

# LANGUAGE-FOCUSED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Multilingual learners flourish when school staff engage with families in respectful and affirming ways. This is especially true when staff acknowledge the special role that language plays in families’ lives. Families of multilingual learners play a critical role in their children’s language development, and care deeply about their children’s language use and language education. However, common school-based family engagement practices often overlook or exclude language education when engaging with families of multilingual learners. Family engagement practices that target families of multilingual learners should include the language learning and development that occur in and out of school.



## Language-Focused Family Engagement

Language-focused family engagement keeps the unique needs and experiences of multilingual learners and their families, including language education, at the center of every home-school interaction. It accounts for the key considerations outlined in the *WIDA ABC’s of Family Engagement*; values and affirms families’ language practices and goals; meaningfully communicates information about school-based language programs, practices and goals; and is based on an affirming, asset-based approach. These concepts form the four pillars of language-focused family engagement; see page 8 for an activity you can use to reflect on the four pillars.

Language-focused family engagement focuses on the families and educators of multilingual learners by emphasizing the important role that language plays in the home environments and school contexts of multilingual learners. Common definitions and approaches to family engagement often narrowly focus on what families can do to support

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](http://wida.wisc.edu/resources).

**Multilingual learners** – Children in early care and education and K-12 settings who are learning more than one language at a time.

**Check out our resources, starting on page 6**

their children’s school-related or academic achievement, while overlooking multilingual learners’ home language and/or English language development.<sup>1</sup> Language learning is essential to the developmentally appropriate learning, academic achievement, and cultural and identity development of linguistically diverse children and youth, and therefore language-focused family engagement aims to increase the opportunities for educators and families to engage in meaningful language-focused conversations and practices.

## ABCs of Family Engagement

Language-focused family engagement is premised on a model of family engagement defined by *relationship*. The relationship between families and educators begins in early childhood and continues through 12th grade. It is *mutual* in recognizing the needs and realities of families and educators, *built* on trust and respect, and *focused* on children’s development and student learning and achievement. The *ABCs of Family Engagement* describe six key considerations for strengthening family engagement practices and building relationships with culturally and linguistically diverse families: awareness, advocacy, brokering, building trust, communication, and connect to learning.

### *ABCs of Family Engagement*

Raising educators’ awareness about their beliefs about family engagement, and how those beliefs drive their approaches or expectations, is a critical first step toward relationship-building with families. Supporting families’ **advocacy** efforts helps to ensure families have a voice in their children’s education. Providing families’ access to cultural and linguistic **brokers** can help families navigate school systems. Forming relationships with families requires **building trust**; trust is not freely given—it must be earned. **Communication** with families of multilingual learners must be two-way, meaningful and free of educator jargon. Lastly, family engagement should **connect to learning** by acknowledging multilingual learners’ academic achievement as well as their language education.

When the ABCs of Family Engagement are front and center, family engagement approaches and practices are more transparent, intentional, and responsive to families of multilingual learners.

## Family Language Practices and Goals

Research shows that parents of multilingual learners often have long-term language goals and aspirations for their children’s language education, and that they engage their children in a variety of language practices in their homes and communities that support their plans.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes families turn these plans into strategies for how their family should use language at home or in the community.<sup>3</sup> For instance, a bilingual family might decide to only attend religious services in the home language instead of attending services in English. In linguistic minority families, these plans and practices are fundamental in supporting the maintenance of the home language.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, many times educators are unaware of the goals of their language minority families.<sup>5</sup> We encourage school leaders and educators to learn about families’ language practices and goals for their children’s language education and to find ways to support families in achieving them.

## School Language Practices and Goals

Just as educators are too often unaware of language practices and language learning that goes on in their students' homes or communities, parents are also often not aware of, or do not fully understand, how language learning happens in schools, or how language is connected to academic learning in schools. School-based language programs policies and can be implicit or explicit, making it especially difficult for parents. Additionally, school personnel face difficulties in accounting for the important role that language plays in learning and have trouble communicating this information to parents. Specialized knowledge and skills are needed to design programs and provide instruction and assessment for multilingual learners.<sup>6</sup> Teachers and staff who are familiar with second language acquisition and bilingualism can help families understand the role of home language development and English language development for academic learning and school readiness, as well as support families as they navigate school language practices and goals.



