

# Head Start Graduate Student Research Program: 2017 Research Scholars

## Jennifer Cunningham

**Project Title:** Exploring the Relation Between Positive Behavior Support and Language Learning Opportunities in Preschool Classrooms

**Mentor:** Ann Kaiser, Ph.D.

**Project Funding Years:** 2017-2019

**University Affiliation:** Vanderbilt University

**Project Abstract:**

Children from low-income backgrounds are likely to begin formal schooling with lower language skills as compared to their peers from higher SES homes (Hart & Risely, 1995; Hoff, 2003). This deficit can play a critical role in student's future academic success, as oral language skills are a key component in literacy development (see Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsch-Pasek, 2010). Finding ways to foster and promote language development early in these at-risk children is essential, especially considering the evidence that this achievement gap persists and widens into young adulthood (Hoff, 2003; Reardon, 2011). High quality childcare and preschool programs can help mediate these differences among children from varying SES backgrounds (Vernon-Feagans & Hines, 2013). However, recent meta-analyses have indicated that professional development efforts to enhance the quality of teacher-child language interactions in classrooms result in inconsistent and relatively small effects on child language outcomes (Cunningham & Kaiser, in preparation; Markussen-Brown et al., 2017).

Exploring what classroom and teacher level factors may influence teacher-child language interactions may be key in understanding how to better support teachers in their use of language support strategies. The goal of the proposed study is to extend what is known about factors that contribute to the language learning environment in classrooms for young children at-risk. Two primary research questions will be addressed: (1) are scores on measures of classroom behavior management and social-emotional support associated with the quantity and quality of teacher-child language interactions during center time in preschool classrooms? (2) do teachers who receive training in behavior management and social emotional support engage in higher quality language interactions with children as compared to teachers who do not receive training?

The participants in this study will be approximately 40 teachers in childcare and Head Start classrooms serving children ages three to five. The study will explore the relationship between positive behavior support and teacher language support strategies in two ways: an initial correlational design study and an experimental research design study in which a subset of teachers who have been randomized to receive Pyramid Model training or "business as usual" will be assessed pre- and post-training. Results from these studies will provide a foundation for understanding the relationship between overall positive interactions in the classroom designed to promote positive behavior and teacher use of language development support strategies. Potentially these findings will suggest ways in which the benefits of training in positive behavior support can be leveraged to also improve teacher-child language related interactions. Because both positive behavior and language outcomes are of concern in children at-risk, increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of professional development in targeting both developmental areas is important to the field.

## **M. Paula Daneri**

**Project Title:** A Strengths-Based Approach to Examining Supports for Self-Regulation Skills of Latino Children Raised in Poverty

**Mentor:** Clancy Blair, Ph.D.

**Project Funding Years:** 2017-2019

**University Affiliation:** New York University

**Project Abstract:**

Early academic success lays a strong foundation for later learning, yet not all children are provided with the tools to succeed early in life. Many Latino children face a variety of challenges, including poverty, recent immigration, and low English proficiency, that may prevent them from acquiring the resources that support healthy development (Murphey, Guzman, & Torres, 2014). Although none of these factors is unique to Latino children's experiences, Latino children uniquely experience high incidences of such factors. Understanding how best to support Latino children's development prior to school entry is a critical public policy issue.

Success in kindergarten and the early elementary school grades rests, in part, on children's ability to adapt to the school environment. When children make the transition into kindergarten, they face both academic and social-emotional demands (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Strong self-regulation skills, which enable children to regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, are central to a successful transition (Blair, 2002). By providing children with the cognitive skills to learn and integrate new academic information and the behavioral skills to follow rules and meet teachers' expectations, self-regulation enables children to thrive academically and socio-emotionally in kindergarten.

