Right from the Start:
A Protocol for Identifying and Planning Instruction for Emergent Bilinguals in Universal Prekindergarten

SUMMARY

This article addresses a schoolwide approach to identifying language learners at the prekindergarten level. This article proposes the use of the Language and Learning in Prekindergarten protocol, which not only recognizes children who are acquiring English, but also offers their first teachers a means to gain a linguistic profile with valuable information for planning instruction. This protocol safeguards the first decisions that early childhood educators must make including, bilingual supports, initial screenings, placement, the language of instruction, and referrals for evaluation.

Access to prekindergarten has become a popular initiative of education reform across the country. In New York, funding for Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) has increased dramatically in a short time following a pledge from Gov. Cuomo to support universal access to prekindergarten for New York's children in order to better prepare them for school (Craig & McKinley, 2014). Increased funding resulted in the rapid expansion of programs offering UPK; in New York City, enrollment for the fall of 2015 is expected to exceed 70,000, nearly all eligible children (Potter, 2015).

In New York, as in the entire country, there has been unprecedented growth in the number of children who enter school speaking little or no English. In 2013, the enrollment of "Limited English Proficient" children in Kindergarten exceeded 24,000 (NYS BEDS Enrollment) but there were more than 146,000 New York children ages 0 to 5 who spoke languages other than English in their homes (NYS-ELC Application, 2013). Recently the terms we use to refer to this student population have been evolving. García, Kleifgen and Falchi (2008) coined the term "emergent bilinguals" to refer to individuals in the beginning stages of acquiring a second language. Increasingly, this is the term used in the literature. The term "emergent bilingual" acknowledges a young child's existing skills and language practices rather than emphasize the language he/she is learning and consequently does not know. This term is also in keeping with our growing understanding of the significance of bilingualism both

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to individual academic achievement and for preserving a competitive advantage in a globalized economy.

Currently, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) mandates implementation of the *New York State Identification of English Language Learners* (NYSITELL) test beginning in Kindergarten. At the pre-K level, UPK regulations provide guidance for assessment and instruction, but do not mandate a process for identifying emergent bilinguals. As the expansion of UPK coincides with increases in the number of emergent bilinguals, questions arise about programming and instruction for a grade level quickly becoming the new entry point into school. Preparing for our young students begins with important questions: how do we identify emergent bilinguals as they enter prekindergarten? What do we need to know in order to prepare for their instruction?

Over the course of a long career in early childhood education as a preschool teacher, school social worker,

and as an administrator, I had the opportunity to work with thousands of young children, mostly from immigrant families living in poverty. In my last seven years in the New York public school system, I was a principal in an early childhood center that offered a variety of programs to more than 1,000 children under the age of 6. Of these, more than 270 attended a UPK program in the school. Those years gave me the opportunity to develop an approach for identifying emergent bilinguals and gathering meaningful information — their strengths, their unique needs — that would inform instruction and programming.

Often when a pre-K student who speaks another language first enters our school we think our first priority should be to quickly identify the *level* of his or her English proficiency. Is this child a beginner? We think we need to match the level of proficiency to a corresponding amount of support in the home language; beginners need more home language support, more

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advanced students need less, etc. That is our logic. However, for the pre-K child, we are beginning with the wrong premise. At 4 years old, all children are developing language. Even those students from English-speaking homes do not yet fully command the English language. ***Our first priority should be to develop their language skills in order to enable academic learning.*** This means that in our first interactions, we can be less concerned with quantifying how much English the emergent bilingual knows and more interested in the nature of his or her early experiences with language in conversations, books, stories, songs, etc. We know that oral language development is fundamental to literacy development (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001) in English speaking children. For bilingual children, a cross-linguistic relationship exists; for example, vocabulary development in the home language supports reading comprehension in English (Bialystok, 2007). Additionally, children's emergent literacy skills are strengthened when they maintain their home language as they acquire English (Cheatham & Ro, 2010).

