Pues que miren, [...] la importancia del programa dual, para mi es que ella tenga una oportunidad de crecer con dos idiomas [...]."

Parents and caregivers of children with disabilities shared their perspectives on their

children's learning growth through both the dual language and Reggio-inspired structure of the center. They indicated appreciation for the supportive environment for children with IEPs and their learning needs, particularly citing the extensive Spanish language growth that they saw for their children.

In addition, many families spoke about the growth they had noticed in their child throughout their time at Tiny Seeds. It was not just about academics, but many caregivers spoke about the social and emotional growth in each of their children. One mother shared, *"Si la ha hecho más independiente,"* when speaking about her child. Many families were impressed with the level of growth their child had been able to attain in such a short time. This growth has been impressive for caregivers but also led to some concerns knowing that for kindergarten their child will have to go to a vastly different school—most likely a school without dual language instruction and definitely no Reggio Emilia. Tiny Seeds' attention to intersections like disability and language, as well as their focus on the whole child, challenges policies and practices that move us away from holistic early learning.

Discussion

While we presented the principles individually in the findings section, it is important to recognize that these principles interrelate; the principles are addressed across intersecting data points. We aim to demonstrate how all of these principles work together to provide a rich educational experience for multilingual children. Across the different sources of data from administrators, teachers, and caregivers, the identities and cultures of the children and their families were seen as integral to the successful implementation of Tiny Seeds'

early childhood education program. The data highlights the importance of acknowledging and supporting the cultural and linguistic identities the children and families bring to the program. The building of trust and partnership between the program and its personnel and the families emerged as a prominent topic, in alignment with trends in the field (USDHHS & USDOE, 2016; Barnett et al, 2016; National Academy of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017; Office of Head Start, n.d.).

The importance of developing and sustaining trusting and collaborative partnerships among families, teachers, and administrators was frequently illustrated by participants. These examples indicate the ways in which Tiny Seeds diverges from many of the hegemonic constructions about sociocultural identity and language that dominate the early childhood landscape (Housel, 2020; Souto-Manning & Rabiadi-Raol 2018). Similarly, the intentional incorporation of the families' funds of knowledge into the curricula and other aspects of the program solidifies the collaborative nature of the relationship between program and caregivers.

The previously presented data demonstrated how the strength of the Tiny Seeds Early Childhood Center is grounded in the relationships across the families, teachers and administrators. Across these three groups, we consistently heard how they worked together to address needs of the children, while capitalizing on the individual and collective assets of families.

Research has demonstrated the importance of having these strong partnerships with families (Bergroth & Palviainen 2020). The current hegemonic ECE that continues to center white Eurocentric ideologies and practices must be problematized. As demonstrated through this

research, the majority of Latine families at Tiny Seeds disrupted what many might view as "typical" family engagement and relationships. They noted that centering the cultural practices and funds of knowledge of families could benefit children's overall success in schooling. This disruption to hegemony was also demonstrated by families when they reflected on their own educational experiences in comparison to those of their children. Families recognized that they needed to reject the pervasive idea that they needed to give up their home language and focus only on their English development. The growth they were seeing in their children at Tiny Seeds Early Childhood Center demonstrated to families that multilingualism would be of great benefit for their children. We also saw this disruption with families who had children with IEPs, which made up 50 percent of the school population. Families had previously been told how their child with identified disabilities should not be in any sort of bilingual program because it would cause confusion for the child; they were told instead that their child should be placed in a monolingual setting to ensure they received the services they needed. This idea was disrupted by Tiny Seeds Early Childhood Center as they demonstrated how children with IEPs can still receive services and have their needs met without having to give up their home language(s).

One of the ways that Tiny Seeds Early Childhood Center succeeds in challenging authoritarianism in ECE is found in its intersections of the Reggio Emilia approach, multimodal pedagogy, and philosophy of multilingualism. Situated at these intersections, Tiny Seeds disrupts traditional notions of what 'counts' as quality learning in early childhood and turns towards holistic learning that honors and encourages children's interests and identities as integral parts of the learning

process. Building on the Reggio foundation of ‘the hundred languages’ (Vecchi, 2010), Tiny Seeds reconceptualizes language beyond words, towards “a meaning-making process for individuals and groups” (Yu & Reyes, 2023, p. 33).