An emerging literature suggests that some self-regulation skills may be a source of strength for Latino children. Latino children demonstrate similar levels of self-control as their socioeconomically-matched White peers in preschool and kindergarten (Li-Grining, 2007). As with all children, however, growing up in poverty puts Latino children at risk for lower self-regulation skills (Galindo & Fuller, 2010). Although past research has examined how to support self-regulation in non-Latino children (Diamond & Lee, 2011), it is unclear whether such strategies are effective for Latino children given that Latinos' early life experiences may differ from those of their peers. More research is needed to develop a nuanced understanding of the strategies that support low-income, Latino children's self-regulation development in early childhood so that programs like Head Start can prepare these children for kindergarten. The proposed project will fill this gap in the literature. Taking a strengths-based approach, the proposed project aims to examine the parenting practices in toddlerhood and teaching practices in preschool that support the development of self-regulation. Grounded in a theoretical framework that recognizes heterogeneity within the Latino experience, we also explore whether demographic and child characteristics moderate relations between adult practices and child self-regulation.

In addition to driving the field of child development forward, the proposed project aims to advance knowledge about evidence-based practices that are integral to Head Start. Our research questions emerged from a long partnership with a local Head Start provider that has a strong interest in understanding how to better support Latino children's development. Through close collaboration with staff at the partner agency, the proposed project will address issues facing current Head Start providers so that Latino children can receive support both at home and in preschool.

## Elizabeth Frechette

**Project Title:** Observing Self-Regulation in Context in Head Start Classrooms and Dual Language Learners School Readiness

**Mentor:** Daryl Greenfield, Ph.D.

**Project Funding Years:** 2017-2019

**University Affiliation:** University of Miami

**Project Abstract:**

Nationally, the rates of preschool-aged Dual Language Learners (DLL) are rising, making it a priority to understand how to support DLLs in the education environment. Currently, over a quarter of preschoolers in the United States are Latino DLLs who live in poverty. It is critical to examine the skills that contribute to the social and cognitive development of young DLLs because an achievement gap is present that persists through development. Head Start serves many Latino DLLs, and thus offers a key developmental setting to examine how to foster DLLs social-emotional and cognitive development to close the achievement gap.

Self-regulation is a critical social-emotional skill, which promotes children's later development and achievement. Self-regulation skills include self-control, emotion regulation, and problem solving. The development of these skills is important for DLL preschoolers from low-income environments because they are predictive of positive outcomes. As a result of the link between early self-regulation skills and later outcomes, it is important to foster the development of DLLs' early self-regulation skills to begin to close the achievement gap.

Few studies have examined self-regulation skills in Latino DLLs; therefore, further research in this area is necessary. To measure self-regulation skills, many studies use either direct assessment or systematic classroom observations; however, little is known about the link between these two tools. Therefore, it is important to clarify the relationship between these two types of measurement techniques in order to use them effectively in research that will inform our understanding and intervention with DLL's self-regulation skills. This study will be the first to examine the association between two different measures of self-regulation, a direct assessment and a systematic classroom observation.

It is especially important to examine the transactional relationship between self-regulation skills and the contexts of the preschool classroom, such as the focus of instruction (e.g., teacher-managed), the group size (e.g., whole group), and teacher practices used to manage behavior (e.g., verbal cues used to make behavioral requests). By researching which contexts of the preschool classroom naturally foster the use of DLL's positive behavior, teachers will be able to intentionally focus their attention on those contexts, which will provide more opportunities for Latino DLLs to practice their self-regulation skills. This project will be the first to determine the ideal classroom contexts that promote higher use of DLLs self-regulated behaviors.

The aims of this study will help contribute to the identification of how to use the classroom to best support the development of self-regulation skills and improve academic outcomes for young DLLs. The goal of this project is to inform classroom-based interventions that support teachers' scaffolding of DLLs' self-regulation skills and to foster positive school readiness skills across domains.

