

Supporting Bilingual Learners and their Families: Key Understandings for Pre-Service Teachers and the Institutions that Prepare Them

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Abstract

An essential component of successful schooling in linguistically and culturally diverse settings is the active involvement of parents and community members. This is made possible when teachers honor families' languages and cultural traditions and build upon them. Teacher preparation programs play a critical role in helping pre-service teachers reject deficit views and recognize that issues of status, power, and economic circumstances all play a role in shaping outcomes for students. Part of the asset orientation that must be fostered in new teachers is the understanding that primary or home language development contributes to both the academic success of children and the well-being of linguistically and culturally diverse communities as a whole. The article provides specific examples of understandings that preparation programs can instill in new teachers so that they come to see community outreach as essential to creating a positive and supportive school environment for all learners.

Introduction

When parents are unable to talk to their children, they cannot easily convey to them their values, beliefs, understandings, or wisdom about how to cope with their experiences. They cannot teach them about the meaning of work, or about personal responsibility, or what it means to be a moral or ethical person in a world with too many choices and too few guideposts to follow. What is lost are the bits of advice, the consejos parents should be able to offer children in their everyday interactions with them. Talk is a crucial link between parents and children: It is how parents impart their cultures to their children and enable them to become the kind of men and women they want them to be. When parents lose the means for socializing and influencing their children, rifts develop and families lose the intimacy that comes from shared beliefs and understandings." (Wong Fillmore, 1991, p. 343)

These words were written more than a quarter century ago, yet they still evoke a danger faced by many Latino families in the U.S.—losing a connection to and role in their children's lives. Affirming the role of parents and community members and the language and cultural traditions they bring with them is a critical component in successful schooling in linguistically and culturally diverse communities. The main focus of this article—support for the development of all of the linguistic resources that bilingual learners bring with them to school—should be at the core of all teacher preparation programs. Learning how to reach out to families who speak a language other than English is just one part of a comprehensive set of understandings that address language, cultural identity, and academic achievement. What follows is a rationale for and examples of some of the non-traditional ways in which Latino parents can help their children and support their life in school. The practices advocated here reflect the kind of asset orientation towards parents and community members that all teachers should embrace and offer suggestions for ways in which all educators can demonstrate a value for students' home languages and culture.

We have known for decades that parent participation is a strong contributor to children's academic achievement (see Epstein et al., 2009, for a complete review of the research as well as specific strategies for building strong home school partnerships). The literature describes many different roles that families can take in relation to children's schooling, spanning a continuum that ranges from passive spectators to active decision makers (Berger, 2007; Swap, 1987). For many Latino / Spanish-speaking parents, linguistic and cultural barriers

will make this involvement with the schools their children attend both more necessary and more challenging. New teachers must embrace efforts to reach out to all families, regardless of language or cultural background, as essential to creating a positive and supportive school environment.

Sociopolitical Context

As linguistic and cultural diversity increases, teacher preparation programs must provide opportunities for all pre-service teachers to develop a positive view towards the maintenance of students' primary languages and learn why it is important to advocate for the development of bilingualism as an essential part of home-school partnerships in a multicultural setting. This perspective is reflected in the following "Organizing Principles" from Miramontes, Nadeau, and Commins (2011):

- The more comprehensive the use of the primary language, the greater the potential for linguistically diverse students to be academically successful. There are always ways to nurture the primary language, regardless of school resources.
- Sociocultural factors and political context must be considered in making decisions regarding every aspect of program planning.
- Parents and community must play a major role in the learning and schooling of their children. (p. 24)

In an increasingly global society, it is critical to prepare children and adults who can interact with, learn from, work for, and care about what happens to people who are different from themselves. Ovando, Collier, and Combs (2003) suggest that "the ability to build a strong partnership is intimately connected with the picture that educators have of the local community" (p. 393). The way that language is used and respected is a critical element of home/school partnerships. At the center of teacher preparation should be a demonstrated value for bilingualism, multilingualism, and intercultural competence.

