

Promoting Equity for Young Multilingual Children and Their Families



This Focus Bulletin invites early care and education (ECE) educators to promote equity for young **multilingual children** and their families. Promoting equity calls for self-reflection. Therefore, in this bulletin we encourage you to critically reflect on your own identities and practices. In addition, we offer ideas for taking a **language-focused approach** to caregiving and instructional practice in ECE settings. Finally, we highlight voices from the field, and offer reflection questions to help you consider what it means to promote equity for multilingual children and their families. This Focus Bulletin is just one resource, focused on equity at an individual level. Although essential, it is beyond the scope of this particular bulletin to address the systemic change needed to promote equity for young multilingual children and their families.

Multilingual children are culturally and linguistically diverse children, ages birth to five years, who are learning two or more languages. Multilingual children are exposed to multiple languages in their homes, communities, and/or ECE settings, and they develop and use language in dynamic ways. In the field, these children are commonly referred to as dual language learners, or DLLs.

A **language-focused** approach promotes the dynamic language and cultural practices of multilingual children. It is rooted in equity and positions families as experts. This approach is vital to multilingual children's identities, development, and learning.

At WIDA we are committed to advancing equity and social justice for multilingual children and youth in ECE and K-12 settings. This work includes challenging linguistic discrimination, cultural biases, and racism (WIDA, 2019). Equity for young multilingual children means that they and their families have the right to ECE opportunities that help them thrive as engaged, valued, and flourishing *multilingual* humans (adapted from National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2019).

WIDA Focus Bulletins are resources for practitioners and educators who support, instruct, and assess multilingual learners in ECE and K-12 settings. To see other Focus Bulletins, please visit wida.wisc.edu/resources.

Advancing equity and social justice for multilingual children and their families requires understanding that **equality** is not the same as **equity**. Equity work calls for understanding our own identities and beliefs and questioning ideas of “best practice for all.” Too often, what appears to be “good for all” results in inequitable conditions for multilingual children and their families. Equity work is ongoing and can be challenging at times; nonetheless it is necessary for ensuring the nation’s youngest multilingual children have opportunities for optimal learning and development—including their home language and English language development.

Equality is not the same as equity.

Equality: The same treatment for everyone.

Equity: Fairness and justice. In early care and education, equity includes advocating for each child to thrive by building on their unique set of individual and family strengths—including cultural background, languages, abilities and disabilities, and experiences. It also involves eliminating differences in outcomes that are a result of past and present inequities in society and reimagining what ECE looks like (adapted from NAEYC, 2019).

What is a Language-Focused Approach? How can it Help me Promote Equity for Multilingual Children and Families?

Providing equitable learning opportunities for multilingual children requires all ECE educators to take a purposeful, language-focused approach to their caregiving and instructional practice. A language-focused approach calls on you to consider what multilingual children *can* do with language. This approach

Asset-based pedagogies are approaches to caregiving, teaching, and learning, rooted in social justice and equity, that honor diverse ways of knowing and being. Asset-based pedagogies draw from, build upon, and sustain children’s cultural and linguistic resources and practices (e.g., Souto-Manning et al., 2019).

promotes **asset-based pedagogies**. Asset-based pedagogies recognize and incorporate multilingual children’s language and cultural practices as valuable resources for learning. Creating ECE spaces where children feel their languages and cultural practices are valued can help multilingual children thrive as they explore their environment and learn (García, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017; Souto-Manning et al., 2019).

Take an Asset-based Stance and Address Bias

Taking an asset-based pedagogical stance calls on us to address biases about language, race, and cultural practices. In ECE settings, bias can show up in many ways, including instructional practice, selection of classroom materials, and interactions. As educators, it is our responsibility to address bias. For example, if you see a child teasing another child for speaking in a language other than English, you should address the situation. You can affirm the language the multilingual child is using, ask the children questions about how the comment made might be hurtful or unfair, and come up with ideas together about ways to celebrate multilingualism. Using asset-based pedagogies sends a strong message that cultural and linguistic diversity enriches the learning experiences of all children.

Embrace the Dynamic Nature of Language and Culture

When you adopt a language-focused approach to caregiving and instruction, you recognize and embrace the dynamic nature of language learning and development. Language is not learned in isolation—children learn language through their



interactions with others and their environments. For example, they learn and develop language by being active members of families, neighborhoods, communities, and ECE programs (Rogoff, 2003; Souto-Manning & Yoon, 2018). ECE educators who use a language-focused approach consider where and how a child is exposed to language, and how the child uses their language(s) to navigate their environments and interact with others. They use this knowledge of children’s language to plan and provide equitable learning opportunities.

