ABCs of Family and Community Engagement: Key Considerations for Centering Multilingual Voices

Language can be a bridge that links families, communities, programs, and schools and opens possibilities for relationships guided by respect, care, and trust (Morris & Nóra, 2024). Listening to and collaborating with multilingual families and communities, and incorporating the ways they engage with their children, contribute to positive experiences in school and beyond (e.g., He & Thompson, 2022; Bang et al., 2019; Paris & Alim, 2017).

All of the ABCs are interconnected. Together, they emphasize that family and community engagement should embody the following qualities:

- Linguistically and culturally responsive and sustaining: incorporating families' dynamic language and cultural practices through learner and family agency and a critical lens
- Holistic: considering the whole person and their varied identities and communities
- Contextualized: focusing on your setting and your families and communities
- Ongoing: happening throughout the year and over time
- Reciprocal: involving two-way communication, collaboration, and partnerships
- Integrated: addressing family and community engagement at individual, interpersonal, and systemic levels (Coady, 2019; Mapp & Bergman, 2019; Bang et al., 2019; Morris & Nóra, 2024; NAFSCE, 2022; Pratt et al., 2024)

This document offers a brief synthesis of literature to support educators working with multilingual learners and their families and communities. (Please refer to the definitions resource for key terms and definitions used throughout this document.) It is organized around six ABCs of family and community engagement—key considerations that are essential for strengthening family and community engagement practices. These six ABCs are awareness, advocacy, building trust, breaking barriers, collaboration, and connect to learning.

Awareness

- Engaging in self-reflection and building awareness can lead to mindset shifts that positively impact engagement with families and communities of multilingual learners (Baquedano-López, 2021; Mapp & Bergman, 2021; Nguyen & Commins, 2020).

- Awareness of self: One important way to raise awareness is to reflect on your own social identities and biases. It is also important to reflect on your beliefs about working with families and how families should support their children's education. When working with multilingual families and communities, it is especially important to reflect on what you have learned and believe about multilingualism, multiculturalism, and language development (Brooks et al., 2021).

- Awareness of the multilingual learners in your context: Another way to raise awareness is to get to know the multilingual learners, families, and communities you serve. Engage in ongoing conversations with multilingual learners and their families. Learn about their beliefs and experiences in school, their language and cultural goals for their children, and any concerns they have (Coady, 2019; Mancilla, 2016; Olivos, 2021).

- Awareness of historical contexts and broader systems: Learn about and reflect on how education systems and society have granted or withheld respect, resources, and opportunities to multilingual learners and their families and communities based on their varied identities (for example, language, residency status, ability, and others). Learn about those who have successfully fought for language and other rights (National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement [NAFSCE], 2022; Powell et al., 2024; Soto-Boykin et al., 2021).
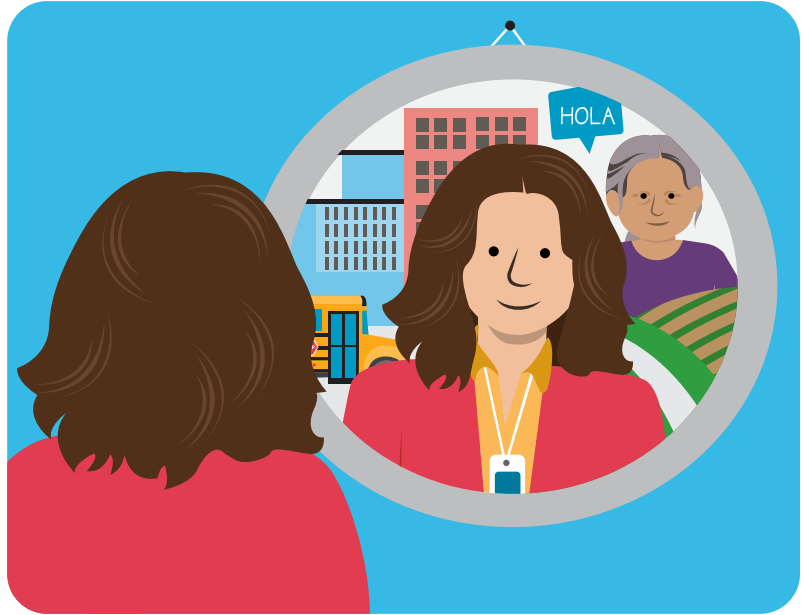
Guiding Questions

- What do I expect of the families and communities of the multilingual learners I serve? How do my identities and experiences impact my expectations of how families engage?
- What do multilingual families expect from us? How do I get to know about the individual experiences and beliefs of multilingual learners and families in my context?
- What mindset shifts will help me promote responsive family and community engagement for multilingual learners?

Advocacy

- Advocacy is an important tool that multilingual families, communities, and educators can use to identify unfair policies and practices and improve multilingual children's educational experiences and trajectories (NAFSCE, 2022).

- Advocacy requires a certain knowledge base and skill set. Educators can engage in professional learning to build their knowledge. Important topics include linguistically and culturally sustaining approaches to family and community engagement, such as understanding families' legal rights, the benefits of multilingualism and preserving home languages, anti-bias practices, and providing spaces for translanguaging (Harry & Ocasio-Stoutenburg, 2020; NAFSCE, 2022; Office of English Acquisition, 2023).