There is a growing body of research arguing for fortifying the home language in order to advance learning in the second language (Kohnert, 2005; Bialystok, 2007; Cárdenas-Hagan & Carlson, 2007, Espinosa 2008). Cummins (2001) describes the

relationship between languages in the bilingual child positing that "the level of L2 [second language] competence which a bilingual child attains, is partially a function of the type of competence the child has developed in L1 [home language] at the time when intensive exposure to L2 begins" (Cummins, 2001, p. 75). Observing children over many years and analyzing data on their achievement informed the creation of a protocol. Entitled *Language and Learning in Prekindergarten* (LLPK), this protocol not only recognizes children who are acquiring English but also offers their first teachers a means to gain a linguistic profile with valuable information for planning instruction.

As a school leader, I was able to notice patterns in the student population, placement, or achievement that helped safeguard the first decisions in many areas, such as bilingual supports, initial screenings, placement, the language of instruction, and referrals for evaluation. The best ideas of teachers, parents, administration, research, and young students themselves produced a useful protocol to guide the identification of emergent bilinguals and the first steps to take toward their instruction. The LLPK is the result of years of teaching and learning at the pre-K level. What began as individual steps in our registration process grew into a fully developed protocol that later was named and documented. Over time, hundreds of

children underwent the steps in the LLPK.

The Language and Learning in Prekindergarten (LLPK) Protocol

The LLPK outlines a whole school approach that begins at registration and continues through key steps in the first weeks of school. All children, emergent bilinguals and English speakers, follow the same steps but the information garnered for each child recognizes emergent bilinguals and is used to plan for their instruction. The steps of the LLPK are outlined below.

Step 1: Document Review

Typically parents complete an application for a UPK program well in advance of registration. Since registration can be a formal process requiring legal documents (i.e. birth certificates) and appointments for screenings, schools need to prepare appropriate supports (translated documents, interpretation services) for a successful process. In the LLPK, the application for UPK includes questions about the home language similar to those in the *New York State Home Language Questionnaire*.

- What languages to you speak at home?
- In what language do you speak to your child most of the time?
- What languages does your child understand?
- What languages does your child speak well?

In a document review of all the applications, it is easy to identify which students will need screenings in the home language and may be identified as "emergent bilinguals."

Step 2: Family Interview and Social History

An interview with a family member to document the child's social history is a vital element to a successful start in school. The child's parent or guardian is best equipped to inform us about the child's skills, talents, developmental history, etc. This is a moment to engage a family and learn from them. The social history is best gathered in an interview between the teacher and a family member who can tell the child's "story" for the teacher to document. Questions can be broad and individualized but the questions that relate to emergent bilinguals and English language learning would include:

- When did the child begin to speak single words?
- In what language did the child first speak?
- When did the child begin to speak in short sentences? In what language?
- In what language does your child speak to you?

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- When your child speaks in your home language, is he or she easily understood?

- If your child speaks in English, is he or she easily understood?

- Does anyone at home speak English to the child (perhaps a sibling)?

- How has your child learned English so far (television shows, siblings, childcare, etc.)?

- Does your child have books at home or visit the library? In what language are these books read to him or her?

- Has the child attended any nursery or childcare program? Was English spoken at that program?

- If your child has a childcare provider, in what language does this person speak to your child?

- Have you intentionally exposed your child to more than one language to ensure that he or she is bilingual or multilingual?

- In pre-K we will begin to learn very basic things about reading and writing at each child's pace. Can your child name any letters in English? Can your child recognize letters or symbols in another language?

- Does your child pretend to read? What have you noticed?

- Does your child pretend to write? In what language?

Responses to these questions provide invaluable information about developmental milestones, family resources, family values, and emergent literacy skills. Pretending to read, for example, demonstrates a grasp of concepts of print, a fundamental literacy skill. As children trace their fingers over words, follow text from top to bottom on a page, or call out individual letters in a word, they demonstrate an understanding that there are conventions governing print. Even before they can recognize all the letters in the alphabet, they can understand that symbols (letters) grouped together (words) express ideas in spoken language. Here bilingual children may actually have an advantage; once they master the concept, they develop print awareness in multiple languages (Reyes and Azuara, 2008). In fact, Bialytok (2006) reports, "in studies with 4-year-old pre-readers, bilingual children consistently outperform monolingual children in a test assessing the extent to which they understand the symbolic concepts that underlie print" (p. 109). Knowing a child's existing skills shifts our starting point for instruction, but if we focus exclusively on what emergent bilinguals can demonstrate in English, we will miss this obvious strength. The pre-K teacher who knows that a child recites letters in his or her home language and pretends to read or write in that language can advance instruction beyond