New teachers must come to understand that instructional programs do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they exist within schools that are situated in communities that can be defined along several dimensions. There is the geographic community that physically surrounds a school; there are the ethnolinguistic communities that constitute the student population; and there are the institutions, services, leisure activities, and commercial enterprises that constitute the life of the broader civic community. As pre-service teachers begin their placements and internships, they should be prepared to pay attention to the linguistic and cultural contexts within which they will work. Coursework should provide the impetus for them to be asking questions such as:

- Is there a climate of respect for different languages and cultures in your building? In the larger community?
- What is the message sent to parents and children about the value and importance of students maintaining and deepening their primary language?
- Is trying to address the needs of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds seen as a burden or as an opportunity?
- Are families and community members viewed as assets to students' academic success or as disinterested or counterproductive?

To address the complex interactions of language, culture and academic achievement, teacher preparation programs need to make it transparent that nothing that has to do with schooling is neutral. They need to help pre-service teachers reject deficit views and recognize that issues of status, power, and economic circumstances all play a role in shaping outcomes for students. For example, it is common for teachers to see students who come from homes where a language other than English is spoken as broken. New (and practicing) teachers too often believe that their job is to "repair" these students by teaching them English. Bilingual students are NOT broken, they are whole human beings who come with strengths and resources that can be built upon. They have the potential to become academically bilingual and bicultural—a benefit to themselves and to the society as a whole.

Terminology is also important. Preparation programs need to move away from labeling students from

diverse linguistic backgrounds simply as “English language learners” and help pre-service teachers learn to think critically about what it means to “learn English” as well as the nature of bilingualism and its benefits. It is also important to emphasize that children are not just learning a new language in school: they are becoming socialized into a new culture and set of power relationships. Some questions to consider (potentially as part of an action research project) include:

- What happens to bilingual learners when they enter schools and embark on the road to proficiency in the dominant language?
- What does it mean to their families that children are becoming speakers of the dominant language and being socialized to new ways of acting?
- In what ways does the schooling experience maximize or limit students’ possibilities for success?

Working with Families and Community—An Outreach Perspective

Typically, interaction with families and communities falls under the umbrella of “parent involvement.” In contrast, the term “outreach” describes an effort where school personnel go out and draw in parents, other family members, and the community at large into the school arena as partners (Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins, 2011). An effective outreach program is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. The goal of community outreach is to build strong relationships based on two-way communication. This entails building trust and breaking down barriers that might be created by language and culture. Pre-service teachers should be guided in how to establish mutual respect with the families of their students by adopting an attitude of learning and maintaining a commitment to the good of the whole society. It is important that new teachers come to embrace the need for community outreach and view their roles as outreach ambassadors. One of the most important messages teachers can send is the value for the students’ primary language as a vehicle for strong identity development to support learning in and out of school.

One goal of outreach can be to break down fears associated with cultural change. Instead of school representing the “other world,” teachers can co-construct the classroom environment so that students’ own linguistic and cultural backgrounds are core variables that drive instruction. The sense of community that develops through school outreach efforts can help reassure families that the school is a safe environment for their children, is understanding and supportive of their values, and is concerned about creating a partnership between home and school.

Teacher candidates should come to understand that for many parents being physically absent from the school arena does not mean a lack of interest on their part. A lack of familiarity and comfort with the school setting is one reason that many parents are reluctant to get involved in school activities. Some issues that may impact Latino parents’ willingness or ability to participate include why they have come to the community in the first place, as well as the larger issues of language and/or culture inherent in immigrant group integration.

Some parents consider teachers to be disinterested and unresponsive to their children. They may feel that their own beliefs about education are ignored or undervalued. Because across the world in different countries there are vast differences in the expectations around schooling, including the way teachers dress, when students can enroll, expectations for parental involvement, or the way addition and multiplication are taught; misunderstandings and miscommunications can easily occur.