- U.S. school systems are historically built on norms and expectations of white, middle class, monolingual, English-speaking families. For families of multilingual learners, it is important to build trusting, collaborative relationships to open up opportunities for advocacy. Also, schools must have clear ways to share about multilingual families' rights and how the school system works. To do this, educators can apply a critical lens to determine how their policies around resources, infrastructure, staffing, curriculum, and instruction are or are not serving multilingual learners and their families (Bang et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2024).

- It's important to offer a variety of avenues for advocacy at individual and systems levels. Consider how your systems support multilingual family advocacy through budgeting, staffing, and resources. Opportunities for advocacy should go beyond typical opportunities like parent–teacher conferences and joining a parent–teacher organization. For example, educators could create welcoming spaces where multilingual families can network in small groups with other multilingual families around goals and concerns to bring back to the school (Blair & Haneda, 2021).

- A common image of an advocate is someone walking up to a teacher or into a board meeting and vocally advocating. Other advocacy roles that families play are just as important and should be encouraged. This may include roles such as storytellers, visionaries, resource connectors, models, collaborators, and others (Iyer, 2017; Mapp & Bergman, 2021).

Guiding Questions

- How do we make sure that our multilingual families feel welcome to connect with and partner with school staff to advocate for their children?
- How do we make sure that multilingual families are included when decisions are being made and provided opportunities to advocate for responsive systems and community connections?
- How do we equip our staff with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to support multilingual family advocacy?

Building Trust

- Trusting relationships are a fundamental part of family and community engagement (Herrera et al., 2020; Mapp & Bergman, 2019; Turnbull et al., 2022). They are also central to education in general. Situating care and compassion as core to family and community engagement promotes responsive educational opportunities for multilingual learners (Pratt et al., 2024).

- Building trust includes (a) care and mutual respect, (b) integrity, or keeping one's word, (c) competence and believing in each other's skills and knowledge, and (d) cultural and linguistic humility, including self-reflection, openness, and learning. These are foundational to building trusting relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; NAFSCE, 2022).

- Educators can partner with cultural and language brokers, often referred to as liaisons, to offer connections with individuals who understand school, family, and community contexts (Ishimaru et al., 2016; Geller et al., 2015; Grant et al., 2022).

- Educators can foster environments for trust-building (both inside and outside of a school building) by listening first, taking an assets-based approach, and keeping conversations going throughout the year (NAFSCE, 2022). It is important to meet multilingual families in community spaces they prefer, respect their and their children's lived experiences, answer their questions, and follow through on their needs and ideas (Caspe & Hernandez, 2023; Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

- It takes ongoing commitment and systemic support to build trust. Educators and administrators should dedicate time and resources to building trusting relationships with multilingual learners and their families and communities (Kandel-Cisco et al., 2020).

Guiding Questions

- How do we build trusting relationships with multilingual learners and their families and communities? What resources are we devoting to this? What resources do we need?
- What might make a multilingual family feel unwelcome in our program, school, or district? How can we address this?
- What are the needs and goals that our multilingual families have that can be met through building trusting community partnerships? How will we build and sustain these partnerships?

Breaking Barriers

- At the systemic level, schools often adopt deficit-based, assimilative approaches toward multilingual learners' language and cultural practices. Language is seen as a barrier, but in reality, this is not the case; the barriers are the systems and deficit mindsets that are not responsive to multilingualism. Breaking barriers includes addressing unfair practices at individual and systemic levels and collaboratively (re)building policies to center multilingual family and community voices, knowledge, and priorities (Housel, 2020; Mapp & Bergman, 2019; Vera et al., 2012).

- Breaking barriers involves critically reflecting on your program, school, or district's expectations for family and community engagement. Standardized forms of English and other languages are often positioned as more academic, intellectual, professional, and useful, despite this not being the case. Even when multilingual students learn standardized English, their language is often still seen as deficient (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Breaking barriers also means partnering with multilingual families to incorporate their dynamic language and cultural practices, including translanguaging, into school environments and instruction (Alfaro & Bartolomé, 2023; Baker-Bell, 2020; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Seltzer et al., 2017). Districts and schools can also explore and create connections with community agencies that have a focus on promoting access and opportunities for multilingual families.

- To break barriers, educators can actively reach out to multilingual families and communities to understand their perspectives, concerns, and goals. It is important to collaboratively follow-up to address individual needs and work with administrators to address needs at the systems level. This is not a one-time approach. It is ongoing and includes informal conversations and formal efforts to equalize the power dynamics between schools and multilingual families and prioritize their needs, goals, and perspectives (Pratt et al., 2024; Blair & Haneda, 2021).

- Another way to break barriers is to ensure that research and data are representative of multilingual families and communities in their context. Educators can work with multilingual families to analyze data and other information (for example, multilingual learners' participation in gifted education, suspension rates, responsiveness of assessments used for decision-making, and accessibility of after school programming) to create more just practices and policies (NAFSCE, 2022; Powell et al., 2024).

