WIDA

FOCUS BULLETIN

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Introduction

In February, 2011, WIDA published a Focus Bulletin on Language and Culture, which was enormously popular, and which continues to be requested by readers. This is a reprint of that bulletin, reformatted and lightly edited to emphasize current WIDA resources and terminology.

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

This Focus Bulletin explores linguistic and cultural diversity in school, and how teachers, staff and parents can help multilingual learners feel welcome, confident, and prepared to succeed academically.

Promoting a Culture of Success for Multilingual Learners

For multilingual learners, as for all learners, the ability to navigate knowledgeably and comfortably in the school community is the foundation for achieving language proficiency and acquiring content knowledge. Belonging to a community of learners is a strong component of intrinsic motivation.

Schools can do a great deal to motivate multilingual learners by actively adopting a nurturing environment of inclusion. This bulletin explores contextual factors for schools, and general education classrooms in particular, that facilitate academic success for all students, including multilingual learners.

Promoting a Welcoming School Culture for Multilingual Learners

Positive cultural identification

At the heart of creating an environment of success is a school-wide effort to help multilingual learners identify with and take pride in their cultural identification. The traditional assimilationist school culture overlooks students' heritages and often breeds alienation; on the other hand, a multiculturally oriented school that encourages acceptance and pride in one's heritage also builds confidence for engagement in learning.

Schools that establish environments promoting racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity help to welcome and value diverse learners, thereby supporting intrinsic motivation for learning.

Some school practices to build acceptance and pride:
- Find curriculum and materials that include people from diverse cultural, ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds.
- Use curriculum and materials that include diverse perspectives and approaches to traditional topics.
- Engage students in multicultural approaches to learning, which include diverse learning styles.
- Encourage staff to establish personal relationships with multilingual learners.
- Permit the appropriate use of students' primary languages inside and outside the classroom.
- Enable students to establish ethnic-based extracurricular organizations.
- Allow students to choose group clustering during recreational or lunch periods.
- Provide, on a regular basis, lunches which reflect the diversity of the school population.
- Promote family and community participation.
- Create a physical environment which affirms differences.
- Encourage expression of culturally based forms of art, music, dance, etc.

Extracurricular engagement

Schools that actively promote student involvement in organizations, hobbies, sports, or other activities significantly improve the potential for individual academic success. These non-academic activities create an important sense of belonging and help to intensify the importance of schooling while at the same time provide time to relax from the stress of academic work. Activities often help to contribute to critical thinking and leadership skills.

> Culturally responsive teaching is an approach that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes.
>
> – Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994)

Some ways to get multilingual learners involved outside the school day:

- Include students from diverse cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds in the planning and implementation of curricular and extra-curricular activities.
- Actively seek participation by faculty, staff, and fellow students.
- Ensure that the school schedule and available modes of transportation support student participation.
- Create a culture- and language-sensitive environment for all activities.
- Hire and train staff to be self-reflective, sensitive to diversity, and aware of their biases.
- Secure support and guidance from the community.

The Home-School Connection

Families are a source of strength and security for children and are crucial in helping them maintain their primary language, value system, and overall stability in an unfamiliar culture. Schools need to make greater efforts to connect with families if they are to help promote greater student involvement and success. Connection and support between schools and families should be mutual, avoiding judgment, intervention, or the temptation to teach families the "right" way to raise their children.

Some ways that schools can encourage multilingual learners' family members to participate in their children's education:

- Hire interpreters and cultural brokers to communicate with families during conferences, meetings, and whenever else necessary.
- Welcome and encourage input from parents and family on their children's linguistic and academic goals.
- Provide all families with timely, equitable access to information regardless of their primary language or mode of communication—through translations of documents, including newsletters and notices, phone messages or homework lines in different languages, etc.
- Provide opportunities for parents and other family members to talk with teachers and other staff about their children's academic and social needs.
- Allow teachers to make an initial scheduled visit at the students' home.
- Whenever necessary, send school staff personnel, (e.g., social workers, bilingual aides, etc.) to the student's home to discuss issues relevant to the student's interests and concerns.
- Encourage parental communication with students about significant issues related to school success.
- Create an environment that welcomes family members to visit the school any time.

Ideas for Family Involvement

The following article incorporates a submission by Catherine B. Feenstra, a Speech and Language Pathologist for a Headstart program in Hampton Township, New Jersey, and the literacy nights organized by Sara Huse, Laura Holt, and Lucerne Rice and held at a middle school in Madison, WI.

A great way to promote children's language development and foster family school connections is to provide opportunities for shared literacy time. In New Jersey, Catherine planned a family literacy night for her students and their parents/guardians. Since most of her students' parents do not drive, Catherine's first consideration was to find a site within walking distance for her families. In Wisconsin, Sara had other resources, including grant funding. She felt it was important to open the school doors to her families, so with the grant money, she was able to offer transportation for all families. For anyone planning a literacy night, available resources along with families' specific needs or challenges must be considered.

