

# A Head Start/College Partnership

## Using a Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Approach to Help Working Teachers Earn Degrees

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When I started in our Head Start program more than a decade ago, I had a Child Development Associate credential. Only two of us spoke Spanish, so we were family home visitors. None of the teachers spoke Spanish.

Now we have language and literacy plans in our dual language preschool program, and a third of the teachers are bilingual and have college degrees. I have my associate degree and am working on a bachelor's in early childhood education. All of this has changed the way I view my teaching. I now think about my language and literacy plan and the best way to teach each child. Our enrolled families feel more valued too.

—Barbara Guillen, *La Paloma Head Start Center, Mount Vernon, Washington*

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**E**ducation qualification requirements for early childhood teachers are increasing in many types of federal, state, and community-based early childhood programs. The 2007 reauthorization of Head Start requires all teachers to have associate degrees and 50 percent to have earned a baccalaureate degree in early childhood education by the year 2013 (Improving Head Start 2007). Many state-sponsored preschool programs have similar goals, as do programs seeking NAEYC Accreditation (NAEYC 2008, 18).

At the same time that teacher standards are rising, Head Start and other early childhood programs report difficulty in finding and retaining bilingual staff qualified in early childhood education (ECLKC 2010, 3). In Washington State, because the agricultural valley of Skagit County has a significant Latino population, we set out to support early child-

hood teachers in meeting higher educational requirements, including preparation to teach dual language learners.

This goal led to a vision of community collaboration to increase teachers' college graduation and develop course work in which teachers experience an infusion of language and literacy strategies for working with dual language learners, children who are learning in both Spanish and English. In this article we discuss the key strategies in this effort and share a collective reflection by teachers and collaborators.

### Build relationships through collaboration and community

Eight years ago in Skagit County, a community college advisory team of early childhood program representatives and college faculty was formed to identify the supports and barriers for teachers to earn their early childhood associate degrees. We had noticed a worrisome trend of working early childhood staff taking many courses over time but rarely graduating with a degree. "Why?" we thought, and asked ourselves, "What is going on?"

Students told us they appreciated the community college's long-term, positive relationship with local early childhood programs, so we knew this was a strength to build on. We reflected on how consistency, predictability, and commitment to a group of children and families is central to quality early childhood programs (Bredenkamp & Copple 2009). We concluded that a parallel process could make a difference if a cohort of working adults pursuing teaching credentials or degrees were engaged in a learning community relationship with a higher education institution.

The Latino population of Skagit County increased by 52 percent from 1990 to 2006. Today 60 percent of the families in the Mount Vernon Head Start area are Latino, double the national Head Start average (ECLKC 2010). Locally, our early childhood teaching staff more closely represent the cultural and linguistic diversity of the community than do K–12 public school system staff. We recognized the important need to support the advancement of a more diverse group of staff to leadership positions—lead teacher, program manager, and director. Our goal was to grow our own

group of early childhood leaders who would reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the community and to put interested teachers on a career pathway toward higher education degrees. It was crucial that a degree be the outcome, not just a collection of courses, workshops, or conference attendance.

### Overcome barriers to completing degrees

In 2008, nearly four thousand adults attended community colleges in Washington State, with the intent of earning an early childhood education degree. The majority (88 percent) attended part-time while working (Washington State Board 2008, 5). To retain a diverse group of early learning professionals and to attract new ones, we believed we needed to help colleges develop degree programs that consider the working lives and the values, cultures, and communities of adult students.

A frequent barrier to graduation generally seemed to be higher education's institutional attitude toward adult students. This attitude is best captured in the phrase *non-traditional students*, which colleges often use in referring to working adult students. Although the phrase implies that such students are different from the norm and somehow harder to support, their numbers are in fact growing. In both associate and baccalaureate degree early childhood education programs nationally, working adults are the norm, representing more than 75 percent of the enrollment (Washington 2008, 17).

An education pattern for assistant early childhood teachers is to pursue degrees while working in programs for children. In contrast, the usual professional development model for K–12 teachers separates preservice and in-service teacher education. This is not typical for teachers or assistant teachers in birth-to-age-5 child care or federal- or state-funded preschool programs.

Local early childhood program representatives to our advisory team identified more than 50 employed teachers wanting to earn associate and baccalaureate degrees in early childhood education. The teachers needed to meet new Head Start preschool teacher preparation standards and to increase their skills in working with dual language learners in infant, toddler, and preschool settings.

Committed college advisors, faculty mentors, and work colleagues and supervisors who understand the community and cultural contexts and support individual early childhood teachers in reaching their educational goals are essential in helping working adults continue their education. In Skagit County, Skagit Valley College has an 80-year history of working with the community. It became a key partner with the local Head Start and other early care and education programs.

