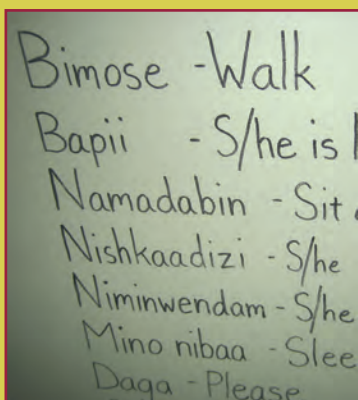## PRINCIPLE 6:

Effective programs for children who speak languages other than English require continued development of the first language while the acquisition of English is facilitated.

Highlights from the Original *Multicultural Principles* (1991)

- Language acquisition is a natural process based on discovering meanings.

- Use of children's first language facilitates learning in the preschool years.

- Research indicates that developing and maintaining a child's first language support and facilitate learning of the second language. This is best accomplished without translation and with the recognition of the child's need to develop understanding before speaking.

Research Review

Since the publication of the *Multicultural Principles* in 1991, research on dual-language development (i.e., children acquiring more than one language) has consistently supported this Principle. First, research has demonstrated that dual-language development does not interfere with the acquisition of typical developmental milestones. Second, research has identified key aspects of environments that support language acquisition. Third, the connections between language and the acquisition of conceptual skills is a compelling reason for the continued development of children's home language. Finally, recent research has indicated that ongoing use of the first language facilitates the acquisition of English. Summaries of these research findings are presented below. Programs are encouraged to access *Dual Language Learning: What Does It Take?*, the Office of Head Start dual language report, via the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center Web site: http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc.

Dual-Language Acquisition: Does It Delay Development?

Dual-language development in young children is characterized by *variability*; simply put, there are various pathways to the acquisition of two languages. Although it is probable

that the majority of children in the world are exposed to more than one language (Bialystok, 2001), dual-language development is often the cause of anxiety in adults. The anxiety may be characterized as a concern that dual-language development is "too much" for young children to handle.

On the basis of this concern, several studies have collected and analyzed data on dual-language development in very young children. Oller, Eilers, Urbano, and Cobo-Lewis (1997) examined groups of monolingual and dual-language (Spanish, English) infants to examine when the children began to babble and how much babbling they did. The researchers found no significant differences between the two groups.

Petito and colleagues (2001) examined groups of monolingual and dual-language children (French, English, sign language) and compared their acquisition of the following language milestones: first spoken (or signed) words, two-word utterances, and a 50-word vocabulary. Prior research on monolingual children has established these milestones as important points in the developmental process. Petito and colleagues found no significant differences in the ages at which dual-language children acquired the language milestones in comparison to monolingual children.

Other researchers have examined dual-language development in preschool-age children (Rodríguez, Díaz, Duran, & Espinosa 1995; Winsler, Díaz, Espinosa, & Rodríguez 1999). In these studies, low-income, Spanish-speaking children attending bilingual

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Definitions

Dual-Language Learners (DLL): Children learning two (or more) languages at the same time, as well as those learning a second language while continuing to develop their first (or home) language (ACF 2008).

L1: Refers to a child's first language, also referred to as home or primary language.

L2: Refers to a child's second language.

Second-Language Learners/Sequential Bilingual Development: Children who begin to learn an additional language after three years of age (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago 2004, 4).

Simultaneous Bilingual Development: Children who learn two or more languages from birth or who start within one year of being born (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago 2004, 4).

preschool programs were compared with similar children who remained at home. The classrooms used in the study were "truly bilingual in the sense that approximately equal proportions of time were spent by teachers speaking Spanish and English" (Winsler et al. 1999, 360).

Children enrolled in the bilingual preschool programs showed significant gains in both Spanish and English vocabulary acquisition. Instead of experiencing a decline in their first language, children who attended the bilingual preschools demonstrated continued growth of first-language skills. In addition, these children advanced their development of specific skills in Spanish, such as using increased numbers of words to tell a story. The authors attributed the children's progress in both languages to the high quality of the programs children attended. Although the research base on this issue is not extensive, the available evidence shows consistent results: children are able to acquire more than one language, given the opportunity to receive consistent exposure in both languages.