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We expect each child to have a unique configuration of responses as it is unlikely that a child would have had no exposure to English at all in the first years of life. A common occurrence for young emergent bilinguals is that they have some exposure to English through early childcare arrangements. At first glance, these children may seem to command the English language where they may only have mastered rudimentary social language. Asking about early experiences with language clarifies how the child has been exposed to English without confusing exposure with mastery. These young children may exhibit a combination of bilingual language skills — social language in English but richer vocabulary in the home language. However, they need continued growth in the home language if they are to reap the benefits of their bilingualism.

Above all else, this first interview is a sensitive step in engaging a family. Several of these questions listed relate to values (reading, writing) and resources (having books, writing materials) that not all families share. These questions are intended to get at language use, not school readiness skills, as these are not prerequisites of any kind for prekindergarten. Instead, inquiring about the child's use of language in the years prior to pre-K helps the first teacher individualize instructional goals and anticipate what the child may need to meet these goals.

Gathering an accurate and comprehensive social history has another important function. When there are concerns about a young child's development or academic progress, it may be that an evaluation by the Committee for Preschool Special Education (CPSE) is warranted. However, the research on special education among children classified as English language learners points to widespread error and confusion often leading to disproportionately high rates of classification but also to a void in the services necessary for this population (Brown & Campbell, 2015). At the preschool level, the initial screenings relying on English language instruments can set in motion this disproportionality even before children formally enter school (Hardin, Scott-Little, & Mereoiu, 2013).

The experience of educators working with large populations of emergent bilinguals at the preschool level is an invaluable resource in understanding the important elements of a comprehensive social history. Alma Aponte is one such educator who served as chairperson of the CPSE in a New

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York school district with a large prekindergarten program with many emergent bilinguals. She identified key points to guide the use of a social history during the process of referral to the CPSE:

■ Pay particular attention to impoverished conditions during infancy. We know that young children who live in poverty have less access to resources. We also know that Latinos, for example, have both high numbers of emergent bilinguals and high rates of poverty. We must be able to distinguish the impact of both poverty and English language learning before we can identify a disability.

■ Share the document among the evaluators — often times each evaluator in the CPSE process begins with a new social history form to complete. Not only is this inefficient and tedious for a parent, it creates multiple opportunities to miss important information.

■ Make appropriate use of the information in the social history. The evaluation process can become overly focused on scores and performance results. Without a social history to inform the interpretation of these numbers, the skills and capacities of emergent bilinguals can be missed entirely as they may not be captured in English language assessments.

Ms. Aponte chronicled decades of work as a CPSE chairperson where a well-constructed social history, used appropriately and widely, became a protective factor in preventing disproportionality.

**Step 3: Informal Interview
with the Child.**
Now we are attentive to how the child uses language. We begin with comfortable conditions: a family member is present, toys are available, seating or furniture is child-sized, distractions are minimal. Ideally the interview with the child is conducted bilingually — in the home language and in English. It is important to gauge language use in both languages so that we can clearly identify the child's strengths. Begin with the home language.

Since the child interview is not a fact-gathering activity but rather a chance to converse, those topics that are most compelling to children are likely to be more successful. Early childhood professionals have a long list of these topics: What did you do for your birthday? Who lives at your house? What's your favorite game? Asking first in the home language, it is also important to ask the child if he or she speaks English. It is telling if the child begins to respond nonverbally (i.e. nodding, shrugging, pointing) and no longer responds verbally. Encourage the child to "demonstrate" the words he or she knows in English in order to observe his or her expressive language.