## Affirming, Asset-Based Approach

Affirming, asset-based approaches to family engagement acknowledge and celebrate families' funds of knowledge<sup>7</sup> and align with the WIDA Can Do Philosophy, or "the belief that all children bring to their learning cultural and linguistic practices, skills, and ways of knowing from their homes and communities."<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, some traditional family engagement approaches do not affirm families' funds of knowledge. In other words, they do not value families' cultural and linguistic knowledge, their at-home activities, daily routines, and traditions. Many traditional conceptualizations of family engagement instead are based on a deficit, assimilationist framing that categorizes minority families as having problems that need to be fixed or improved.<sup>9</sup> To sustain affirming, asset-based strategies, educators need to know about what is happening in their students' homes, confront their own biases, and connect students' worlds of home and school in meaningful and constructive ways by putting in place strategies that support what occurs in the family instead of attempting to change what families already naturally do.<sup>10</sup>

## Voices from the Field: Seminole County Public Schools

*Seminole County Public Schools serves approximately 3,800 K-12 English learners from 292 different countries, who speak over 370 languages. The district provides support to PreK programs in the community. Learn more: <https://www.scps.k12.fl.us/>*

### What is your district's vision for family engagement?

At the core of our district's vision for family engagement is serving the needs of the families in our school district. We communicate to families that they are not just "invited to participate," but also that we want to help develop or enhance their skills as parent leaders who are actively engaged with us in the common goal of academic and language success for their children throughout their academic career.



Staff from Seminole County Public Schools.

### How do you communicate your family engagement vision to staff and families?

We communicate this vision by reaching out to as many families directly, whether it is via phone calls, meeting the families at English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) nights and other ESOL events, such as the ESOL Family Leadership Academy, and through our parent leaders who serve as ambassadors at their local schools. Parent leaders help us reach families that our staff may not be able to reach. We also share our vision for family engagement at staff development sessions so that trust and respect are at the heart of the relationship-building we do with families and are viewed as essential to success in preparing our culturally and linguistically diverse students for the 21st century.

### How does the district allocate resources to support family engagement initiatives?

Title III, Immigrant Grant, and district funds are used to support the parent engagement activities. For example, every year we develop a Parent Academy Action Plan. This helps us develop the training modules, set dates for events, secure locations, and order resources/materials needed for each event.

### How do district parent liaisons provide support directly to families?

We believe we can best provide support to our parents by first working on establishing relationships where, over time, trust can develop. We try our best by making the effort to reach out and get to know them, their stories, their culture, their needs, hopes, and expectations. At the core of our work with families is a common goal—the academic and personal success for their children. All of this occurs in different ways, at first through personal phone calls

and meetings with families at ESOL nights at our different schools, and then later through the families with whom we have formed relationships, who become our ambassadors at local schools.

### Is there a family engagement event you feel is successful in engaging families?

The ESOL Family Leadership Academy engages families as co-planners and participants. This event provides the forum for us to be able to offer workshops that help families navigate the cultural and/or language barriers they may face in schools, as well as how to use their natural talents as parent leaders. This event also helps us, as staff, identify families' needs, so as a department we can develop future workshops that are timely and relevant to families.

## One District's Plans to Support Multilingual Children in PreK

The School District of Palm Beach County (SDPBC) is the 5th-largest school district in the state of Florida and 11th largest in the continental United States. The SDPBC has 187 schools and serves approximately 190,000 students who speak 152 languages and dialects. The Department of Early Childhood Education services approximately 2,400 students in five full-day program models, with an emphasis on low-income students, students who need additional academic support, and students with disabilities. As the number of Dual Language Learners (DLLs) has increased, so has the necessity to support their unique academic needs. As such, the Department of Early Childhood Education has placed a deliberate emphasis on academic programming for DLLs. With the support of the Mary and Robert Pew Educational Foundation, the SDPBC has developed a pilot program called DLL Literacy Linkages. The pilot will launch during the 2018-2019 school year in four schools. The Department of Early Childhood Education uses a play-based approach in all their classrooms, including those that participate in DLL Literacy Linkages. This program will utilize the WIDA Early Years Promising Practices Implementation Kits along with onsite district coaching and full-day district-led professional development days for teachers. In addition, the department will offer two parent workshops that focus on building language and literacy. These family literacy events will discuss the importance of supporting children's home language(s), offer strategies for storytelling at home with children (e.g., using wordless picture books), provide parents opportunities to practice with their children, and introduce parents to a lending library of resources they can use to practice the skills taught in the workshops. Through these resources and offerings, the Department of Early Childhood Education will work closely with schools to accelerate the achievement of DLLs and create model programs for the county.



