

SYMPOSIUM SUMMARY

Supporting School Readiness in a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Community

April 14, 2007



Investing in School Readiness

This third annual school readiness symposium was made possible through a generous grant from the Freddie Mac Foundation.

Supporting School Readiness in a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Community

Fairfax Futures' 3rd annual symposium brought together 285 early childhood educators from the child care, preschool and Fairfax County Public School communities to learn about the latest research and best practices to support the school readiness of young children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. *Supporting School Readiness in a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Community* was made possible through a generous grant from the Freddie Mac Foundation.

Over 100 languages are spoken within Fairfax County Public Schools, reflecting the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of our county's children and their families. Engaging young dual language learners and their families through early childhood education programs can help support children's dual language development and their readiness for school. Symposium panelists and speakers shared practical strategies that can be used to support the home culture and language and, at the same time, nurture additional skills children need to succeed in school.

MORNING PANEL PRESENTATION

The Role of Culture and Language in Helping Children Learn

Moderator: **Gail Bjorklund**, Fairfax County Office for Children

Panelists: **Robert Stechuk**, Academy for Educational Development
Monimalika Day, George Mason University
Pilar Fort, Zero to Three

Robert Stechuk

Sharing current research and anecdotes from his family's experience, Stechuk encouraged symposium participants to remember:

- No matter what the home language, early exposure to language is crucial for all children. Language-rich environments are critical to nurture children's language development.
- Children need to hear language in order to develop it. They need opportunities to use the language that they have. When they use their language, children see themselves as capable of communicating.
- Children's home language is a fundamental resource because it is connected to the formation of personal identity, the way children think about themselves, and supports their ability to relate to and understand others.
- By the age of three or four, most children have mastered the sound system of their home language. By then, they have acquired vocabularies of hundreds of words.
- It's important to talk to children every day on topics that are meaningful to them.
- Look for ways to extend conversations and introduce new vocabulary. This allows children to process information from the outside as well as develop their ability to communicate and use the language they have inside.



Monimalika Day

Moni Day highlighted four beliefs and practices that are common to early childhood educators who work successfully with culturally diverse families and children. Culturally competent early childhood educators:

- have a strong understanding of their own cultural background and what they bring to the classroom and their interaction with families;
- are good at engaging families and determining the meaning behind their cultural practices;
- explain their own culture as well as the culture of their school or early childhood education programs and;
- negotiate and create a respect or understanding of both cultures.

Pilar Fort

Pilar Fort challenged participants to think about the barriers we may be imposing as educators on young dual language learners:

- In the United States, we often find children who are sent to bilingual schools, yet at the same time, we tell children from immigrant families to speak English only and avoid speaking their home language.
- Children are able to learn two, three or four languages simultaneously.
- In the poorest villages in Africa, it is not uncommon to see children learn their tribal language first, and then their mother's language and the community language. Finally, they learn English, French or Portuguese, depending on the country from which they come.
- The challenge is often the adults who believe that children have a problem.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Cultural Responsiveness and Dual Education (CRADLE) Project

Presenters: **Gwen Henderson Freeman** and **Myrtle Smiley**

Clearview Elementary School

- The purpose of the CRADLE project is to increase understanding of the:
 - ◆ linguistic and cultural qualities of children under the age of three
 - ◆ linguistic and cultural issues and concerns affecting families and expectant parents
 - ◆ approaches for implementing promising practices in dual language acquisition for infants and toddlers.
- Children can learn more than one language in two ways – as simultaneous language learners who learn two or more languages within the first year after birth or as second language learners, who begin to learn another language after three years of age.
- The CRADLE project demonstrates that dual language learning can be supported by:
 - ◆ Linking with children's homes by involving families in the learning environment
 - ◆ Developing strong relationships with children and their families and strengthening knowledge of dual language learning
 - ◆ Involving the community in supporting dual language learners through strong community partnerships.

Cultural Reciprocity: A Process for Developing Collaborative Relationships with Families

Presenter: **Monimalika Day**
George Mason University

- There is a difference between being culturally sensitive and culturally competent.
- Cultural sensitivity is defined as having the knowledge that cultural differences and similarities exist, without assigning positive or negative values to those cultural differences.
- Cultural competence is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals that enables those entities or individuals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.
- In the case of cultural reciprocity, individuals initiate a two-way process of information sharing and understanding that can lead to genuine mutual understanding and cooperation. There are four steps essential to this process:
 - ◆ Identification of cultural values embedded in one's interpretation of a situation or in one's recommendations
 - ◆ Find out whether the family being served recognizes and values these assumptions and, if not, how their views differ
 - ◆ Acknowledge and explicitly respect any cultural differences identified and fully explain the cultural basis of an assumption
 - ◆ Through discussion and collaboration, determine the most effective way of adapting recommendations to the value system of a family.