Early childhood education is often dismissed as being all play and no ‘real’ learning; Tiny Seeds disrupts the binary between play and learning. Through exploration of nature, the learning environment, peer engagement, use of multiple named languages and forms of expression (including, but not limited to body language, sensory engagement, drawing and painting, etc.), Tiny Seeds not only led children to more traditional metrics of academic success, but also nurtured a love of learning, a deep curiosity, and a multi-faceted engagement with themselves and the world around them.

Implications

There are many implications for administrators and educators from the research presented here. The research presented demonstrates the importance of intentionality as a requirement to enact these principles. None of the principles happened without explicit decisions being made by the administrators, educators, and families to work together to prioritize bilingualism, build partnerships that were reciprocal and not unidirectional, and use partnerships to learn together by integrating families’ cultural and linguistic practices into the curricula. The principles presented here can be used by any administrators and educators that serve the needs of multilingual children to meet the needs of both the children and families and provide an experience of belonging.

It is important to acknowledge that the transformative, affirming community of Tiny

Seeds is, unfortunately, in many ways a self-contained bubble. As many caregivers lamented, there is no continuum after children age out of the program, and they wish there were continuations or extensions of the program—including its structure, values, and approach to learning—when children enter the K-5 pipeline. Extensions of this type of programming would encourage the sustaining of multilingualism, as well as community-oriented learning, in older grade levels in the way that it happens here. Unfortunately, part of the challenge with extending and sustaining programs like this one across early childhood and elementary childhood is the undervaluation of early childhood education in K-12 discourses and the lack of understanding of this developmental stage as foundational for bilingualism and biliteracy.

We argue that the principles and practices described by Tiny Seeds’ administrators, teachers, and families represent a defiant and functional challenge to the U.S. language policies, ambivalent at best and oppressive and authoritarian at worst. Participants’ voices describe the validation of the cultures and languages of the children and families attending Tiny Seeds; the program challenges prevalent hegemonies that favor the majority language over other languages used in the home. In addition, the data from our case study of Tiny Seeds indicates that administrators, educators, and families are collaboratively disrupting existing power differentials between the majority culture and language and the cultures and languages present in the program, which are arguably representative of the linguistic and cultural diversity that characterizes the U.S. today.

References

- Alfaro, C., & Bartolomé, L. (2023). Preparing ideologically clear bilingual teachers: Honoring working-class non-standard language use in the bilingual education classroom. In *The Critical Pedagogy Reader* (pp. 496-512). Routledge.
- Anderson, J., Horton, L., Kendrick, M., & McTavish, M. (2017). Children's funds of knowledge in a rural northern Canadian community: A telling case. *Language and Literacy*, 19(2), 20-32.
- Barnett, W. S., Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Gomez, R. E., Horowitz, M., Weisenfeld, G. G., Clarke Baron, D. (2014). America's war on language. *The Web of Language*, 3. Available at <https://blogs.illinois.edu/view/25/116243>
- Bergroth, M., & Palviainen, Å. (2020). The early childhood education and care partnership for bilingualism in minority language schooling: collaboration between bilingual families and pedagogical practitioners. In *21st Century Pre-school Bilingual Education* (pp. 47-65). Routledge.
- Bishop, R. S. (1990, March). Windows and mirrors: Children's books and parallel cultures. In California State University reading conference: 14th annual conference proceedings (pp. 3-12).
- Bloch, M.N. (2013). Reconceptualizing theory/policy/curriculum/pedagogy in early child (care and) education: Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE) 1991-2012, Vol. 11(1).
- Brown, S. (2020). Pushing against hegemonic practices: emergent bilinguals respond to children's literature. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 28(2), 242-255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2020.1735742>
- Brown, A., & Grigg, J. (2017). Critical narrative as a framework for professional border crossing in early childhood. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 18(3), 333-345. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949116668097>
- Cannella, G.S., & Viruru, R. (2004). *Childhood and Postcolonization: Power, Education, and Contemporary Practice* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203463536>
- Cioè-Peña, M. (2022), TrUDL, A Path to Full Inclusion: The Intersectional Possibilities of Translanguaging and Universal Design for Learning. *TESOL J*, 56: 799-812. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3074>
- Delpit, L. D. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Pedagogy and power in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58, 280-298.
- De Houwer, A. (2020). Harmonious bilingualism: Well-being for families in bilingual settings. *Handbook of home*

