

Language and Cultural Diversity in the Classroom

Children under the age of six who come from immigrant families form the fastest growing segment of our population. Census estimates show that about 25% of preschool-aged children come from homes where a language other than English is spoken. Diversity of languages and cultures is growing throughout the country. So, what does that mean for your early childhood classroom and your curriculum right now?

A high quality, developmentally appropriate early childhood curriculum can be very effective in meeting the needs of diverse learners with attention to some key adaptations. Most importantly, there must be some support for each child's home language (DEC 2010, Tabors 2008, Nemeth 2009, Nemeth 2009, August & Shanahan, 2008).

Language is the main component of early literacy development, but including children from different languages and cultures involves more than just teaching them the alphabet. Five factors need to be considered in diverse early childhood education programs, bringing together the social/emotional as well as cognitive domains.

1. Identity and Self-Esteem

A child's home language is the language of his family. It is the language used to love and nurture him from the time he is born and it is the language in which he learns about the world and how he fits into it. It is so important to support and honor this powerful beginning and to help the child see that this part of his life is valued and understood. In the early years, children don't think of language as an academic subject. It is just part of who they are. In a classroom where the teacher only speaks the language of some children and not others, an English language learner (ELL) may feel like a second class citizen and may even be treated that way by other children (Chang, et al 2008). If the teacher finds a way to use some of every child's language at least some of every day, she can support the value of each language and support each ELL's self esteem. It is important to celebrate diversity more than just one multicultural day per year. Every child needs to feel recognized and valued every day.



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2. Tolerance and Acceptance of Diversity

The early childhood curriculum and environment should include clear messages about celebrating all kinds of differences. This adds value not only for the ELLs, but for all children by helping everyone grow up in a safe and positive atmosphere. Children in a classroom benefit by learning to make friends with others who may look or sound or behave differently and to interact without fear or judgment. Even if the adults in the classroom are not bilingual, each child's language and culture should be reflected throughout the classroom (Espinosa, 2009). Teaching children techniques for communicating with someone who speaks a different language helps them feel prepared and have fewer conflicts. Show them how to speak more slowly, to use gestures such as pointing and demonstrating, to repeat if their friend doesn't understand, and to be patient. Some curricular strategies teachers use to



address diversity in early childhood include:

- sharing books with themes about how we are alike and different.
- enjoying music from different countries.
- having families come in and share aspects of their culture.
- inviting volunteers to serve as bilingual role models.
- exploring culture and language through foods.
- field trips to different markets, performances, museums.
- using diverse classroom supplies.
- authentic, not stereotyped, images throughout the classroom.

3. Family Strength

Language is the tie that supports family bonds. Some families think they help their child by telling the school they want their child to learn only in English. However, research says that pushing a young child too quickly into English may have negative effects (Wong Fillmore, 1991). It is vital that early childhood programs have a strong, united position that is made clear to the parents. Parents need to know that, if it is their desire to have their child succeed in English, then supporting their home language in the early years is the best way to make that happen. The quality of

home language interactions can go a long way toward rounding out the effective early literacy and language curriculum in your program. Ideas you might try:

- Share information with the family about research and need to support home language.
- Help families learn what works such as reading and talking about stories, visiting interesting places and having conversations, getting a library card, enjoying chats while engaging in household activities.
- Set up a multilingual classroom lending library.
- Send home fun activity ideas to extend the explorations happening in your class.

4. Language Development

Supporting the home language while also supporting the learning of English can seem rather complicated because there may be different languages, abilities, and temperaments in the classroom. The following strategies can be used to enhance and support your existing curriculum:

- Use functional labeling for objects in the classroom. Show the words in English and also in the child's home language.
- Have many bilingual books but do not read them at the same time. Avoid simultaneous translation. Choose a few key words to introduce the story in the one language before reading in the other (Gillanders and Castro, 2011).
- Repeat and extend themes and projects. As the child is beginning to learn the meanings of words in a story, she will need to further practice and refine her understanding. After the story is over, place related props in the sand and water table or the block area, or sing songs with the same words later in the day.
- Increase your use of nonverbal communication strategies. Use more vocal expression, pointing, gesturing, and body language.
- Use visual supports when talking with children such as pictures, puppets, props, or even opening to the page in the story book.
- Assign language buddies. A more experienced child who may speak the newcomer's language or one who is very supportive can partner with a friend to help him understand how to participate in a game or activity.