Staff and children from a PreK classroom in SDPBC

## Linda's Long Journey to Kindergarten!

Linda's story illustrates issues faced by multilingual learners, their families, and their educators. Families may experience anxieties about the language and cultural development of their children. This story provides an example of how families may have language goals and plans for their children that educators can explore.



*Teresa is a 26-year-old single mother who migrated to the U.S. from El Salvador three years ago. She arrived in Texas with her 2-year-old daughter Linda, and lives with Tito, her uncle, and Susana, Tito's wife, along with their four children. When she lived in El Salvador, Teresa's dream was to move to the U.S. so that Linda could someday attain a university degree and become a "professional."*

*A few months after their arrival in Texas, Teresa started a job as a domestic worker with Luisa, a local business owner whom Teresa befriended at a bus stop. To this day, both Teresa and Luisa still clean homes in nearby affluent towns. While Teresa is at work, Linda stays with Susana, who speaks to Linda only in Spanish. Linda tries to play with Susana's children but it doesn't happen very much because Susana's children are much older than Linda. One of Susana's children is a seventh-grader and the rest are in high school.*

*Through her job, Teresa has gotten to know a few Latino families quite well. She has noticed that little children and teenagers in the Latino homes where she works don't like to speak in Spanish, refuse to speak in Spanish when addressed in Spanish by older family members, and that they only listen to music and watch television in English. It's clear to Teresa that the children much prefer to use English whenever possible. Teresa thinks it's a shame that these children decline to speak Spanish. She fears that someday Linda will refuse to speak Spanish too, and that's why Teresa makes sure to remind Linda of life in El Salvador. Teresa tells Linda stories, jokes, and riddles that are popular in Salvadoran culture. Teresa also worries that she doesn't speak enough English to interact with Linda, if Linda ever refuses to speak Spanish. Last year, Teresa tried to enroll Linda at the local Head Start program, but the program was full, and Linda was placed on the waitlist. Teresa never received a call to enroll Linda, and now in a few weeks, Linda will start Kindergarten.*