- language maintenance and development: Social and affective factors, 18, 63.
- DLI Research Alliance. American Councils. (n.d.). <https://www.americancouncils.org/research-assessment/dli-research-alliance>
- D'warte, J., & Woodrow, C. (2022). Engaging methods for exploring 'funds of identity' in early childhood contexts. *Education Sciences*, 13(1), 4.
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (Eds.). (2011). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia experience in transformation*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Emerson, R., Fretz, R., & Shaw, L. (1995). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. University of Chicago Press.
- Espinosa, L. M. (2015). Challenges and benefits of early bilingualism in the US context. *Global Education Review*, 2(1).
- Freire, J. A., & Valdez, V. E. (2017). Dual language teachers' stated barriers to implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 40(1), 55-69.
- Fyfe, B., Lee-Johnson, Y.L., Reyes, J., & Schroeder Yu, G. (Eds.). (2023). *Affirming the Rights of Emergent Bilingual and Multilingual Children and Families: Interweaving Research and Practice through the Reggio Emilia Approach* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003294405>
- Gándara, Patricia & Escamilla, Kathy. (2017). *Bilingual Education in the United States*. 10.1007/978-3-319-02258-1_33.
- García Coll, C., Lambert, G., Jenkins, R., McAdoo, H. P., Crnic, K., Wasik, B. H., & Vázquez García, H. (1996). An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child development*, 67(5), 1891-1914.
- Guo, K. (2015). Teacher knowledge, child interest, and parent expectation: Factors influencing multicultural programs in an early childhood setting. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 40(1), 63-70.
- Housel, D. A. (2020). Supporting the Engagement and Participation of Multicultural, Multilingual Immigrant Families in Public Education in the United States: Some Practical Strategies. *School Community Journal*, 30(2), 185-209.
- Ishimaru, A. M. (2020). *Just schools : building equitable collaborations with families and communities*. Teachers College Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2, 257-277
- Kaiser, D.J. (2023). Multimodal Translanguaging and Assisted

- Intersemiotic Translation in the Reggio Emilia Approach. In Fyfe et al., 2023 (Eds.). *Affirming the Rights of Emergent Bilingual and Multilingual Children and Families: Interweaving Research and Practice through the Reggio Emilia Approach* (1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003294405>
- Kerbo, H. (2011) *Social stratification and inequality*. McGraw-Hill Education.
- Kopeliovich, S. (2013). Happylingual: A family project for enhancing and balancing multilingual development. In M. Schwartz & A. Verschik (eds.), *Successful family language policy: Parents, children and educators in interaction* (pp. 249–275). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Kroll, J. F., & Mendoza, G. A. (2022). Bilingualism: a cognitive and neural view of dual language experience. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology*.
- Martinez, S. L. & Rury, J. L. (2012). From “Culturally Deprived” to “At Risk”: The politics of popular expression and education inequality in the United States, 1969-1985. *Teachers College Record*, 114, 6.
- McNamara, K. (2016, September 8). Dual Language Learners in Head Start: The Promises and Pitfalls of New Reforms. Migration Policy Institute.
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/dual-language-learners-head-start-promises-and-pitfalls-new-reforms>
- Melendez, L. & Syc, S. (2021). Voices from the field: The early education and care of emergent bilingual and multilingual Infants and Toddlers. MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN ExchangePress.com
- Moll, L.C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31, 132–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849209543534>
- Moss, P. (2014). Transformative Change and Real Utopias in Early Childhood Education: A story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality (1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315779904>
- Mueller, L. M., Howard, K., Wilson, E., Gibson, J., & Katsos, N. (2020). Bilingualism in the family and child well-being: A scoping review. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 24(5-6), 1049-1070.
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures. The National Academies Press.
doi.org/10.17226/24677.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2019). Advancing Equity in