A language-focused approach also calls on us to expand our understanding of cultural practices and acknowledge that learning about culture is an ongoing process. Culture is much more than what we see on the surface (e.g., foods, holidays, music, artifacts). Cultural practices are dynamic and may change based on who is involved and the context. As educators who stand for equity and social justice, this means we must position ourselves as learners and be open to exploring the linguistic and cultural practices of the children and families we serve. NAEYC (2019) says “view your commitment to cultural responsiveness as an ongoing process. It is not a one-time matter of mastering knowledge of customs and practices, but an enduring responsibility to learn and reflect based on direct experiences with children, their families, and others” (p. 6). Understanding the dynamic nature of language and culture better prepares ECE educators to meet the unique needs of multilingual children and their families.

Recognize Families as Language Experts

Early childhood educator, professor, and consultant Elsa Jones shares how she addresses deficit perspectives and monolingual norms with ECE teachers. “Diversity is a strength! Promoting the whole child’s development includes supporting the varied ways multilingual children learn and use language. Honoring cultural diversity and children’s first teachers – families – is an ethical responsibility.” Teachers and families have expressed beliefs that young children won’t succeed if they also speak home languages in classrooms. “I emphasize the value and benefits of being bilingual and multilingual. It’s a gift, an advantage I don’t have and truly wish I did.” Still, despite research-based best practices, not everybody sees it that way. A teacher once asked Elsa, “If eight different languages are spoken in children’s homes, does that mean we label the classroom and learn basic words in all eight languages?” The teacher felt it would be a burden. Elsa replied, “Yes! How do you decide which children’s languages you will omit and ultimately dishonor? All children must be appreciated and represented. If you authentically value every child and family, you do it!” – *Elsa Jones, Program Chair, Early Childhood Education, Post University, Waterbury, CT*

A language-focused approach recognizes that families are experts in their children’s language learning and development. Families of multilingual children are keen observers of children’s language use. They can offer valuable information to help educators support children’s home languages and English language development. Promoting equity for multilingual children calls on ECE educators to examine their family engagement practices and ensure that they provide opportunities for meaningful, ongoing, two-way communication with families of multilingual children *about language*.

Who am I? What do I Believe about Language Development and Learning?

Gina is a White early care educator who grew up speaking only English. She has done a lot of self-reflection about her identities and role as an ECE educator. She said, “When I was in a position as an ECE educator helping children and families achieve certain milestones and outcomes, that came easier. When I started at the migrant Head Start, I’d say to parents, ‘Why don’t you try this?’ and they’d say, ‘Why don’t you talk to us in Spanish?’ More than one mother said, ‘You are going to need to do this.’ I had to work through my ego and how to be approachable, confident, and humble. I began to see myself as a bouncing off point for what families want and need. I shifted my teacher identity from being in control of a classroom to supporting who was already there. Children need guidance and structure, but they don’t need to learn how to exist. I had a really amazing director at the center, and she set the tone. She knew every kid and every parent’s name and was out there in classrooms and in playgrounds all the time. When parents said things like ‘we can tell you’re trying, but you still don’t speak Spanish,’ she was never bothered. She’d say, ‘You know, you’re right.’ I don’t know if I would have had the same reaction when engaging with families myself if I hadn’t watched her own that and be a really gracious model.” – *Gina McTigue, ECE Educator, Brevard, NC*

An initial step to promote equity for multilingual children is to reflect on your own identities and your beliefs about language. Self-reflection involves thinking deeply about your personal beliefs, values, and biases. It means reflecting on the historical and current societal impacts of language discrimination, racism, classism, ableism, xenophobia, and other systems of oppression affecting you, the people around you, the families you serve, and the young children in your care.

A language-focused approach includes critically reflecting on your **language ideologies**. These are deeply held beliefs about the role of home languages, the early acquisition of English, and the kinds of **linguaging** that will lead to success. Ideologies shape practice and send messages to children and their families about how their identities and communication are or aren't valued..

Language ideologies are a set of beliefs, values, and attitudes about language that justify our perspective on linguistic acquisition, socialization, and communication (Silverstein, 1979).