## Audrey C Juhasz

**Project Title:** Leveraging Home Languages to Promote Executive Functioning: An Examination of Influences and Outcomes

**Mentor:** Lisa K Boyce, Ph.D.

**Project Funding Years:** 2017-2018

**University Affiliation:** Utah State University

**Project Abstract:**

Executive functioning (EF) is an umbrella term for neurologically-based skills that have to do with managing oneself in order to achieve a goal. It includes skills such as working memory, inhibitory control, and attention shifting. These skills are necessary for planning and reasoning which are essential to academic achievement in math, science, and all other subjects requiring reading comprehension.

Knowing two languages is often associated with EF skills. This may be because both languages are constantly active in the brain, which gives dual language learners (DLLs) many opportunities to cognitively inhibit the language not currently being spoken and attend to the spoken language. Think, for example, of a DLL interacting in a monolingual environment. The DLL must attend specifically to the language in the particular context and ignore the language that is irrelevant. Furthermore, they must suppress producing words in the unrepresented language because the production of an unknown foreign word would be met with surprise and confusion. Because much of this process is managed automatically in the brain, many DLLs may not be aware of the extra inhibition and attentional practice they are experiencing even though it may be contributing to overall EF skill.

Some research indicates that in environments where one language is considered essential for academic and personal success, some children experience loss of their home language. Not all children who are exposed to two languages develop proficiency at the same rate or leave Head Start with similar abilities in each language. For example, by the time they reach kindergarten, some children from Spanish speaking homes, attending English immersion Head Start classrooms, seem to be proficient in two languages, while others seem to be most comfortable in a single language. A practical method for monitoring these changes does not currently exist. Furthermore, how these differences influence the development of EF is unclear.

**Objectives:**

1. Test a method for tracking changes in dual language development that will enhance teachers' understanding of developmental trajectories in key areas of academic readiness.
2. Identify how changes in English and home language vocabulary scores influence EF outcomes.
3. Develop strategies to encourage teachers and families to promote children's dual language development and to build on this dual language use to enhance ongoing EF development.

## Laura Wallace

**Project Title:** Addressing the Needs of Infants and Toddlers Exposed to Maltreatment: Examining the Impact of an Integrated Early Head Start & Children and Youth Service Program

**Mentor:** Patricia Manz, Ph.D.

**Project Funding Years:** 2017-2019

**University Affiliation:** Lehigh University

**Project Abstract:**

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that 4 million abuse referrals were made to Child Protective Services involving 7.2 million children, and that 58.2% of these reports were substantiated (USDHHS, ACYF, 2017). Abuse and maltreatment is particularly damaging in the first years of life as it may cause long term negative impacts on brain growth and development (Glaser, 2014). Children who are the victims of early abuse and neglect suffer from social, academic, and behavioral challenges throughout their life (Romano, Babchishin, Marquis, & Fréchette, 2015).

In 2002, the Office on Child Abuse and Neglect in the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, established the Early Head Start Child Welfare System Initiative as a joint effort between the Office of Head Start and the Children's Bureau. Funding was provided to 24 grantee sites to increase integrated delivery of services to infants and toddlers who were involved in the child welfare system. SafeStart, an integrated Early Head Start/Children and Youth Services program was one of the original sites, and has remained as one of the few operational programs. SafeStart serves children between the ages of birth and 3 and provides both Early Head Start center based and home visiting services to children and families. These services are delivered in collaboration with Children and Youth Services.

Given the uniqueness and demonstrated need for integrated service systems for maltreated children, it is crucial to evaluate programs that have been established and maintained. This project is designed to evaluate the impact of SafeStart, an integrated EHS/Children and Youth Services program, on child and family outcomes. Specifically, this project will examine how contextual child and family factors at the time of enrollment, duration of enrollment, age at enrollment, and transitions and attrition are related to child outcomes while exploring what combination of factors put families at greatest risk for negative outcomes. Moreover, the project will use a community-based participatory research approach (Nastasi et al., 2000) to develop and strengthen relationships among crucial stakeholders, including local policy makers. Study findings will be applied to enhance the SafeStart program and to strengthen relationships between interagency programs and local legislature.