- Early Childhood Education: A Position Statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- National Institute for Early Education Research(2015). State of preschool 2015. Retrieved from <https://nieer.org/state-preschool-yearbook-2015>
- Office of Head Start (n.d.). Dual Language Learners Program Assessment. Retrieved from: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/form/dll-program-assessment>
- Pacini-Ketchabaw, V. & McIvor, O. (2005). Negotiating bilingualism in early childhood-A study of immigrant families and early childhood practitioners. In V. Pacini-Ketchabaw and A. Pence (Eds.). *Research Connections Canada: Supporting children and families*, pp. 109-126. Canadian Child Welfare Federation.
- Palmer, D. K. (2009). Middle-class English speakers in a two-way immersion bilingual classroom: "Everybody should be listening to Jonathan right now." *TESOL Quarterly*, 43(2), 177–202.
- Park, M., Zong, J., & Batalova, J. (2018). Growing superdiversity among young US dual language learners and its implications. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.
- Pence, A. and Nsamenang, B. (2008) A case for early childhood development in sub-Saharan Africa. Working Paper No. 51. The Hague, The Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation.
- Pérez, M. S., & Saavedra, C. M. (2017). A call for onto-epistemological diversity in early childhood education and care: Centering global south conceptualizations of childhood/s. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 1-29.
- Quay, S., & Montanari, S. (2016). *Early bilingualism: From differentiation to the impact of family language practices*.
- Rowsell, J., & Collier, D. R. (2017). Researching multimodality in language and education. *Research methods in language and education*, 311-324.
- Rinaldi, C. (2023). Preface. In Fyfe, B., Lee-Johnson, Y.L., Reyes, J.M., & Yu, G.S. (eds.). *Affirming the Rights of Emergent Bilingual and Multilingual Children and Families: Interweaving Research and Practice Through the Reggio Emilia Approach*. Routledge.
- Robinson, K. H., & Jones-Diaz, C. (2006). Diversity and Difference in Early Childhood Education: Issues for Theory and Practice.
- Rodríguez, M. (2015). Families and Educators Supporting Bilingualism in Early Childhood. *School Community Journal*, 25(2), 177-194.
- Simpson, D., Loughran., S., Lumsden., E., Mazzocco., P., McDowall Clarke, R. C., Winterbottom, C. (2018). Talking heresy about 'quality' early childhood education and care for children in poverty. The

- Journal of Poverty and Social Justice, 26 (1), 3-18.
- Souto-Manning, M. (2016). Honoring and building on the rich literacy practices of young bilingual and multilingual learners. *The Reading Teacher*, 70 (3), 263-271.
- Souto-Manning, M., & Rabadi-Raol, A. (2018). (Re)Centering Quality in Early Childhood Education: Toward Intersectional Justice for Minoritized Children. *Review of Research in Education*, 42(1), 203-225. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18759550>
- Spring, J. (2010). Deculturalization and the struggle for equality. A brief history of the education of dominated cultures in the United States. (6th Edition). New York: McGraw Hill Higher Education.
- Surraín, S. (2018). 'Spanish at home, English at school': how perceptions of bilingualism shape family language policies among Spanish-speaking parents of preschoolers. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*.
- Tout, K., Halle, T., Daily, S. Albertson-Junkans, L. & Moodie, S. (2013). The Research Base for a Birth through Age Eight State Policy Framework. Child Trends.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education (2016). Policy Statement On Supporting The Development Of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners In Early Childhood Programs. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED566723.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2017). Policy statement on supporting the development of children who are dual language learners in early childhood programs. Washington, DC:
- Valdez, V. E., Freire, J. A., & Delavan, M. G. (2016). The gentrification of dual language education. *The Urban Review*, 48, 601-627.
- Valenzuela, A. (2010). Subtractive schooling: US-Mexican youth and the politics of caring. State University of New York Press.
- Vecchi, V. (2010). *Art and creativity in Reggio Emilia: Exploring the role and potential of ateliers in early childhood education*. Routledge.
- Walker, A. (2019). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Identity, Presence, and Intentionality: A Brief Review of Literature. *Journal of Research Initiatives*, 4(3).
- Wei, L. (2011). Multilinguality, multimodality, and multicompetence: Code- and modeswitching by minority ethnic children in complementary schools. *Modern Language Journal*, 95(3), 370-384.
- Yoshikawa, H. & Kabay, S. (2015). The Evidence Base on Early Childhood Care and Education in Global Contexts. Education for All Global Monitoring Report. United

Nations Educational, Scientific, and
Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Yu, G. S., & Reyes, J. M. (2023). Breathing new
life: The graphic languages,
translanguaging, and metaphoric
language with young children in
multilingual contexts. In *Affirming the
Rights of Emergent Bilingual and
Multilingual Children and Families* (pp.
33-49). Routledge.

Zheng, Z., Degotardi, S., & Djonov, E. (2021).
Supporting multilingual development in
early childhood education: A scoping
review. *International journal of
educational research*, 110, 101894.