As indicated in the quote at the beginning of the article, one of the greatest dangers in bilingual communities is the breakdown of intergenerational communication and the disruption of family ties. It is inevitable when people leave one country for another that such ties will be strained, but it can be exacerbated by well meaning, yet uninformed, practices and policies in schools. A haphazard or uncritical approach, especially to issues of language use and cultural identity, can result in weakened family ties. When children are exhorted to adapt to the new culture and the dominant language is the only one that is used for instruction, children can receive the message that who they are, as well as the language and culture of their parents, is no longer of value. Feelings of alienation and not belonging, caused by communication barriers, can contribute to unrest among adolescents and young adults in linguistically and culturally diverse communities.

Without strong messages from schools and the larger community to do otherwise, students who arrive

at school speaking languages other than English typically abandon their first language, reject their home culture, and often lose the ability to communicate with key members of their care-giving community. With so many things to learn in order to survive in the new setting, it can be easy for immigrants to think that the best thing to do is leave the primary language behind and concentrate on fitting in. In my own family, my immigrant grandparents encouraged their children to stop using their home language so that they could fit in and do well in school. As a result, my parents, and so many others like them, gave up their primary language and became monolingual English speakers—inadvertently cutting off my generation and those that come after from a rich cultural heritage.

One way to counteract this trend is for schools to send the unified message that the stronger the primary language, the better students will do in all of their academic work. (Cummins, 2007; Goldenberg, 2013; Greene, 1997). Through their attitudes and action, educators can help students to maintain their first language while they are learning the dominant language. At minimum, teachers can insist that parents have a role and encourage them to always use their strongest language to continue to develop their children's linguistic and cognitive strengths.

Why Does Maintaining the Primary Language Help?

To better understand why the continued development of students' primary language is so critical, it is helpful to think of the brain as a kind of "conceptual reservoir." This reservoir contains the knowledge, conceptual understandings, and ways of acting in the world that humans accumulate as they develop from birth through adulthood (Cummins, 2011; Miramontes, Nadeau, & Cummins, 2011). Figure 1 below represents the idea that this reservoir of knowledge can be accessed and added to through any language a person knows. The pathways in are receptive—we acquire information and understandings through listening, observing, exploring, reading, and imitating. The pathways out are how we represent thought and ideas—speaking, writing, artistic expression, and physical movement. The arrows on the left labeled *L1* (first language or primary language) show these pathways going in and out of the reservoir. As we learn more, the pathways in and out grow stronger. Implicit in this discussion is that the primary language is not simply a language, but holds the mores and behaviors of the home culture.

Using both languages

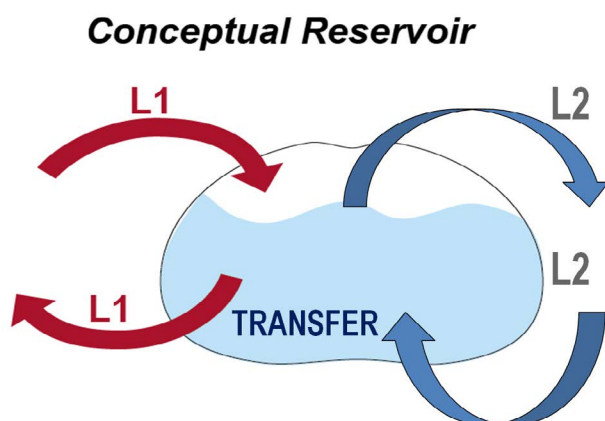


Figure 1. Using Both Languages. Knowledge can be added to and accessed from the conceptual reservoir through all the languages a person knows (Miramontes et al., 2011).

When people begin to learn a second language, they do not start a new reservoir—rather, they begin to express what they already know and understand through the new language. The arrows labeled *L2* (second language) demonstrate adding conceptual knowledge to the reservoir and representing what is known through a second (or third) language. For example, once you know that polygons are distinguished by their number of

sides and angles, you do not have to relearn the concept of “shapeness”—just the new terms for the shapes you already know. By understanding this relationship between the two languages, pre-service teachers can come to see primary language support as contributing to and not deterring academic success in a second language.

A key understanding that teacher preparation programs should impart is that whatever students know in one language, they can learn to express through any language they learn. The more students know, the more there is to transfer. In practice, this means that teachers should be encouraging students to value learning in all languages and affirm that learning through the primary language will strengthen learning through the second. While some individuals may sense this intuitively, many second language learners have the feeling that they are starting over. This is exacerbated by comments from teachers such as, “These students don’t know anything,” when what they do not know yet is how to express their ideas through English.

