Introduction

California's early childhood workforce needs training to support the state’s large and growing population of Dual Language Learners.

Sixty percent of children age 5 and under in California are Dual Language Learners (DLLs). The future success of our state depends on how well we support these children as they progress through school, yet most early educators in California have not received the specialized training they need to ensure that California’s large population of DLLs succeeds in school. When young children who are learning two languages do not receive the instructional support they need to participate fully in an early childhood classroom, they miss out on early learning experiences that are critical to their long-term success. In California today, too many DLLs are falling behind in school and losing their home languages.

With proper training in instructional approaches to support DLLs, early childhood educators can make sure that these students are able to participate fully in their classrooms, develop their home languages in addition to English, and see their home languages and cultures as something to take pride in and value.

In 2018, California allocated $5 million for professional development for teachers of DLLs. The state has since signaled its continued support for this work by calling for greater attention to DLLs in the 2020 Master Plan for Early Learning and Care. This brief describes one successful model funded by the state in 2018: the Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) model, which helped train early childhood educators and school leaders to support DLLs as well as strengthened regional capacity to better serve DLLs.

Given the critical nature of these investments for the future of California and the need to build on them to grow an effective early childhood workforce, this brief highlights how SEAL’s work in these communities has made a difference in preparing early childhood educators to meet the needs of DLLs. We also find that there are key structural barriers that need to be addressed for future investments to be successful.

The state needs to continue doing this in preschools. All caregivers need this kind of knowledge: very valuable, high-quality professional development geared towards our Dual Language Learners.

— EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR, WOODLAND
Background
As policy shifts to support bilingualism, California invests in training early childhood educators to support DLLs more effectively

California’s investments in training teachers of DLLs are part of a series of new policies that place value on bilingualism and multiculturalism, a major shift for the state after 20 years of English-only education. In 2014, the State Board of Education adopted the English Language Arts/English Language Development Framework. Voters passed Proposition 58 in 2016, repealing the state’s English-only education law. The state adopted the English Learner Roadmap the following year. These new policies emphasized increasing intellectual rigor, supporting instruction in home languages, and ensuring meaningful access to the entire curriculum for all students.

Despite these policy shifts, the process of preparing and certifying the early childhood workforce in California still pays little attention to how to support DLLs. Research shows that simultaneous development of English and the home language is more effective than an English-only approach for DLLs and that affirmation of culture and home language is an important component of early education. However, most early childhood educators in California do not have access to training on supportive instructional approaches for DLLs.

In 2018, the California Department of Education’s Early Learning and Care Division awarded a Dual Language Learner Professional Development Grant to five providers of professional learning to begin to rectify this problem. The purpose of this grant program was to offer high-quality professional development for early childhood educators to increase their knowledge about DLLs and their use of effective instructional practices for DLLs.

SEAL was one of the five organizations to receive funding under these new investments. The SEAL model’s intense professional development supports teachers over time in building children’s language skills through exposure to a culturally responsive,
hands-on curriculum based on the California Preschool Learning Foundations. Rather than perceiving preschool as a means for preparing children for K-12 education, the SEAL PreK-3 Model views preschool as an articulated, language-rich, and joyful schooling experience that fosters a successful transition to kindergarten and a love of learning.

SEAL provided two types of professional development experiences under this grant to extend both reach and potential impact within a given community: a Deep Dive professional development series and the Learning Community Networks (LCNs). Both experiences were designed to teach language-intentional strategies through thematic instruction to support DLLs’ language development and content learning. All participants received integrated curriculum units that SEAL created and a series of training on the following topics: (a) developing complex oral language, (b) developing analytical language and thought, (c) connecting early literacy to learning about the world, and (d) cultivating joy in learning. Teachers in the Deep Dive series were given more time to meet, to practice what they had learned, and to work directly with SEAL trainers. The LCNs were designed to build internal systemic capacity as a train-the-trainer model, and training was led primarily by early learning directors or administrators from the early learning grant sites. SEAL provided training to these regional LCN facilitators along with extensive resources for each training session. Participants met less frequently than those in the Deep Dive, and often were the instructional assistants from classrooms whose lead teachers attended the Deep Dive series (see Graphic 1).

The professional development series were offered in partnership with four County Offices of Education, 20 school districts, and one community-based organization in California. Despite the coronavirus pandemic which began in the final quarter of the grant, more than 360 early childhood educators and administrators across California took part. These educators collectively serve almost 4,000 children (see Graphic 2).