Student responses in the child interview should be monitored for features such as:

the choice of words, the complexity of responses, the number of words in a response, the clarity of expression, and the language of choice. In the example below of a Spanish-speaking child, we can note certain strengths:

> **Teacher:** What did you do for your birthday?
>
> **Child:** I have party *en mi casa*. I have a lot, a lot *globos* (making big circles with her arms). Pink. *Y mis amiguitos…* friend.

In this exchange, the teacher observes that the child has sufficient knowledge of English to understand the question and responds with facts and important details. Using a common English phrase ("I have") she relates the story of a party at her house. She communicates that she had many, many balloons using another common phrase ("a lot"), a word in Spanish, and physical gestures to make herself understood. Although she cannot combine the detail in one sentence, she adds that her balloons were pink. She seems to want to elaborate on who attended and begins a full sentence in Spanish but stops short opting for another commonly known English word for young children: friend. This child is deliberately using the languages and vocabulary at her disposal to tell a story that occurred in the past with unmistakable detail and some enthusiasm.

One obvious strength children exhibit during an interview is co-mingling their languages to make themselves understood. Rather than be concerned about strict adherence to one language or the other, we note the child's resourcefulness in self-expression. In fact, when children "borrow" from one language to express themselves in another language we can better assess their grasp of a concept. Teaching the corresponding vocabulary to a child who already understands a concept is a lower-order task.

Bilingual or multilingual individuals are able to employ skills in all their languages to make meaning in an academic setting. Advances in our understanding of bilingualism have lead to pedagogical approaches such as translanguaging, where "students are asked to alternate languages for the purposes of receptive or productive use (García & Wei, 2014, p. 20)." When little children are encouraged to employ translanguaging we are able to get a fuller sense of their skills and capacities.

Making a Determination

A careful review of Steps 1 through 3 can help us determine who is an emergent bilingual. We remember that we are not looking to identify a level of English proficiency but rather we want

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to know about children's language skills in order to plan for their instruction. Based on our understanding of the nature of bilingualism in early childhood, we can make a determination about each student using a process of elimination. Emergent bilinguals in prekindergarten generally satisfy the following conditions:

- They have been exposed primarily (but not exclusively) to the home language from birth;

- Their developmental milestones in language exhibit growth in the home language or in multiple languages;

- They may co-mingle their languages in conversation and strategically employ translanguaging to make themselves understood;

- Although they may have good comprehension (receptive language), they have minimal expressive language in English.

Once we can identify emergent bilinguals in our prekindergarten we can turn our attention to instruction. The LLPK does not stop at identifying emergent bilinguals but continues to inform their instruction.

Step 4: Review of Existing Screenings
UPK requires initial screenings. At this point the child's scores and evaluations are reviewed to assess emergent literacy or numeracy skills and ensure that bilingual supports are made available.

The LLPK continues with a review of initial screenings that have been conducted in the home language or bilingually. Across UPK programs there are varied instruments used for initial screenings (i.e. DIAL-R, Bracken, Brigance). The LLPK introduces guiding principles to inform the interpretation of results from initial screenings using any instrument:

- Screenings conducted in English with children who do not speak English are not valid and we should not place great weight on the results. Initial screenings should be conducted in the home language;

- Many initial screening instruments tend to measure specific or discrete skills in English (vocabulary, letters, colors, numbers, etc.) that correspond to age or general school readiness. While they may be useful, they may not fully capture a child's skills in the home language. Consequently, initial screenings may set in motion a deficit perspective that focuses on what children cannot produce in English rather than how well prepared they are for school. The LLPK does not confuse school readiness with English language acquisition; instead, the LLPK promotes a strengths perspective where results from initial screenings are informed by the portrait of the child's language skills drawn from the social history and child interview.

- The National Association for the

Education of Young Children (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2003) warns against the overuse of one-time administration of standardized measures with young children — the LLPK does not rely on one-time administrations of any instrument but rather enables an unfolding of children's language skills that teachers can note and support through instruction.