5. Support for Teachers

Teaching in a diverse, inclusive classroom places many demands on the teacher. In order for the teacher to be successful, a number of program supports should be in place.

- Training in first and second language development
- Training in ESL and bilingual teaching strategies
- Cultural awareness training
- Support/time/resources to help the teacher learn and use the languages in her classroom
- Ongoing coaching and mentoring support
- Access to a staff member or volunteer who speaks the languages in the classroom to assist with observations, portfolios, communication and adapting classroom materials
- Materials and supplies in the languages/cultures of every child in the class
- Guidance from the chosen curriculum about making appropriate adaptations
- Guidance on observing and assessing ELLs in the context of the chosen curriculum

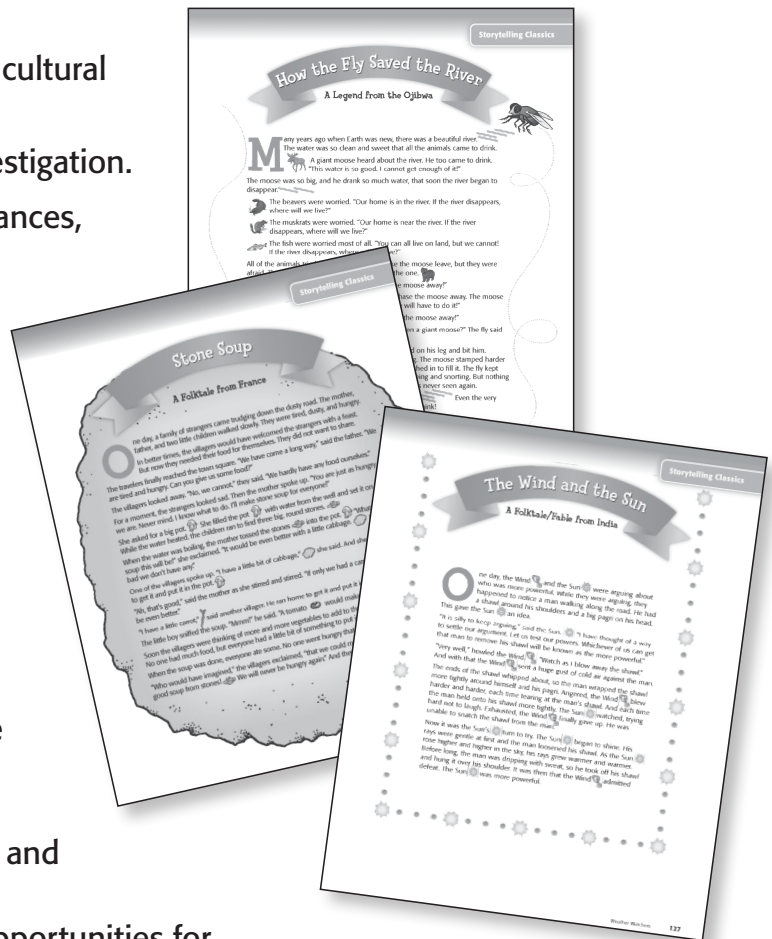
Advantages for All Early Childhood Children

Growing up bilingual brings cognitive advantages for all children. While the curriculum is adapted so ELLs can learn in their home language and English, the same thought should be given to helping English speakers learn another language. As our country becomes more and more diverse, early childhood teachers hold a pivotal role in helping the new generation of children grow up bilingual, culturally aware, and ready to get along with all kinds of people in all kinds of situations. What a wonderful opportunity to give every young child advantages for a lifetime.

Incorporating Ms. Nemeth's Research and Philosophy

The InvestiGator Club® supports language and cultural diversity in a variety of ways, including:

- multicultural tales and stories in each Investigation.
- culturally-rich activities including songs, dances, storytelling, and art projects.
- specific social and emotional and social studies activities that build on diversity and acceptance.
- ELL-specific suggestions in each Teacher Guide.
- interactive materials such as Oral Language Cards in dual languages.
- strong visual props such as Daily Routine Posters, Oral Language Cards, puppets, books, and Flapboards.
- opportunities for family members to share their cultural backgrounds with children.
- Spanish translations of all family correspondence as well as key vocabulary and story text.
- performance and authentic assessment opportunities for ELL children.
- multicultural classroom library with Bruno's Buzz books and collection of InvestiGator Club trade books.



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