Nourishing the roots of learning: Lessons from a Spanish immersion preschool

Introductions
Who are we and where do we work?

“My interactions with children are intentional because I have clear goals for those interactions and strategies to meet those goals”
Premises:

Young dual language learners deserve environments where they will develop linguistic and cognitive skills to create the condition for their success in the future.

Young dual language learners have the right to environments that respect their competence and offer rich opportunities for self-directed play and exploration.

Teacher as gardener

A gardener can prepare a space, plant a seed, provide water... but the plant has to do its own growing.

Similarly, a teacher can provide experiences, materials and support... but ultimately, each child has to do her or his own learning.

When we work in an intentional, reflective model, we can see ourselves as gardeners. We seek out seeds and nurture them so they can grow.
The first thing that grows when a seed sprouts are the roots. I propose that the roots of learning are:

- **Language** – talking with others about what we are thinking about
- **Symbolization** – making one thing stand for another, like a block for a telephone or a drawing of a tree
- **Reasoning** – classifying, comparing, predicting, evaluating....
- **Relationships** – building connections with peers and adults, and managing our own and others’ emotions

These four developmental processes offer a powerful opportunity to build learning capacity for young dual language learners.

Since they are all fundamental organizing systems for the brain, strengthening these processes both helps children learn now and prepares them for more learning in the future.

We can best address all four of these processes through intentional interactions in the context of complex social play.
Language

Closing the word gap can help close the academic gap.

- Narrate
- Question
- Describe
- Explain
- Enjoy
- Command
- Correct

Number of words heard by age 5, in millions

Command: 13
Correct: 42

Bethica Quinn, 2016

Symbolization

- Communication can happen in a variety of ways. Language is only one mode of communication.
- All modes of communication rely on symbolic representation, or the use of symbols or models to express ideas.
- Symbolic representation is key to literacy because written text is a set of symbols that represent sounds that form words representing objects, actions and ideas.
- Symbolic representation is also key to science and mathematics because it lets us create ‘models’ of problems or ideas. We also use numbers, operations and formulas to allow us to manipulate quantities.

Bethica Quinn, 2016
Reasoning

- Reasoning, or using structures such as cause and effect, classification and comparison, and problem solving to organize thinking, is a fundamental process of the mind.

- “Increasingly the world does not care what you know. Everything is on Google. The world only cares, and will only pay for, what you can do with what you know.”
  
  Thomas Friedman

- The incoming Common Core Standards and Next Generation Science Standards for K-12 emphasize reasoning and analytical skills in language arts, mathematics, and science.

Relationships

- Neither language, symbolization or reasoning can be brought to bear effectively on academic or real-world problems without the ability to connect and collaborate with others; in other words, to form relationships

- Recent research points to social skills acquired by age five as perhaps the most powerful predictor of lifelong academic, career and personal success
The roots of learning

- Language
- Symbolization
- Reasoning
- Relationships

These four capacities may be even more important for dual language learners:

- Skills in these four areas can help dual language learners understand what is going on around them and communicate their ideas even when there is a language mismatch.
- Strengthening “common underlying proficiency” by building a rich language base and cognitive capacities moves dual language learners toward becoming strong bilinguals with all the cognitive, career and life benefits that confers.

Once the roots have developed, knowledge can begin to sprout....

Letters and sounds, numbers and quantities... The 'academic' skills all grow up from the roots of learning.
The child is continually and competently building relationships using language reasoning and representing ideas and experience through symbols.

The job of the teacher is to support this activity and help the child to begin to grow up from these roots for a lifetime of success.

We do this by providing rich invitations to explore and then interacting intentionally with children while they engage with the invitations through complex social play.

What do teachers do during complex social play?

- Support children’s language
  - Narrate
  - Repeat and extend
  - Use advanced vocabulary
- Support reasoning
  - Open-ended questions
  - Analysis
- Support symbolic representation
  - Comment on children’s representations of ideas
  - Invite re-representation
- Support relationships
  - Point out children’s ideas and strategies to other children
  - Scaffold social skills
- Observe to plan further invitations to offer the group
Observation – What, So What, Now What

Start with an open mind

- I noticed....
- I wonder about....
- It made me think that....

Then narrow in

- How are the children reasoning?
- How are the children representing their ideas?
- What words did they use?
- How are they building relationships with each other?
- What are the children’s questions?

Finally, make a plan

- How could I build on each of the roots of learning with my interactions?
- What further invitations can I plan to extend the play?