Home Language and Conceptual Skills

Language development involves more than learning to speak. As children acquire their home language, they also build up their conceptual knowledge. From birth to five years of age, young children develop a wide range of important conceptual skills, including the following:

1. **Categorization**: Children are able to identify apples, bananas, and oranges as examples of fruits or are able to recognize the differences between children and adults.

2. **Classification**: Children are able to distinguish between big and small items or are able to group items by two or more attributes (e.g., "This bowl is red and plastic. That bowl is green and made of glass.").

3. **Narration**: Children are able to describe previous experiences as a coherent (i.e., logical, readily understood) story or to recall in detail the contents of a favorite book.

4. **Cause and effect**: Children are able to identify germs as the source of illness or are able to understand that sunlight can cause sunburn.

5. **Logical reasoning**: Children are able to link two ideas in a logical order (e.g., "We have to clean up because it's almost time to get on the bus.") or are able to distinguish between real and pretend activities.

6. **Number operations**: Children are able to count the items in a group or are able to add small quantities together to obtain the correct sum.

7. **Spatial relationships**: Children are able to indicate objects that are above, below, or beside another object or are able to indicate, for example, that an object is to the left of another object.

In many concrete and important ways, children develop a wide range of important conceptual abilities as they acquire and develop their first language. These skills are essential for reading and school success, and the skills have the potential to transfer from one language to another. To support children's readiness for school, Head Start programs should maximize children's uninterrupted conceptual development during the preschool period by supporting home language learning as well as English.

The Home Language Foundation

Strong and continued support for the development of the home language is key for successful second-language acquisition. As Collier (1995) explained:

> The key to understanding the role of first language in . . . second language is to understand the function of uninterrupted cognitive development . . . when parents and children speak the language that they know best, they are working at their actual level of cognitive maturity. (p. 6–7)

That is, parents should be encouraged to use the language they know best when speaking with their children. As children continue to develop their knowledge in the first language, this same knowledge and learned concepts can readily be transferred to a second language once the child has developed vocabulary and grammatical abilities in that second language.

Recent support for this position was provided by the results of a study by Miller and colleagues (2006). In their study of 1,500 Spanish–English bilingual children enrolled in kindergarten through third grade, the authors examined how oral language proficiency in either Spanish or English was related to children's reading abilities in both languages. The authors reported that children's oral language proficiency in English predicted their reading scores in both English and Spanish. Likewise, children's oral language proficiency in Spanish predicted their reading scores in both languages. The evidence indicates that increased proficiency in one language supports reading ability in a second language.

Although the results come from only one study, these findings do not support the operation of English-only environments for children who speak languages other than English. In fact, the findings suggest that the continued development of the child's home language—with an explicit emphasis upon the development of strong oral language skills—is a direct source of support for the child's acquisition of English, and particularly for successful reading in English later on.

Key Implications

Figure 4 presents an imperfect but perhaps useful visual display of sequential dual-language development. The figure indicates that a child has begun to acquire one language from birth (indicated in yellow) and then begins to acquire a second language as a 4-year-old (indicated in red).

As you view the figure, keep in mind the range of conceptual skills that children acquire and develop in their home language (yellow) or L1. (These skills are listed on pages 47-48.) Now consider the extent of the children's development of their second language, (red) or L2.

Figure 4 demonstrates children making steady progress in their second language (red), L2. However, their acquisition of L2 vocabulary takes time. When we consider the range of conceptual skills formed in their language (L1), and then regard the extent of second-language development, it is difficult to imagine how children could continue to develop their conceptual knowledge if access to their first language were substantially reduced or cut off entirely.