Catherine planned to send out invitations to her Headstart families in English and their native languages whenever possible, making sure to include information about the place, time, and participation requirements. In her program, she requires that parents/adult family members sign up in advance and participation is limited to one adult with one or two children each because she wants to keep group stations small. If a larger space is available and one-on-one adult/child time is not a focus of your event, working with community agencies or high school students to offer child care at the event might allow you to extend this invitation to whole families as Sara did.

Helping students feel and be part of the planning is important and helps build enthusiasm about the event, so Catherine's students will decorate boxes prior to the literacy night to be used during the event to collect books. Sara's students are older, so their involvement extended into making the actual invitations and they participated in organizing the event. The role that your students play in their literacy night will depend on their age and your access to them during and beyond the school day.

On the night of the event, Catherine will set up stations around the room and have a teacher/group leader to manage each station. Each of these station leaders will read a book to participants. Book choice can vary from local creations to donated books. For Catherine, it was important to find stories with repetitive phrases that are vocabulary-loaded, but depending on the purpose of your literacy night, the choice of books may vary. Sara and her colleagues, on the other hand, bought bilingual books through their grant. The bilingual books used at Sara's
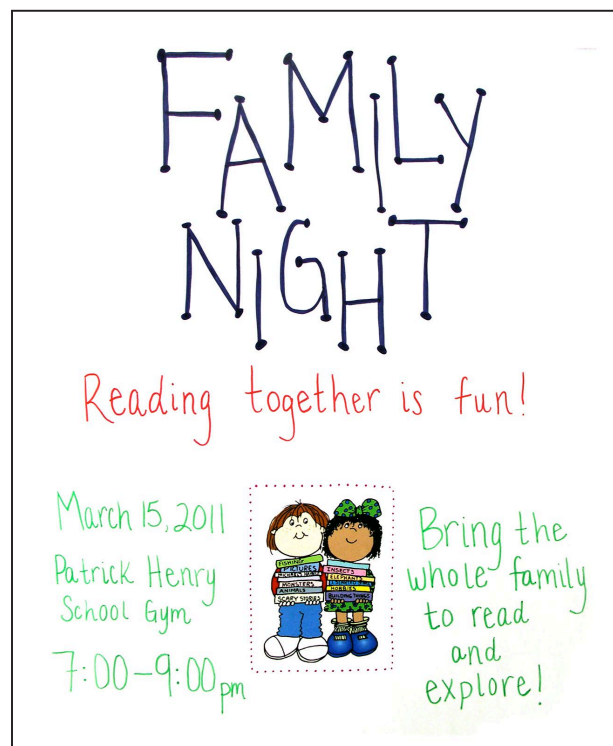
literacy night helped families to identify with the stories and promote students' home language literacy development. Both organizers stressed the importance of allowing families to take the books home with them. Choosing books that will engage families in literacy conversations is key to making these events a success. Knowing your families and focusing the purpose of the literacy experience is a first step toward this end.

At each station during Catherine's planned literacy night, the leader would read the story once to the adult and child pair, then the pre-made books could be handed out for the parent/guardian and child to practice reading it together. Participants would rotate through two or three stations in a night, collecting books as they went. Sara opted for inviting prominent bilingual community members to read the books out loud to the entire audience in both languages. Again, although the choice is yours, available resources might limit your options as to the format of your own literacy night.

Both Catherine and Sara shared a goal: to involve parents in the language development of their children. Though Catherine works with preschool students and Sara teaches at a middle school, both acknowledge the important role that parents play in students' engagement in literacy practices. Whether in English, Spanish, or additional languages, the goal of the projects was to provide families with fun and accessible opportunities to carry out conversations and activities related to reading.

Promoting a Positive Classroom Culture for Multilingual Learners

Everyone belongs

Welcoming multilingual learners into schools is not only about including them in school activities and providing translation services. Welcoming multilingual learners into schools is about including them into the club of learners. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (1943) identified belonging as a prerequisite to learning. When we fail to include multilingual learners, we are sending the message that they do not belong to the club of learners. On the other hand, including students physically without providing meaningful access to the curriculum and materials is not any more effective than excluding them. Fostering a climate of inclusion and delivering content in linguistically and socially comprehensible ways requires awareness and a willingness to engage in appropriate practices to embrace diversity.

Some classroom practices to embrace linguistic and cultural diversity:
- Differentiate language used for instruction so students can access the content.
- Differentiate learning processes to allow students to demonstrate understanding of content without language being a barrier.
- Differentiate language of assessments to ensure they are valid measures of students' understanding of content.
- Modify the environment to facilitate and encourage student interaction.
- Create a language-rich environment throughout the school day to promote the acquisition of academic language of all students.
- Lower the affective filter for multilingual learners by asking linguistically appropriate questions, avoiding overcorrection and allowing for multiple ways to communicate.
- Adopt a "two by ten" technique of talking with each student two minutes each day, ten days in a row, about any subject he or she is interested in.
- Value and display student work in the classroom and throughout the school.