Linguaging is using language to make meaning of the world around you and to shape your knowledge and experience (Swain, 2006). It views language as an action word rather than noun or named language like English or Mandarin. For multilingual children, linguaging can take place in all their languages at the same time.

For example, despite evidence to the contrary, the belief that bilingualism or multilingualism “confuses” children is still common today. This belief can result in practices that lead to home language loss and/or present inequitable conditions for multilingual children. Research has shown that developing two or more languages at the same time does not cause confusion or delays. In fact, multilingualism affords children cognitive, social, academic, and professional benefits (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2017). Also, becoming bilingual or multilingual in early childhood has shown to positively impact brain development in areas like attention. Early multilingualism also protects from brain decline later in life (Pliatsikas et al., 2020).

ECE educators who only speak English, or who do not know the languages their children speak, can promote children’s dynamic language practices by taking a stance that “everyone is learning” (Garritty, Aquino-Sterling, & Day, 2015). For example, Michelle, a bilingual Kindergarten teacher, has had children in her class who speak languages other than Spanish or English, the focus languages of her school’s dual language program. Michelle shared an example of how she made space for and validated a Russian-speaking child’s language use. “We always sing a good morning song in Spanish and English. ‘Good morning! Buenos días!’” And she would say it in Russian, too, and the kids would ask her about it. “When I have those advantages of children who speak multiple languages, I make time for them to shine. I say, ‘You’re teaching me something!’” - Michelle Reyes, Bilingual Kindergarten Teacher, Schaumburg, IL

Another common ideology or belief is about code-switching. Although some individuals view this language practice negatively and discourage children from engaging in it, research has shown its value. Specifically, **translanguaging** research has shown that the many ways that bilingual or multilingual people engage in languaging, which may include code-switching, are valid and valuable ways to make meaning, connect with others, and promote equity. While most translanguaging research in the United States is primarily based in K-12 settings, there is a growing body of studies in ECE settings (e.g., Arreguin-Anderson, Salinas-Gonzalez, & Alanis, 2018; García, 2020; Garrity, Aquino-Sterling, & Day, 2015; Gort & Sembiente, 2015).

Translanguaging refers to the complex language practices of multilinguals. It is a pedagogical approach, it is a stance that educators of multilingual children take, and it is transformative (García, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017). Multilingual children “do not simply switch codes or move from one language to another but they draw on the particular linguistic resources that specific sociocultural contexts require.” (García, Flores, & Woodley, 2012, p. 50).

How Do I Engage with Families as Partners and Advocates to Promote Equity for Multilingual Children?

In a research study on parents’ goals and concerns about language in early care and education, parents advocated for more linguistically and culturally responsive assessments (Mancilla, Spalter, Cuéllar, & Shekar, 2020). Parents were very concerned that their children are not able to fully show what they know on assessments administered in English. These parents believe this has led to their children being misclassified as having a speech or developmental delay. As parents were sharing their concerns about this topic, one mother leaned in and raised her voice to emphasize how critical it is for their concerns about the language of assessments be addressed. She said, “Pónganlo así como que esa sea una de las mayores prioridades, porque creo que eso nos preocupa a todas.” [Put it (unfair assessment practices) down as one of the major priorities because I think this is concerning for all of us.] - *Preschool Development Grant Parent Research Participant, MD*

Families are children’s first teachers. Recognizing families as experts on children’s language development is a core element of a language-focused approach. This approach calls on us to provide opportunities for **parent voice** to be heard and valued. Two-way communication is, after all, an essential element of relationships or partnerships with families..

Parent voice is the right and opportunity for multilingual parents and caregivers to express their thinking, beliefs, and understandings about language learning and language use (Mancilla, 2016). This includes how their children and family use language at home, how language is used within their community and/or society, and language learning experiences in and out of ECE programs. Parent voice may consist of parents' desires, dreams, goals, and hopes for their children's bi- or multilingualism, concern over the language used for instruction and assessment within ECE programs, and/or fear that their children will lose the home language. Parent voice may also come in the form of frustration, fear, or anger over isolation, exclusion, discrimination, or disrespect. Ideally, these understandings and beliefs have weight within children's formal learning environments, and ultimately have a positive influence on children's language development and learning.