Figure 4. **Visualizing Sequential Dual-Language Acquisition**.
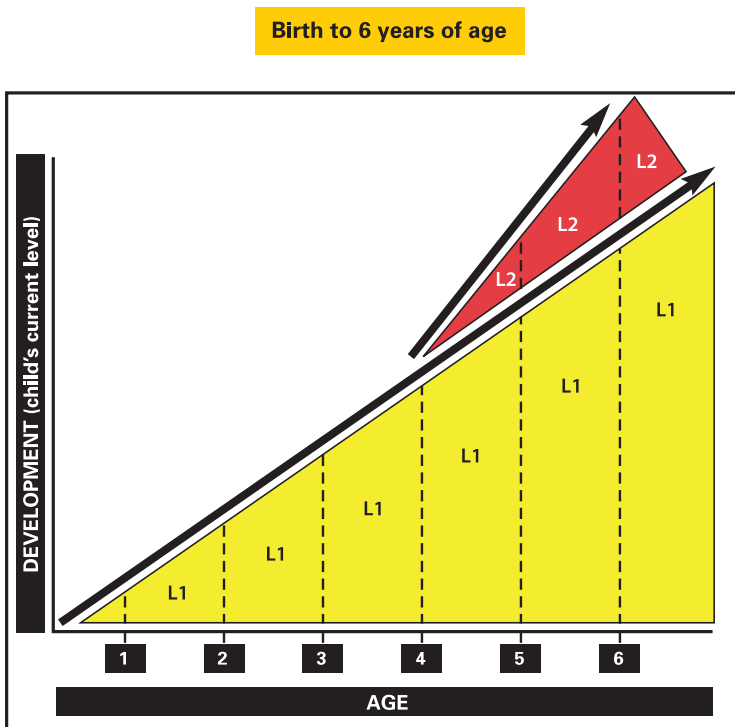
Simply put, during the first few years of sequential dual-language development, children do not have the level of L2 vocabulary and other language skills (i.e., grammar) to be able to use or to develop their conceptual skills. There is just not enough linguistic "raw material" to do the job.

Therefore, Principle 6 is consistent with the research on language acquisition and with the research on the development of conceptual skills. Programs should seek to support the continued development of children's home language by hiring teachers or obtaining volunteers to the extent possible. However, it is clear that not all programs are able to hire staff fluent in all of the different languages that the children and families speak. Therefore, it is vital that programs form partnerships with parents and other community members who are encouraged to provide such assistance. Program staff can help families tap into their strengths and interests (e.g., storytelling, quilting, gardening, games, physical activities) and communicate with them how these can contribute and be brought into the classroom as learning opportunities.

By maintaining the development of children's home language, we concurrently support the advancement of many conceptual skills that are necessary for later academic success. This increased improvement and continued learning in the home language can be accomplished while introducing and supporting children's development of English.

VOICES FROM THE HEAD START COMMUNITY

A program in Washington state recognized how difficult it was to support children who speak languages other than English when, within their Head Start program, there were 20–30 languages spoken in any given year. The program covers a wide geographic area; some centers may have only Spanish and English speakers, whereas others may have 5–7 languages spoken in one classroom.

With the oversight of the bilingual services manager, the program created a bilingual assistant program. Hired at the beginning of the program year, part-time bilingual assistants are community members, parents of formerly enrolled children, and others who understand and speak sufficient English and one of the desired home languages. The bilingual assistants (who are not part of the teacher–child ratio requirement) are assigned to a classroom when there is a minimum of four children in the classroom who speak the same second language. (Classrooms with fewer than four children who speak a second language are not assigned a bilingual assistant. In these classrooms, however, trained volunteers who speak the language of the children serve as language models and work individually with the children.)

The program provides training to the bilingual assistants, who work with teachers to help children learn expectations, transitions, and routines. They are trained how to provide individual language support in order to meet children wherever they are in their process of language acquisition. Classrooms teachers are required to complete an online training module on how to work with the bilingual assistants effectively and on the importance of home language retention and second-language acquisition. The bilingual services manager together with individual teachers decide how long the bilingual assistant remains in the classroom. The bilingual assistants are an integral part of the program's philosophy of supporting and utilizing a child's first language while promoting English language acquisition.

Reflective Questions/Activities

1. Review the list of cognitive skills that children develop as they acquire their home language (see the "Home Language and Conceptual Skills" section, p. 47). Do observations of the classrooms in your program demonstrate that teachers plan learning experiences to support children's acquisition of these skills?

2. To what extent is the program able to hire staff who speak the home languages of the children enrolled in the program?

3. When it is not possible to hire staff who speak the home languages of families, what has your program done to increase families' access to the full range of Head Start services and to communicate the importance of family support for the home language(s)?

4. Does your program have written policies on the use of home language and English throughout your program's systems and services? If not, what information is needed to begin? If yes, how are these policies shared with staff and parents?

5. What policies and practices are in place within your program to support parents' understanding of first- and second-language development?