Academic Language Development

Differentiating language to provide access to the content is important, and equally important is providing opportunities to build students' academic language proficiency. Successful classrooms provide their students scaffolding within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) to reach the next level of language proficiency.

Opportunities to grow linguistically should be integrated throughout the day and encompass all four language domains: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Developing language is more than just learning new vocabulary. Students must learn how to use that vocabulary, how to effectively increase their linguistic complexity, and about the structure and rules of language that increase the comprehensibility of the communication.

Some classroom practices supporting academic language growth:
- Identify and explicitly teach the essential academic vocabulary of the content in context.
- Address the syntactical rules of English when appropriate.
- Integrate the delivery of all content through the four domains, listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- Organize student interactions into varied combinations of pair/cooperative/group work.
- Allow for flexible grouping that changes depending on the task and linguistic needs of students.
- Incorporate learning styles and multiple intelligences in instruction.
- Diverge from prepared lesson plan when a 'teachable moment' presents itself.
- Use a variety of linguistic supports, including visual and graphic supports, interactive supports, and home language supports whenever possible and appropriate.

Every student has a story

There are many possible stressors that can impede learning even before addressing issues of comprehensible instruction. Trauma experienced in the country of origin before arrival for foreign born students, the upheaval and discontinuities of constant travel in search of jobs for migrant families, and impoverished and sometimes dangerous home environments are some of the challenges that some multilingual learners face.

Knowing the backgrounds of multilingual learners and having focused conversations with them and their families are indispensable for helping them overcome learning challenges.

Some ways to make your classroom safe and comfortable:

Be aware that multilingual learners may have a great deal of anxiety about learning and take steps to mitigate the stressors.

Be more patient and understanding with students who are unwilling or unable to participate in activities. Their hesitation may be due to culture shock, lack of understanding of the task, or the language around the task to be performed.

Reward students honestly for quality work performance and provide greater choice in selecting activities to increase intrinsic motivation for learning.

Look for opportunities to enable multilingual learners to share their unique experiences or knowledge in areas that other students do not have.

In Conclusion...

Inclusive school and classroom environments set the tone for success. By actively and consistently examining practices which might be obstructive, confusing, incomprehensible, or overwhelming, educators can create an environment for multilingual learners that fosters involvement, engagement, and thirst for learning. It is true that teaching and learning practices need to be research-based, constructive, and comprehensible for learning to occur. However, for any of that to matter, schools must become socially affirming and welcoming communities where everyone is invited to succeed linguistically and academically.

WIDA has a CAN DO philosophy, which accentuates the positive qualities and assets of our multilingual learners. The efforts of all stakeholders, from paraprofessionals to superintendents, make a difference in the education of ELL students. Together, by focusing on what our multilingual learners CAN DO, we can send a powerful message that students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds enrich our schools and communities. Read the full CAN DO Philosophy at wida.wisc.edu.

WIDA Resources for Providing Rigorous Pedagogy

WIDA provides several tools that educators can use to determine students' linguistic abilities and think about how to engage them in activities that simultaneously challenge their language skills and their content comprehension. These include

- WIDA Can Do Philosophy
- Scaffolding Learning for Multilingual Students in Math
- Writing with a Purpose
- American Indian English Language Learners

Recommended Print Resources

Garcia, Eugene (2002). *Student Cultural Diversity.* New York: Houghton Mifflin, Third Edition.

Gay, Geneva (2000). *Culturally Responsive Teaching.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Ginsberg, Margery B. "Lessons at the Table". Alexandria, VA: Educational Leadership, March 2007, pp. 56-61.

Ginsberg, Margery B. and Wlodkowski, Raymond J. (2000). *Creating Highly Motivating Classroom for All Students.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006). *Understanding Language Teaching.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, Associates, Publishers.

Nieto, Sonia (1996). *Affirming Diversity.* New York: Longman, Second Edition.

Noel, Jana (2008). *Developing Multicultural Educators.* Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc. Second Edition.

Sapon-Shevin, Mara. "Inclusion: A Matter of Justice." Alexandria, VA: Educational Leadership, October 2003, pp. 25-28.

Smith, Rick and Lambert, Mary. "Assuming the Best.". Alexandria, VA: Educational Leadership, September 2008, pp. 16-20.
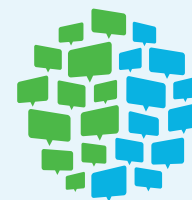
Contributing Authors

Don Bouchard
Mariana Castro
Andrea Cammilleri

WIDA Focus Bulletin Staff

Annemarie Banas
Rebecca Holmes
Janet Trembley