Step 5: Document Interactions & Language Development
Over the course of the UPK academic year, teacher/child interactions are critical for learning and language development. Anecdotal records of these interactions illustrate the child's progress and continue to inform individualized instructional planning. Interactions with teachers can serve as assessments and reveal the child's mastery of academic language skills while peer interactions can reflect what a child has mastered with regards to social language. Documenting language interactions through anecdotal recordings, quotations, comments, scribed dictations, etc., at multiple points in the year provides the necessary evidence of a child's progress in English acquisition in a manner that is authentic and meaningful. Regular review of anecdotal records of these interactions supports progress monitoring in the UPK classroom.

Ultimately, anecdotal records of language interactions benefit the child's teacher in Kindergarten. A rich linguistic profile of a child's progress in pre-K provides the receiving Kindergarten teacher more valuable information than scores from one-time test administrations. A seamless transition from pre-K to Kindergarten benefits children when their teachers share important features of students' progress so that educators can anticipate and put in place the necessary supports for academic success.

Instructional goals in UPK programs are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards through the competencies articulated in the *New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core* (2011) [PKFCC]. One of the principles expressed by the PKFCC concerns the use of the home language for learning stating that it is "essential to encourage *continued first language development* [emphasis mine] in our children by providing them with appropriate education settings such as a bilingual classroom or integrated English as a Second Language Program (ESL)… (p. 6)." Research confirms that bilingual instruction enhances English acquisition and long-term academic achievement for emergent bilinguals from pre-K to third grade (Escobar, 2013).

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Many UPK programs do not offer bilingual instruction but do offer families many bilingual supports. We are challenged to think broadly and recognize how using the home language for instruction supports maintenance of bilingualism and also allows us to maximize the benefits of cross-linguistic transfer for academic learning. In addition, when we allow our children to use all their skills — in any language — for greater comprehension or self-expression, we have not threatened English acquisition but supported it.

**One Example:
Alicia enters pre-K**

Alicia was an adorable 4-year-old who entered pre-K in November. Since she was registered (Step 1) late in the year, the usual initial procedures were handled differently. As principal, I met with Alicia's mother individually to complete the social history bilingually (Step 2). I learned that Alicia had been in a domestic violence shelter for months; registering for pre-K was a fresh start for Alicia and her mother but they knew no one in the community. The social history also revealed that Alicia had no prior preschool experience and spoke only Spanish at home. Her mother reported that she had worked with Alicia at home to get her ready, reading and writing together to the best of the mom's abilities. Compelled by her family circumstances to move quickly, Alicia was assigned to the one remaining opening for the year.

The child interview (Step 3) was scheduled to take place on her first day but she would not respond. We allowed her to spend more time in the classroom and become acclimated to her new circumstances. The initial screenings (Step 4) would be conducted with her new teacher and an interpreter.

Every classroom at the school had bilingual support. A bilingual teacher (Spanish-English in our case) had regularly scheduled times in each classroom to help children build their home language skills as they were learning English. Bilingual support was a bridge for academic learning that classroom teachers welcomed.