Educators must help students see their primary language, not as a stigma, but rather as a gift. For this to happen, part of the understandings that all new teachers should acquire is that the maintenance of the primary language is a way to build academic skills, and not simply a desire to hold onto the past. This is especially important in language restrictive states (e.g. Arizona) that dictate that only English can be used for instruction and formal primary language is not permitted. Teachers can still send the message to students that their home language is of value. Even minimal supports, like having books and dictionaries in languages other than English in the classroom or directing students to web links related to the topics of instruction, will make a difference for the students. There is no law that says teachers cannot encourage students to maintain their home language.

Parents can and must play an active role in continuing to add to students’ conceptual understandings or “deepen the reservoir.” This does not mean asking them to teach the curriculum, but to focus on continued cognitive development. All parents can extend the kinds of thinking skills critical to academic success such as inferring, predicting, comparing/contrasting, etc. These can be developed in multiple ways using real life experiences, pictures, books, or whatever else is available in the home environment. As an example, in a history class a teacher candidate could send home a copy of a photo or illustration from a textbook for students and parents to use as a basis for discussion. They could discuss what they see; any connections they might have; compare situations, clothing styles, and/or events to those in their own experience; infer what might have happened before and predict what comes next. A powerful way that schools can connect to Latino families is to assist students in creating what Cummins et.al. (2005) have termed “identity texts.” According to the authors, the products are positive statements that the children make about themselves through written, spoken, visual, musical, dramatic, or multimedia presentations. What is essential is that the topics are of the students’ choosing based on their own experiences at home, and are authentically integrated into the academic curriculum at school.

Encouraging parents to continue their children’s conceptual development in their primary language—reading and talking in the first language at home—will make it easier to bring the community into the classroom. A major goal is to instill in children a pride in who they are, while at the same time respecting differences and becoming open to new ways of thinking and doing. Preparation programs need to give prospective teachers the tools they need to find out what students bring with them to the learning environment and help them to develop a strong sense of self.

An added benefit of seeing parents as partners is in diagnosing learning difficulties. When lines of communication are opened between parents and teachers it is possible for them to work together to try understand the nature of any academic problems a child may have. By inviting parents to share how their children learn at home, teachers can better determine whether academic challenges are due to expected second language development patterns or may stem from deeper processing issues, as any underlying cognitive challenges would be evident in the primary language. This both affirms the role of parents in their children’s schooling and increases the likelihood that appropriate instructional interventions will be chosen.

Tapping into “Community Funds of Knowledge”

Another aspect of outreach is becoming aware of the cultural assets in the community. In order to

appreciate the role and importance of language and culture, teacher candidates can begin by analyzing how their own language and culture affect their attitudes and beliefs about learning. Because their biases and perspectives will influence how they interact with their students, it is important that they are given opportunities to uncover how they view and value other languages. While it may not be possible to be completely knowledgeable about every culture in a school, all teachers can become more conscious of the possibility of cross-cultural differences, the visible and invisible power relations at work, and seek to understand and accommodate or illuminate them. They also can maintain the perspective that all families and communities have something to offer in support of children's academic success.

Pre-service teachers should be provided opportunities to link with families in their school communities and reinforce parents' role in deepening conceptual understandings through the primary language at home. Another way to link families to the instructional program is by incorporating what are termed "community funds of knowledge" into the academic curriculum (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, 1990). Funds of knowledge are defined as the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, get ahead or thrive. They include the dynamics of the children's households, and how they function as part of a wider, changing economy. When teacher candidates come to view students' communities as resources and linguistically and culturally diverse families as having assets, they can build on this knowledge, and help parents work from their strengths by providing ways for them to authentically participate in their children's education.