It is also critical to engage families as advocates for their children's language development and learning. Advocacy requires a certain set of knowledge and skills. Often, families from historically marginalized populations, such as many families of multilingual children, have not had the chance to gain the knowledge and skills needed to advocate within the U.S. education system. Therefore, as educators who take a stance for equity and social justice, what steps are we taking to uplift families' voices? How are we supporting families' efforts to build the knowledge and skills needed to advocate? What barriers may families be facing when advocating for their children and what can we do to help? These are questions we must reflect and act on if we truly value partnerships with families.

Adopting a language-focused approach to engaging with families of multilingual children does look and sound different than traditional family engagement approaches or practices. The following list offers examples of language-focused family engagement practices:

- Continually seek input from families about their language goals, hopes, fears, and/or concerns.
- Build trust and respect by getting to know individual families and their language and cultural practices.
- Share information with families to clarify questions or concerns they may have about multilingualism. Offer information about the benefits of multilingualism to young children.
- Have regular, ongoing conversations with families about their children's language development and learning across the different settings children navigate (e.g., home, ECE setting).
- Develop a vision in collaboration with families on how your program will promote cultural and linguistic diversity.
- Create welcoming spaces where families can network with other families that share common goals (for example, bilingualism and multilingualism) and/or concerns.
- Provide ways for families to share about ECE options with each other in languages they understand. More than written flyers or online information, word-of-mouth is a common way that families learn about and make decisions regarding ECE programming.

Conclusion

In summary, adopting a language-focused approach can include

- Reflecting on personal beliefs about language and your own language practices
- Actively seeking to learn from families about how language is used in their homes and communities
- Ensuring that the voices of families and community members of multilingual children are included in all aspects of early care and education—including decision-making
- Taking a stance on language that invites multilingual children to use their linguistic resources—in all of their languages—to communicate and interact with others so that all languages, dialects, and accents are celebrated (García, Johnson, & Selzer, 2017)
- Encouraging children to use their languages in ways that fuel their creativity and curiosity
- Intervening gently but firmly, to address situations where a multilingual child is the target of teasing, rejection, or exclusion based on their language background or use
- Engaging in professional learning focused on multilingualism and equity
- Recognizing how educational systems are set up to provide more resources and options to people who are White, “standardized” speakers of English
- Advocating for change in policy and practice to ensure multilingual children have equitable, high quality ECE opportunities

Adopting a language-focused approach and engaging in critical self-reflection are great starting points for equity work at the individual level. But the work does not stop there. Equity is about creating a sense of belonging. This means taking concrete steps to embrace multilingual children’s dynamic language practices and engaging with families as experts, true



partners, and advocates. It means challenging policies or practices that position multilingual children’s language practices as deficient. Equity is not achieved in one day, nor is it a set of strategies that will work for all. Equity work is an ongoing effort. Equity for multilingual children happens through a language-focused approach that reimagines what early care and education looks and sounds like.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

You can use the following questions (adapted from Motha, 2014 and [Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019](#)) to guide self-reflection or to talk with your peers or colleagues (e.g., in a professional learning community).

Examining my own Identities and Ideologies

- What messages about English and other languages did I get from my environment growing up (e.g., family, media, child care, school, local businesses, and community centers)?
- How does language connect to my other identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, ability, class, and others)?
- What access and privileges are (or are not) afforded to me because of the forms of language I speak?
- What value do I assign to certain language dialects, accents, forms of language, or mixing of languages?
- What can I do to make more space for open and honest conversations about equity and language use?
- How can I strengthen my sense of justice related to language use and my capacity to change unfair situations to fair ones?

Connecting Ideologies to Caregiving and Instructional Practice in Learning Spaces

- When I picture an ECE setting with children who are engaged in learning, what do I see and hear? How is language being used? How do I feel about the languages I'm hearing and how am I responding?
- How do I incorporate all my children's languages and the way they use language in my learning spaces (e.g., welcoming and promoting translanguaging)?
- How do I create spaces for conversations about language with families of multilingual children? What do I know about the language goals families have for their children? How do I use information I learn from families about children's language to help inform my practice?
- How do I promote culture as dynamic, individual, and changing, based on context? How do I challenge stereotypes?
- Can I think of a time when I avoided addressing a deficit perspective on language? Can I think of a time when I addressed a deficit perspective on language head on? What were the consequences of silence or speaking up?
- How can I strengthen children's innate sense of justice related to language use and their capacity to change unfair situations into fair ones?

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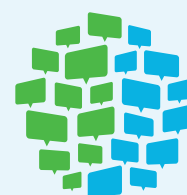
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