Soon the classroom teacher began expressing concern about Alicia. She had not spoken a word in class. She was cooperative but seemed disconnected. Despite multiple attempts, the teacher had not been successful in completing initial screenings due to her silence. I offered my support to the teacher.
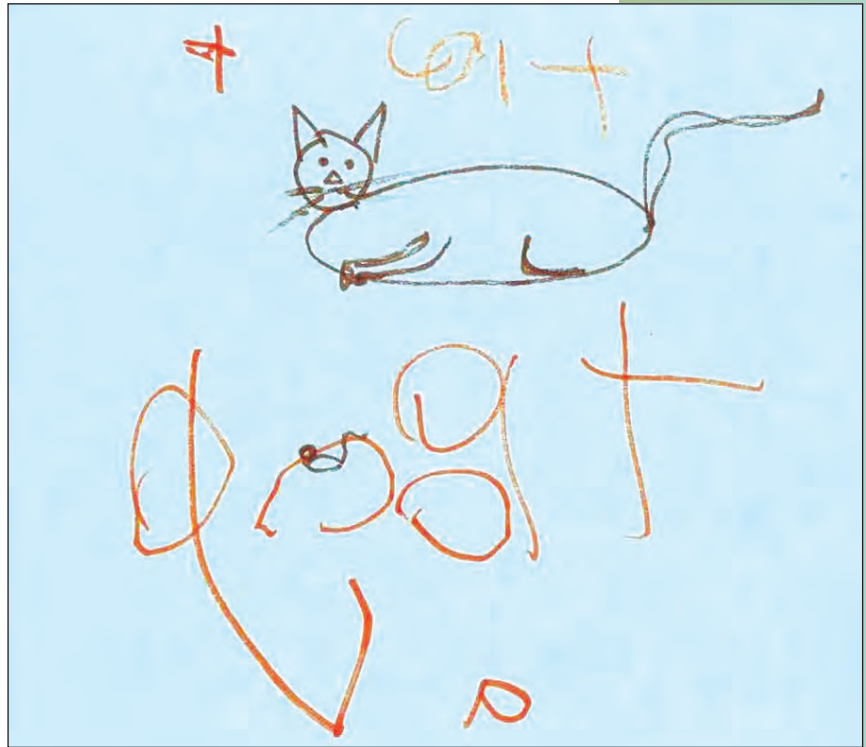
Whenever I try to engage a preschool student I talk about my cat Chiclet (the word for "chewing gum" in Spanish). The name alone usually gets a smile. I approached Alicia with a story about Chiclet during center time (Step 5). For her activity, Alicia had chosen to "write" on a clipboard all her favorite words displayed around the classroom. I spoke to Alicia entirely in Spanish and using my own clipboard, I drew a picture of my cat

Chiclet. Alicia began to smile. She grabbed my clipboard and began writing. To my surprise, she painstakingly wrote the letters c-a-t at the top of the page. I noticed how Alicia had written in English when she did not speak English so I asked her what she had written. Very quietly, Alicia sounded out c|a|t. Since we had not spoken in English, I asked Alicia what "cat" was.

Once again Alicia took my clipboard and wrote a word — this time in Spanish — gato. She sounded out the letters g, a, t, and o in Spanish. Finally she spoke: "Esto significa gato" [this means cat].

Alicia could not express herself in English yet she had phonological awareness in two languages. In our interaction I could observe that she had learned about letter sounds in English from her mother and applied the same principle to Spanish, the language she did speak. Alicia demonstrated how translanguaging works: she used skills in one language to make meaning in another. She also demonstrated how learning in one language advances learning in another. While reading in Spanish is taught in phonemes, not letter sounds, Alicia successfully applied the same principle of sounding out letters for Spanish words and evidenced her emerging biliteracy.

It would have been easy to miss Alicia's skills if our only focus had been to document the level of her English proficiency; Alicia did not speak English! Instead, the LLPK protocol offered a structure where we could learn about Alicia first from her mother, and then from our own interactions in the Spanish language. Alicia was one of many emergent bilinguals in our school who presented unique challenges to our protocol. Yet eventually we completed each step of the LLPK and documented her remarkable growth in prekindergarten. Alicia was among our highest-achieving students who moved on well prepared, with emerging skills in English, and ready to tackle Kindergarten.

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Conclusion

The primary goals of the LLPK can be stated as follows: to identify those children who enter prekindergarten as emergent bilinguals and gather meaningful, relevant, and useful information about their development and language use so as to inform instructional planning.

Gauging whether this goal has been met is a multi-faceted undertaking. Gathering program statistics, such as rates of identification and overall student performance enabled an evaluation of the effectiveness of LLPK at the program level. By contrast, analyzing student-specific data, including parent feedback, samples of work, assessment scores, and teacher anecdotal records, could be used to assess how well the LLPK informed instructional planning.

The pattern of demographic shifts evident across the country was also evident in our school. The LLPK protocol served us well to identify the more than 44 percent of emergent bilinguals in prekindergarten every year. Everyone at the school collaborated to ensure translation and interpretation services for families, and access to bilingual supports for instruction.

Our student population demanded that we learn about bilingualism. Responding with a protocol that respected their home languages and their remarkable asset as bilingual individuals, we supported learning in prekindergarten and created the ideal conditions where the skills a young child brings from home become the basis for success in school.

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