Guiding Questions

- What do multilingual learners and their families and communities say are barriers to engagement in our context? If we do not know, how can we gather this information?
- What avenues do we have for addressing barriers and unfair practices impacting multilingual learners, their families, and their communities? What will we try first?
- How can we include multilingual learners, their families, and community members in collaborative work to break barriers and increase access to opportunities?

Collaboration

- Meaningful, two-way collaboration and communication characterizes effective family and community engagement. Proactive strategies for collaboration include finding out when and where multilingual families prefer to meet, seeking out the topics that multilingual families want to discuss, setting the agenda in advance with them, and then working together to address families' goals, concerns, and needs (Haines et al., 2023; Mapp & Bergman, 2021; NAFSCE, 2022).

- Reciprocal, family-friendly, jargon-free communication in families' preferred languages and technologies is an important part of collaborating with multilingual families. Also consider how you are conveying genuine interest, openness, and access when communicating with multilingual families. This is important for building trusting collaborative relationships (Qarooni, 2023).
- One-way communication—from school to home only—is inadequate for engaging in practices that incorporate multilingual families' and communities' language and cultural assets and needs. Collaboration offers opportunities for educators to ensure that multilingual families are actively involved in partnerships with schools and communities (Blair & Haneda, 2021).
- Educators and schools need resources, professional learning, and other supports to include families' perspectives, language, and cultural practices in visioning, decision-making, curriculum, and instruction (Protacio et al., 2021).
- It is important for educators to consider how to share power with multilingual families and communities. In this way, educators can be co-participants in collaborative processes rather than just hosts of an event or an educational expert in the room. This will promote more learning and meaningful action. It also supports families to take on leadership roles (Delgado Gaitan, 2012; Schultz et al., 2023; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006).

Guiding Questions

- How have we collaborated with multilingual families and their communities to create a shared mission/vision? How have we collaborated to review and revise family engagement policies and practices and make decisions about curriculum and instruction, social-emotional learning, and so on? What else could we be doing?
- In what ways might we be overwhelming families with education jargon? How can we ensure communication and collaboration is reciprocal, family friendly, and in the languages our families prefer?
- How do we encourage social support networks and connections among multilingual families and their communities? Is it working?

Connect To Learning

- Incorporating the identities, dynamic language and cultural practices, and goals of multilingual learners and their families and communities into learning promotes family and community belonging as well as children and youth's language development, learning, self-esteem, and identity development (Ishimaru et al., 2019; Mapp & Bergman, 2021; Morita-Mullany, 2021).

- While family cultural nights and community speakers at assemblies may be genuine efforts to include families and communities in schools, these events often position linguistic and cultural knowledge and practices as separate from day-to-day language development and learning. These events alone do not lead to a sense of belonging or ongoing connections to learning (Bang et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2024).

- As a start, educators can find out and address what families want to better understand about classroom, district, school, or program curriculum and instruction. Ask what else could be included (Llopart & Esteban-Guitart, 2018). Then, make this an ongoing conversation so that families are not just sources of information but co-constructors and collaborators (informally and formally, such as through coffee chats, professional learning communities, multilingual family advisory groups, and so on).

- When connecting to learning, it is important to avoid essentializing portrayals of groups and instead focus on the interactions, lived experiences, and complexities that exist within families and communities. Educators can ask families about the language, learning, and cultural goals they have for their children and consider how these can be incorporated into their classrooms or the school (González et al., 2005; Protacio et al., 2021). Incorporating family and community assets into learning should happen in core content areas like literacy, science, social studies, and math and they should also be incorporated into the arts, social-emotional learning, outdoor education, and more.

- When connecting to learning, it is important to consider assessment practices and how they are responsive to multilingual learners. Ensure that tools or instruments used to assess or evaluate children's language development are linguistically appropriate and responsive to their dynamic language practices. Also, ensure data is interpreted in ways that recognizes the bilingual or multilingual environments in which children are learning and developing language. Talk with families about the assessments used at school to hear their opinions on whether these assessments are or are not culturally and linguistically responsive. Incorporate information in your data analysis from families about what they see as their children's strengths and areas for growth (Figueras-Daniel, 2019).

- Include families' and communities' knowledge in different content areas by creating spaces for translanguaging, engaging in project-based learning and inquiry cycles that connect to multilingual learners and their families' lived experiences, incorporating family and community storytelling, using multilingual and multicultural literature and mentor texts, and incorporating student-generated photographs and community mapping (Coady, 2019; García & Kleyn, 2016; Protacio et al., 2021).
- Another important practice connected to learning is to ask multilingual learners and their families to identify issues in their communities that can be addressed in lessons or units. These types of projects promote community care and elevate family and student voice.

Guiding Questions
- How do we build from our multilingual families' knowledge and goals in our instruction, environments, and curricula? Is there more we can do?
- How do we engage in ongoing conversations with families around their children's language development and learning in clear and understandable ways? How do we know families are getting the information they seek and in comprehensible ways?
- How do we join with multilingual families for planning, implementing, and evaluating language development and learning opportunities and services? What feedback do we have from families about how we collaborate with them?

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