## Discussion/Reflection Questions

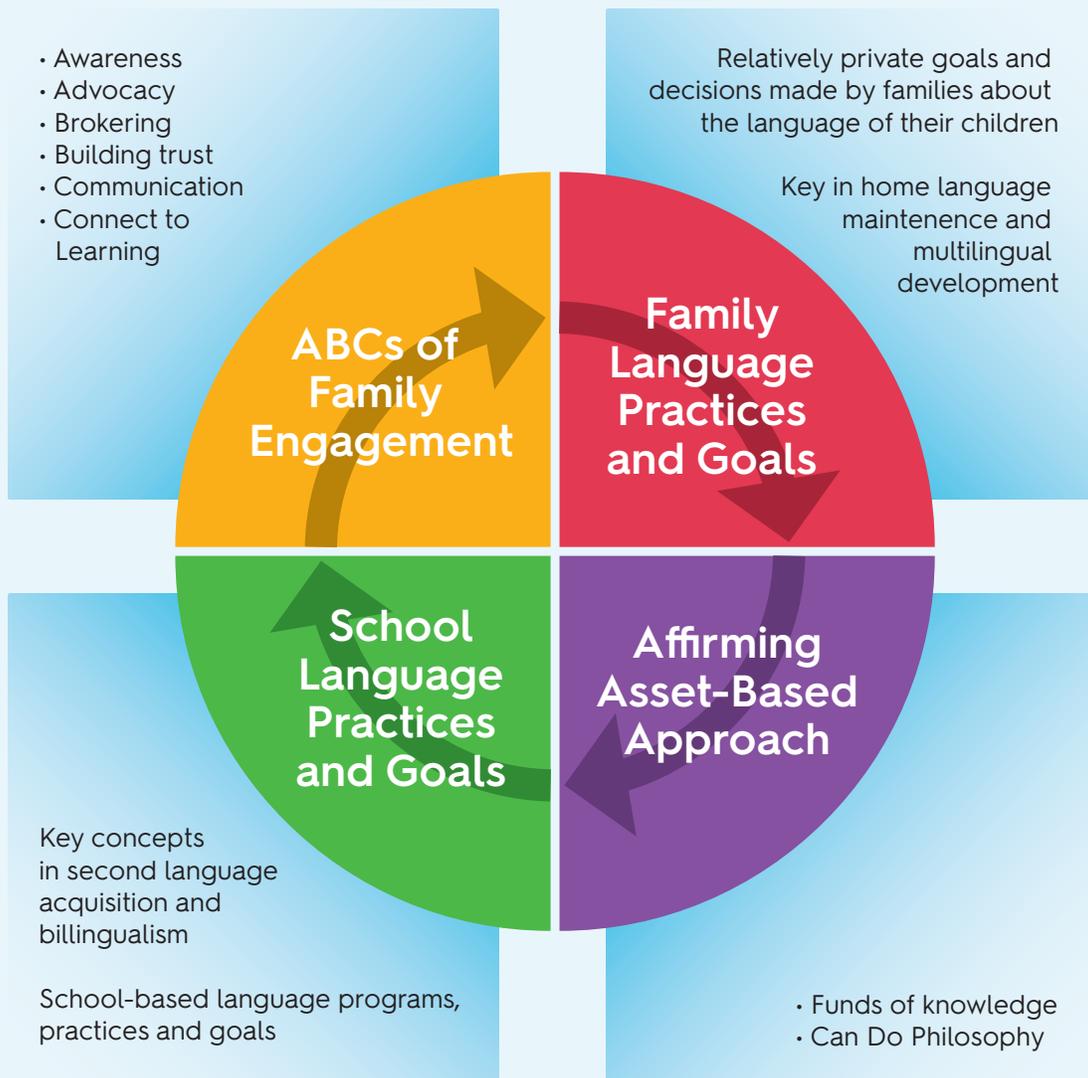
Imagine you are Linda's Kindergarten teacher.

- How might you interact with Teresa and Linda in ways that reflect an asset-based approach?
- What are some language practices that Teresa and her daughter engage in? What are some of the goals Teresa has for Linda's language development and cultural heritage?
- What are some ways in which you would connect what you have learned about Linda's life and upbringing with your school-based instruction to support Linda's language and development in meaningful and constructive ways?
- How would you plan to learn more about, share with other educators, and help advocate at school for the language goals that parents like Teresa have for Linda?
- How might you engage meaningfully with Teresa about Linda's language use and development in and out of school?

## The Four Pillars of Language-Focused Family Engagement: A Reflection Tool for Educators

The purpose of this tool is to deepen understanding of the four pillars of language-focused family engagement, as well as to encourage reflection and sustain conversation among educators and practitioners working with multilingual learners. Thinking through the questions on the next page can help ECE centers and schools plan language-focused family engagement strategies that will benefit multilingual learners and their families.