As part of coursework and internship experiences, teacher candidates should have opportunities to:

- Interview or survey parents and community members about the kind of work they do and the skills they have.
- Learn about "survival networks" in the community and how newcomers make sense of new cultural and social patterns.
- Investigate the kinds of activities, responsibilities, and interactions children have in their home community.
- Invite family members to share their knowledge and expertise as part of the delivery of the curriculum.
- Value students' ability to use more than one language by bringing the languages of the community into the school and classroom.
- Encourage non-English-speaking parents and family members to communicate with their children in their strongest language.

Another way to facilitate communication with families is to make use of linguistic resources that exist in both the school and ethnolinguistic community to act as bridges between the two. Many schools employ native language tutors, community liaisons, and bilingual teachers. While this support is usually limited and seldom available for all languages, still the message sent is that the education system does support use of students' primary languages for learning.

Overcoming Language Barriers

Preparation programs should provide all teacher candidates with ideas for how to overcome language barriers that may exist between families and schools. For example, connecting to families through their primary languages will require the use of oral interpreters and translating key documents and information. This entails much more than finding someone who speaks the language on the spur of the moment. The most effective interpretations occur when the person is proficient in the dominant language, has a strong understanding of both cultures, and is familiar with the context about which they will interpret, i.e. school rules, expectations or policies regarding special services. It will be important to find people who speak the same dialect, as there are huge variations in terminology, accent, and semantics across the different dialects of the same language. It is critical that interpreters understand that their role is to communicate the message accurately and help clarify misunderstandings, but not to advocate for a particular response.

Pre-service teachers must also become conscious that children translating for their parents may be perceived as an easy solution but there are many drawbacks to relying on this translation strategy. The children are readily available, but they may not have the skills to go back and forth between two languages or be familiar with technical vocabulary. Acting as the translator may also shift the typical power relationships in the family and result in discomfort for both the child and the adult. Imagine having been asked as a 10 year-old to tell your mother that she needed an operation or informing your father that he had cancer. If this would be difficult for us as adults, it must be overwhelming to a child. According to the Office for Civil Rights (2010), the use of children as interpreters for school-related issues is never advisable. While these situations are sometimes unavoidable, every effort should be made to minimize their occurrence and help students and their families cope with the dynamics and challenges of children translating for adults.

Creating Partnerships within the Context of Public Schooling

All pre-service teachers must see themselves as working in partnership with families. Partnerships based on cooperation allow a two-way flow of getting information from and giving information to families. The goal is to let families know you are there to help them and their children as demonstrated in Figure 2. There are a multitude of activities that spell cooperation when families do not speak English. They can be as varied as workshops, classes, and training sessions; written communication in the parents' native language; identification of and communication through media that exist in the home languages of the students; and individual mentors. Special classes can be offered for parents in the dominant language and their primary language related to school topics, vocabulary, and procedures.



Figure 2: “En Columbine, Todos Somos Familia.” This bulletin board posted at the entrance to a school in Colorado affirms its diversity and welcomes all families. (Photo: Nancy Commings)

As pre-service teachers enter their internships, they should develop an awareness of the total school climate and non-instructional aspects of the setting that affect the wellbeing of students and their families. Again, course and internship assignments can focus on this aspect and require students to examine elements of a welcoming school community in multilingual settings. For example, the school office is usually the first contact families have with schooling. No matter the location, how families are received makes a difference. Words, body language, and facial expressions all send a message. Below is a set of “Look-Fors” that can be used to identify

many of the simple steps that every school or institution can take regardless of the language skills of the teachers and other staff members.

Creating a Welcoming Environment: Key Look-Fors (Commins, 2008)

- Are there welcome phrases, directions, and notices in the major languages spoken by the students?
- Is there a list of interpreters in each language or a set of contacts in the school or community who can help out if needed?
- What kind of informal communication structures are in place (such as “telephone trees” or bilingual parent contacts) for each language group to convey important information?
- Is there a formal orientation process (Tours, Videos, Conversations, Podcasts, etc.) to let families know about school routines and requirements such as school timetables and calendars in languages other than English?
- Does the school provide opportunities for parents to observe classes either directly or through videos?
- Does the school maintain a multicultural or multi-faith calendar to ensure that planned events either coincide or do not conflict with significant dates in the community?
- Is there any formal or informal training for new staff regarding the best ways to reach out to families?
- Does the school provide childcare for meetings or afterschool events?
- Is there a tolerance for children being present in all situations?
- Is food provided or allowed at community-oriented events or meetings?
- Are parents and community members invited to share their knowledge and resources or involved in any way to help find library materials and websites in their own languages or work with students on dual-language projects?