Dual Language Acquisition in Children Birth through Five

Presenter: **Robert Stechuk**
Academy for Educational Development

- America is engaged in extensive dialogue about children learning more than one language. While bilingual ability is considered an asset in older children and adults, exposure to more than one language for young children is often viewed differently.
- Children are able to communicate and ready to acquire any language beginning at birth.
- Young children are capable of learning different but parallel acquisition of more than one language. New research suggests that bilingual exposure does not produce confusion or delays in young children.
- Exposure to English should not be at the expense of a child's first language.

Supporting English Language Learners

Presenters: **Teddi Predaris** and **Veda Johnson**

Fairfax County Public Schools, Office of ESOL Services

- Among factors that may affect language and learning:
 - ◆ Learning environment
 - ◆ Personality
 - ◆ Culture
 - ◆ Motivation
 - ◆ “Real World” concerns
 - ◆ Teacher Expectations
- When working with young English-language learners, remember that:
 - ◆ Many students who sit silently may not be producing language but will be listening and internalizing the English language structure
 - ◆ Code switching or language mixing is typical as children start to acquire words and language skills in a second language.
 - ◆ Most students acquire Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) in one to three years.
- To enhance learning for young English-language learners:
 - ◆ Model everything
 - ◆ Think and read aloud
 - ◆ Repeat and rephrase
 - ◆ Use visuals, photographs and real objects
 - ◆ Encourage parents to read to their children in their home language and share family stories passed down through generations to promote cultural preservation.

Connecting Families with Community Resources

This panel shared community resources available in Northern Virginia to support children and families of diverse cultures and linguistic backgrounds.

Panelists: Moderator: **Dennis Hunt**, Center for Multicultural Human Services
Rosalia Fajardo, Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC)
Nancy Briggs, Family Services Manager, Family Service and Involvement Section (FSIS), Office of Early Childhood and Family Services, Fairfax County Public Schools.
Janet Hubbell, Regional Human Services Manager, Fairfax County Government.
Ambreen Ahmed, Executive Director and Rahanuma Asmi, Foundation for Appropriate and Immediate Temporary Help (FAITH) Social Services

Panelists noted:

- Challenges immigrant families may face in connecting with the services they need and their uncertainty about where to begin to find assistance.
- County agencies, nonprofit organizations and Fairfax County Public School services can help families access needed resources and support their children’s school readiness. Examples mentioned include:



- ◆ PEATC, which assists families of children with disabilities through education, information and training.
- ◆ FCPS Parent and Community Liaisons, helping to create a link between home and school and to build relationships between school staff and families.
- ◆ Fairfax County's (703) 222-0880 phone number, designed to help families navigate the array of community resources and assistance.
- ◆ FAITH, an organization providing support in cases of domestic violence and also supports orphan children, providing mentors, special programs, clothing and school supplies. FAITH also distributes groceries to Muslim families during Ramadan and provides grief counseling and funding to defray the cost of funeral expenses for the families it serves.

KEYNOTE REMARKS: Eugene Garcia

Early education of English Language Learners: Roots and Wings

Dr. Eugene Garcia, Chair of the National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics and Vice President for Education Partnerships at Arizona State University, is an expert in the area of language teaching and bilingual development. He served as a senior officer and director of the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs in the U.S. Department of Education and is currently conducting research in the areas of effective schooling for linguistically and culturally diverse student populations.

Dr. Garcia emphasized the importance of respecting the cultures and languages that nurture young children and supporting and reinforcing the value of those with children and their families.

To help close the achievement gap, Dr. Garcia encouraged early childhood educators to:

- Ensure that parents are involved and engaged in their children's schools and early childhood education programs.
- Make sure children are respected and are made to feel welcome in the classroom. Encourage their success and let them know that teachers are there to help them achieve their potential.
- Nurture and support a child's home language and culture.
- Accept responsibility for each child's education and work harder to find ways to instruct, understand the child's family, and communicate with parents.

Special thanks to the Freddie Mac Foundation and to Fairfax County's Office for Children for their support of this event.

Fairfax Futures is a nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that our county's youngest children are well prepared to succeed in school and in life. In collaboration with partners across the county, we invest in early childhood education and school readiness by bringing attention and financial resources to sustain our region's future.

For more information about Fairfax Futures or to learn more about membership in the **School Readiness Network**, visit www.fairfax-futures.org





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12011 Government Center Parkway
Suite 920
Fairfax, VA 22035
www.fairfax-futures.org