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## Steps Early Childhood Programs Can Take to Support Their Teachers' Success in College

- 1. Identify local accredited degree-offering educational institutions and key persons.** Do the institutions and faculty have a history of working successfully with diverse groups of employed early childhood teachers? Do the institutions have relationships with early childhood education programs and strive to meet NAEYC standards for programs preparing early childhood professionals (NAEYC 2009)? Do the institutions welcome bilingual/bicultural adults and know the community context? When they review college transcripts and work, do they give equivalency credit for courses taken in other institutions inside and outside the United States?
- 2. Discuss the educational goals of your staff with local higher education institutions.** Can the institutions work with you to establish a teacher cohort program for those working toward a CDA credential or associate and baccalaureate degrees in early childhood education? (Link with other early childhood programs, as needed, to encourage institutions to offer the courses teachers need.)
- 3. Determine whether faculty have expertise in first and second language acquisition.** Do the faculty understand the diversity of early learning program settings and the approaches to dual language acquisition? Can they support working teachers in seeing themselves as culturally responsive teacher-researchers who understand the role of culture and language in people's lives? Can they help teachers create or build on curricula based on the lived experiences, interests, cultural and linguistic histories, and interactions of the children and families in their programs? Do faculty model dedication, professionalism, and passion for the field of early childhood education and infuse their courses with information on current research and teaching trends?
- 4. Ask about study options, times, and locations.** Evening, e-learning, summer intensive, weekend, or other courses offered on staff planning days can be effective options for working teachers. Are the institutions able and willing to offer classes at times and locations that fit the lives of working adults?
- 5. Emphasize that academic advisors are key.** Do the institutions have designated program coordinators and advisors who support adult students in all areas, including financial aid, registration, program advising, tutoring, and more? Do advisors take a strong interest in each student, make themselves available to problem solve issues quickly, and welcome back teachers who need to take time off due to family issues?
- 6. Make sure the early childhood education courses integrate related skills.** Do the early childhood education courses weave in technology, writing, and math developmental skills? Must students remain in precollege courses for years? Do the institutions offer developmental courses that link to college-level academic courses (for example, students take both English and the Introduction to Early Childhood together with two instructors)? How do the programs identify student needs and support students in gaining the academic skills necessary to succeed?

## Maintain cultural relevancy and respect for active teaching adults

The focus of our partnership was on creating a teacher preparation program that would convey caring, commitment, and high expectations (Gay 2000). Teaching adults, like teaching children, requires respect and appreciation of the experiences, languages, and cultures of the community of learners. We infused these ideas into the college curriculum. By hiring bilingual faculty, the teaching could draw on the adult students' life experiences as central topics for class discussions, as well as those of the children and families with whom they worked.

The Child Development Associate (CDA) credential provides a bridge to college. With 12 credits of course work in both Spanish and English, the CDA is articulated with required and elective course work in the early childhood associate degree program at Skagit Valley College. The additional support that employed teachers received in writing and mathematics came from an integrated basic skills program at the community college. As a result, CDA recipients scoring below college level in English skills now had the support of a college English or ESL (English as a second language) instructor.

The next change was adding a yearlong, evening series of courses, Spanish for Spanish Speakers, to replace the college's traditional foreign language course format. The Spanish Speakers courses further enhanced all teacher enrollees' abilities to communicate with Spanish-speaking children and families and gave them the confidence to facilitate a dual language preschool literacy curriculum. Skagit Valley College faculty taught intensive summer courses in both Spanish and English on the developmental sequence of children's second language acquisition.

By September 2004, the college had hired a program consultant (coauthor Sharon Cronin) through a Head Start Higher Education Grant for Hispanic Service Partnerships. Based on the consultant's experience from previous college partnerships, we linked the development of a specific early childhood program dual language plan to the community college's intensive summer course, Language and Literature. Adult students who enrolled the first summer would later become the practi-

cum site model teachers. This allowed other students to gain experience in dual language (Spanish/English) toddler and preschool Head Start program settings.

The community college faculty included a former Head Start program manager. She facilitated the enrolled teachers' cross-cultural communication and collaboration, using an innovative, dual language college course format for adult students that is frequently used in first-year early childhood education classes (Cronin 2008). A faculty team of two instructors (one speaking Spanish and one speaking English), along with translation equipment, helped to ensure everyone's understanding at all times. Our cohort of teachers later cited this technique specifically as informing their teaching practice and increasing their sensitivity in working with bilingual families and children.

### Reflections—Ours and the teachers'

The adult early childhood education students in our teacher preparation programs averaged 36 years in age. Approximately half of the Head Start staff enrolled in the degree-seeking program identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino; the other half, European American or Native American. The employed teachers were from Northwest Washington State and Head Start programs run by the Washington State Migrant Council, Skagit-Islands Head Start, and the Samish Indian Nation. All enrolling students had a strong interest in supporting the linguistic and cultural diversity of the enrolled children and families in their community programs.

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**“Do I feel comfortable here? Will my experience be respected?”** When the new adult students met coordinators and faculty at the Skagit Valley College early childhood program, they expressed feelings of anxiety about entering college for the first time or after an absence of many years. They worried that faculty might not recognize the amount of experience and knowledge they had about children and the community. The advisory group summarized this collection of concerns as one of adults needing validation and respect for valuable life experiences.

**“Make my courses relevant to my work with children.”** Beyond the need to feel comfortable and to have their experience acknowledged and respected in the college setting, the employed teachers clearly articulated the need to have their work-based problems addressed in their college classes. Paulo Freire's notions of the importance of problem-posing and problem-solving education to produce critical thinkers became an important part of our program framework (Freire 1998).

**“Understand my family and work commitments.”** We found it essential to learn the times and locations that were best for most students before scheduling courses. The challenge was recognizing that no single approach would fit everyone's family and work commitments. The compromise we chose was to offer a combination of evening, computer-based distance learning, and weekend and summer intensive courses.

Most working teachers could successfully take two courses per quarter, enabling them to complete a two-year associate degree in three to four years. Teachers' increasing comfort with online learning through the use of an online course support site for most face-to-face courses allowed them to gradually develop computer skills. Successful



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