To evaluate the effectiveness of its offerings, SEAL surveyed the grant participants at the beginning and end of the grant period. In addition, SEAL conducted focus groups with early learning directors and lead teachers as well as interviews with SEAL staff at the conclusion of the grant.
Key Findings
Strengthening the capacity of early childhood educators to support DLLs

**Educators deepened their understanding and increased their use of effective instructional practices for DLLs.**
After attending the SEAL training series, early childhood educators reported greater understanding of DLLs and how to apply that knowledge in the classroom. They understand better what a quality early childhood education for these students looks like. They have learned useful instructional strategies for supporting DLLs’ development, including their oral language development. At the end of the grant period, teachers are more confident in their ability to teach DLLs; they report that the SEAL training they received has had a positive impact on the children they serve.

Early childhood educators report that the children in their classrooms, including DLLs, are not only enjoying their learning but also producing more academic and complex language, engaging more actively in learning, and expressing themselves more comfortably in their home languages.

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**SEAL fostered regional capacity and infrastructure to support DLLs.**
In communities that participated, curriculum and teaching not only are aligned to the California Preschool Learning Foundations but also are now intentional about language development. In addition, connections and relationships among multiple players are stronger. For example, the training strengthened connections among educators within grant sites, including between lead teachers and their instructional assistants; between educators and their respective administrators; among educators across grant sites, particularly within their respective regions; and between educators and families, particularly Spanish-speaking families.

The combination of the intensive Deep Dive series and the lighter touch of LCNs expanded SEAL’s reach, in particular by including more instructional support staff within the regions served. Instructional assistants had the opportunity to receive professional development via LCNs that was aligned with the training their lead teachers had received in the Deep Dive series, which both deepened and expanded the impact of the training. This approach not only built staff capacity to deepen their professional learning but also created greater ownership of SEAL training across the region.

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I’ve seen a tremendous difference in the teachers who are participating in SEAL. It’s almost like, they had the training and the next time they were back in their classroom, everything changed. The parents were involved, the teachers were overly excited, which I loved, and the students were really learning. I heard from one of the teachers that [students] were going home and explaining insects to their parents.
— EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR, SAN BERNARDINO

We were able to pull in the aides who were in the classrooms who were actually going through SEAL [Deep Dive training]. And it was so nice that they got the opportunity to work through some of that in the trainings, because I often heard, ‘Oh, that’s why she’s doing what she’s doing!’ They were making those connections.
— EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR, VISALIA
Virtual learning expanded the reach of training opportunities.
Beginning in March 2020, as COVID-19 closed schools and early learning centers across the state, SEAL adapted the remaining training sessions to a virtual format. Although the pandemic did disrupt in-person delivery of professional learning, it also enabled SEAL to expand opportunities for DLL-specific professional learning to more early childhood educators who were able to log into a prerecorded or even a live virtual training more readily than attend in-person trainings.

There is a great need for professional learning that is multilingual and that frames biliteracy as an asset.
As noted previously, 60% of children under age 5 in California are DLLs. Unlike K-12 teachers, who tend to be considerably less ethnically and linguistically diverse than the students they teach, California’s early childhood workforce is predominantly non-White and more closely resembles the population of children it serves. Consistent with this finding, 48% of educators statewide who were served by the five DLL grant recipients, including SEAL, identified as a person of color. In our work, we found a considerable number of early childhood educators whose primary language was Spanish. Many participants were raised during California’s English-only education era and received powerful and inaccurate messages about the dangers of teaching or even speaking Spanish in educational settings. Bilingual education was seen at the time as a failed model. Early childhood educators may have memories of being punished for speaking Spanish in school when they were students and also may have been trained to see bilingualism as a deficit when they first began working with children. In contrast, by framing bilingualism and biliteracy as an asset that early childhood educators should nurture and celebrate, SEAL’s model and training is a powerful, affirming reversal for many participants—one they understand quickly and welcome with open arms.

Additionally, teachers said this asset-based framing of Spanish helped foster stronger relationships with Spanish-speaking parents and increased parents’ engagement in the classroom. Our work with these teachers also highlighted the need for professional learning in languages other than English to support them further in their own learning and to apply that learning in supporting their DLLs.
Demand for professional learning is high, but structural barriers exist to providing effective professional development for early childhood educators.