Not all parents see their role as being involved in their children’s formal education. When they do get involved, it is often the whole family. No matter what is attempted, it will require acceptance, patience, persistence, and above all, an open-door, welcoming attitude. Other assignments might include conducting interviews and talking with parents to seek to learn about their interests and circumstances (Ahlquist, 2006). Questions can address what the parents want teachers to know about their children, their culture, their hopes for their children’s education and future in the schools of their adopted homes. Messages about the importance of the primary language can help students see that they too belong and are valued.

Teacher candidates working with older students can participate in efforts to learn about the various cultures by conducting mini-ethnographic interviews to get to know the families (Flaitz, 2006). As part of history, geography, language arts, music, math or art methods courses, students can compare and contrast a single variable across countries and cultures, e.g. literacy rates, climate, non-verbal communication clues, or how multiplication is taught. They can inform themselves about the places in the world that their students are arriving from and create country reports and display visual images that might help to create a sense of belonging in the school. Other activities teacher candidates might engage in to get to know students and their families include:

- Clarify values around classroom practices.
- Reflect on thoughts and feelings if one were to trade places.
- Talk about losses and gains as a result of the immigrant experience.
- Discuss proverbs and “words of wisdom” across languages and cultures.
- Create a newcomer’s guide: “Understanding Your New School.”

Break Down Barriers

A fundamental disposition that pre-service teachers must adopt is that they have much in common with people they might perceive as different from themselves. Most important perhaps is that all parents love their

children and want them to succeed. Teacher preparation programs should provide candidates opportunities to build personal relationships and cross-cultural understanding both for themselves and among different parent groups regarding similar needs, interests, or concerns. This can be as varied as becoming conversation partners, providing each other with cooking classes, or sharing childcare. Another way for teachers and families to learn about each other is by jointly creating a Community Portrait that could include characteristics of ethnicity and the socioeconomic structure in the community, how various languages are used outside of school, or the history of the area and important locales and events. Additional ideas include:

- Link families one on one so that new arrivals and longer-term residents are able to build personal relationships and break down barriers.
- Encourage parents who are more established to develop a parent network to welcome and support newly arriving families whether from across the city or around the globe.
- Discuss parenting and how the rules and expectations for behavior might be similar and different across countries and cultures.
- Recruit and train bilingual peer tutors for new students, who can help with the translation of signs, notices, and newsletters, or act as greeters and guides for parent teacher meetings and events.
- Help all school community members understand the gift of bilingualism and how all children benefit from adding new languages onto their primary language.

A final area of focus for teacher preparation programs is how pre-service teachers can help build a sense of ownership in schools where parents may not speak the language of instruction or know the possibilities for taking advantage of school resources. Central to this is exposing candidates to multiple ways of supporting primary languages as a resource. For example, schools provide a natural setting in which to meet the educational needs of adults which has the additional benefit of students seeing their parents actively engaged in the learning process themselves. A parent education program can provide classes in the dominant language. Teacher candidates might conduct an assessment of parents' educational and schooling needs through interest surveys to determine the kinds of classes and opportunities that would be of interest or value to families. This work is most effective when done in collaboration with sponsoring agencies, religious organizations, or other community groups.

Conclusion

This article has explored the knowledge and perspectives all teacher candidates should receive in their preparation programs regarding the importance of connecting with families through their primary language. Supporting primary language development will contribute to both the academic success of children and to the wellbeing of their linguistically and culturally diverse communities as a whole. Given the widely varying circumstances and program types that pre-service teachers attend, what can be accomplished in terms of application of these perspectives may vary. But all programs can include these perspectives and seek to provide opportunities for all prospective teachers to develop an asset orientation towards and value of bilingualism for all students.

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