### The Four Pillars of Language-Focused Family Engagement



## The Four Pillars of Language-Focused Family Engagement: A Reflection Tool for Educators

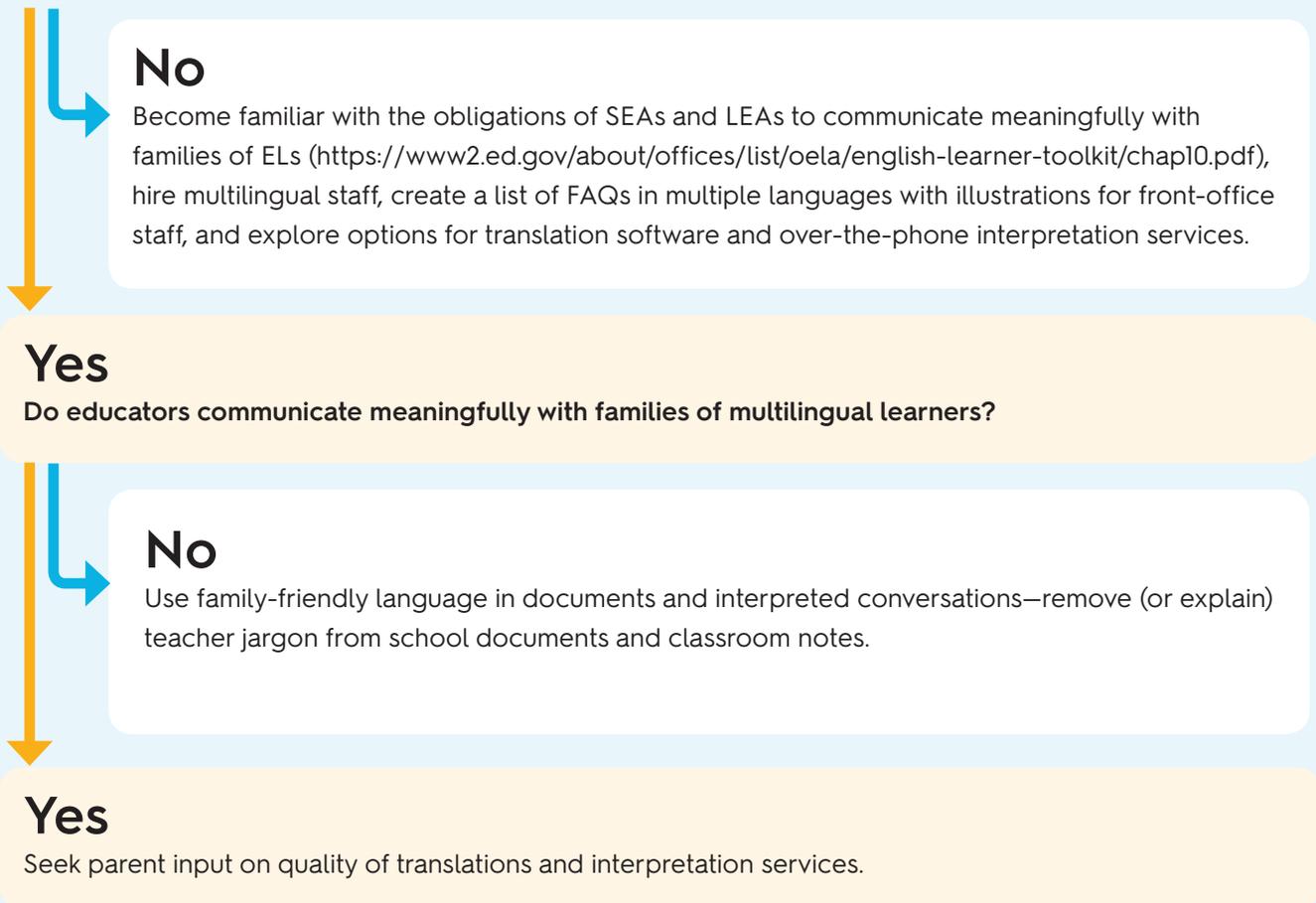
ABCs of Family Engagement	Family Language Practices and Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we ensure families, staff, and students have a voice in establishing the school vision for family engagement?</li> <li>• How do our personal experiences inform our work with families?</li> <li>• How can we support families as they advocate for their needs?</li> <li>• How can we eliminate language barriers that prevent families from communicating with our staff?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we incorporate or build on some of the language routines and practices that occur in our students' homes in our classroom practices?</li> <li>• How can we better understand and address the fears that linguistic minority families might face about their children's possible loss of their home language?</li> <li>• What are some resources that we can provide families to support their language goals for their children?</li> </ul>
School Language Practices and Goals	Affirming Asset-Based Approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways can we improve how we communicate with families about the language programs and services available to multilingual learners?</li> <li>• How might we engage families in two-way communication about English language development and/or proficiency?</li> <li>• In what ways can we support families' efforts to advocate for their children's language education?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are ways that we can learn about families' funds of knowledge?</li> <li>• How can we support coworkers to see families from an affirming, asset-based perspective?</li> <li>• If we were asked to celebrate and affirm the languages and cultures of multilingual learners in meaningful ways, what would we do?</li> </ul>

## Language-Focused Family Engagement: Potential Pathways to Implementation

Language-focused family engagement is robust. It includes family and school language practices and goals. It emphasizes an asset-based approach. And the strategies identified in the WIDA ABCs of Family Engagement serve as valuable tools for everyone involved in nurturing and educating multilingual children.