Early childhood educators are hungry for professional learning designed to address the needs of DLLs. Across California, demand for DLL professional development is greater than the resources available. SEAL was unable to serve all the school districts, County Offices of Education, and community-based organizations that requested professional learning. Survey data show that participants found their SEAL training valuable, with 99% agreeing that their participation in SEAL was a positive experience for them and 70% strongly agreeing with this statement.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of structural support for professional learning in the early childhood sector that threatens to impede progress made during the grant cycle and going forward. SEAL regularly encounters logistical difficulties in providing professional learning to educators in the K-12 system. These difficulties were considerably more pronounced when trying to deliver professional development to early childhood educators. These barriers included:

- finding substitute teachers;
- identifying a common day (weekday or Saturday) for a training within a given region;
- participants having difficulty traveling to other sites for training; and
- administrators being too stretched or holding too many responsibilities to coordinate grant activities.

Collectively, these logistical challenges highlight how underresourced the early learning system is and how little structure there is within it to support professional learning.

Policy Implications

Building a workforce prepared to support DLLs

California’s Master Plan for Early Learning and Care aims to create a statewide equitable early learning system over the next decade. The plan specifically calls for greater attention to DLLs, who constitute about 60% of the age group that the early learning and care system is designed to serve.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made this call for equity-based policymaking even more urgent. The pandemic has laid bare the state’s deep inequities. DLL children, their families, and their communities have been hit hard by COVID-19. They are more likely to live in crowded, insecure housing conditions and to have family members who are essential workers. They are more likely to have experienced economic hardship and high rates of disease. Moreover, they have been disproportionately affected by school closures.

To build a high-quality early learning system that truly reaches all students in California, the state must learn from its early investments in DLL professional development.
Specifically, our findings show that the state should:

**Prioritize investments in teacher development** so that all early childhood educators can receive training on the content knowledge and teaching skills they need to support DLL children. These investments should include professional learning opportunities for teachers, assistants, and leaders as well as support for coaching assistance to lead teachers and instructional coaches. The state should take a systems-building approach.

**Ensure that California’s early learning system has the structure and resources needed to support high-quality, sustained professional learning** across this sector. Teachers need more than a single conference or workshop. Rather, they need ongoing time to try new strategies, reflect on their work, and plan and collaborate with peers. Our work shows that a combination of intensive learning with job-embedded structures, policies, and practices is most effective. To do all of this, the state must address current structural barriers (time, substitute teachers, and funding) that exist in the early education system. Time for collaboration and planning to enact research-based practices should be built into school calendars and teacher contracts.

**Make use of regional infrastructure and partners.** In California, there are 58 County Offices of Education that provide services to the state’s school districts and offer direct services in early childhood education. County Offices of Education, First 5 California, county commissions, and other government agencies and community-based organizations are important partners in building infrastructure to support early childhood educators with deepening their knowledge and skills regarding DLLs. These partnerships need to be supported and taken advantage of over time.

**Include flexible and virtual options.** SEAL’s experience shifting to virtual training during the pandemic shows that these can be important options on a menu of training opportunities, which can enable more teachers to take part and help to overcome logistical barriers to attendance. Hybrid models of professional development that involve independent work time and may include virtual training are one option. In these models, educators get paid to do the work on their own time, during the summer or on weekends, for example. SEAL has had success with models that combine virtual synchronous and asynchronous professional learning and are locally facilitated.

**Invest in models like SEAL that value and support biliteracy.** Professional development should emphasize research-based approaches that best support DLLs. Children learn best when teachers acknowledge and build from the linguistic and cultural assets that children bring to schools as well as when learning is designed to support their specific needs. Professional learning for early childhood educators should support biliteracy both in instructional delivery and pedagogy and in curriculum. Professional learning should explicitly promote an asset-based approach that will counter the deficit-based model that has existed in California for too long. Educators need training that frames biliteracy as an asset to counter prevailing myths, such as the idea that children will fall behind if they learn two languages at once. Finally, many early childhood educators themselves are bilingual and bicultural. The value and support of biliteracy needs to be built into the professional learning model itself.

Dual Language Learners are the future of California. If the state is to build a system of early learning and care that is truly based on equity, the needs of DLLs must be at the center of that reform. The state needs to develop an early care and education workforce that is prepared to support and celebrate bilingualism and biliteracy.
Endnotes