However, from an implementation perspective, an educator might ask, what do I do next? Where do I start? How do I get buy-in from my staff and/or colleagues? The following flowchart provides examples of concrete actions that cut across many aspects of language-focused family engagement. Of course a flowchart can't describe every approach, but it can provide a way for individuals and groups to identify potential next steps. Feel free to duplicate this flowchart for your personal use at your local setting.

### 1. Does your school offer translation services for families and staff?



## WIDA FOCUS BULLETIN >> CLOSER LOOK

2. Do educators and administrators at your school have opportunities to learn about second language acquisition, bilingualism, and EL education as well as the language practices and goals of families in the school community?

**No**

Create a committee to identify professional learning opportunities (e.g., workshops, conferences), start a professional learning community (PLC) or a home-visit program where you can learn about families and about their language goals or language-based questions.

**Yes**

Is the knowledge and expertise that educators and administrators gain through these professional learning opportunities shared with other staff?

**No**

Start a PLC, lunchtime meeting series, or coaching/mentorship initiative at your school.

**Yes**

Create a school-wide plan for professional learning or identify annual focus areas using themes or priorities to guide building-based professional learning.

**Professional Learning Communities (PLC)** are spaces where educators, practitioners and school leaders come together to reflect on their values and practices in order to implement new strategies that hold promise to improve educational outcomes for the students they serve

## WIDA FOCUS BULLETIN >> CLOSER LOOK

### 3. Does your school have resources and opportunities for families to learn about language program models and services offered to multilingual learners?

#### No

Check out WIDA resources ([wida.wisc.edu/teach/learners/engagement](http://wida.wisc.edu/teach/learners/engagement)) and adapt or make your own resources; plan parent meetings multiple times during the year to discuss language-focused topics (e.g., what the EL designation means, English language proficiency testing, exit criteria, program models and services, bilingual literacy seal, etc.)

#### Yes

Do parents provide input on these programs and services or meeting topics?

#### No

Gather parent input via multiple means (e.g., survey, parent meetings, or individual conversations); bring together a group of educators, administrators, and family members to analyze information collected; engage in joint decision-making about program models and services.

#### Yes

Engage in this process every few years to be attentive and responsive to changing demographics of your school community.

## WIDA FOCUS BULLETIN >> CLOSER LOOK

4. Does your school have a family engagement vision/mission statement? A family engagement vision/mission statement articulates the purpose and fundamental beliefs about family engagement to guide the school's work with families of multilingual learners.

**No**

Bring together a group of educators, administrators, and families of multilingual learners to create a family engagement vision/mission statement for your school.

**Yes**

Did parents provide input?

**No**

Bring together a group of educators, administrators, and family members of ELs and multilingual children to revise the current family engagement vision/mission statement.

**Yes**

Share with another school! Write it up! Make it available in several languages! Ensure it is accessible to families.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Henderson & Mapp, 2002; WIDA, 2016a; Cuéllar, 2018; Cuéllar & García, 2012; Mancilla, 2016
- <sup>2</sup> King & Fogle, 2013; King, Fogle, & Logan-Terry, 2008; Tollefson, Pérez-Milans, & Curdt-Christiansen, 2018
- <sup>3</sup> King & Fogle, 2013
- <sup>4</sup> King & Fogle, 2008; King, Fogle, & Logan-Terry, 2008; Pillai, Soh, & Kajita, 2014; Souza, 2015
- <sup>5</sup> Cuéllar & García, 2012
- <sup>6</sup> Bunch, 2013; Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000
- <sup>7</sup> Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 21
- <sup>8</sup> WIDA, 2014, p. 5
- <sup>9</sup> Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013
- <sup>10</sup> Nieto, 2012, 2017

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