



# Young Multilingual Children in Minnesota

Exploring Parent Perceptions of Children's Language  
Development, Family Engagement Practices, and Decision-  
making about Early Care and Education

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Purpose

This study explores the perceptions, experiences, and decision-making of parents of young multilingual children, ages birth to five years, with regard to children’s language learning and development, family engagement practices, and children’s participation in early care and education (ECE) programs.

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

## Research Questions

Three questions guided this study:

1. What goals, aspirations, fears, and concerns do parents have for their children’s language learning and development?
2. What are parents’ perceptions about family engagement practices used in early care and education programs and the extent to which these support children’s language learning and development?
3. What roles, if any, do their goals, aspirations, fears, and concerns about children’s language learning and development play in their decision-making about early care and education?

## Methodology

Data were collected in August 2019 from 15 parents across four ECE program sites in urban and suburban Minnesota. Table 1 presents an overview of data collection methods, along with some demographic information of the participants. This study honors parent voice by using the demographic descriptors provided by the parents.

**Table 1: Summary of Data Collection**

Site Number	Number of interviews	Interview Language	Countries of Origin Represented	Home or Heritage-Language
1	2	English	Ethiopia, Puerto Rico	Amharic, Spanish
2	4	English, Spanish	El Salvador, Mexico	Spanish
3	2	English, Spanish	Dominican Republic, Mexico, United States	Spanish
4	7	English, Spanish	China, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Former Soviet Union, United States	Cantonese, Mandarin, Spanish, Russian,

The first phase of data analysis occurred soon after each interview and resulted in initial concepts and themes tied to individual sessions (e.g., interview or focus group). The second phase of analysis consisted of re-examining the initial concepts and themes and coding all of the data. This resulted in a list of major themes and patterns that make up the study findings.

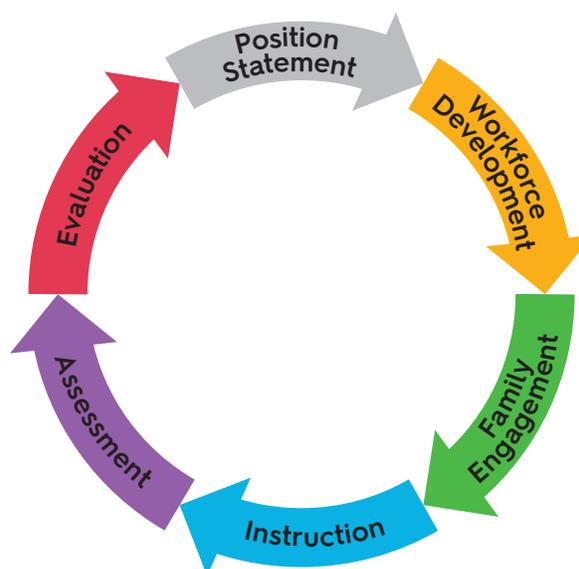
## Findings

All parents strongly value bilingual and multilingual skills and aspire that their children can grow up to speak at least two languages. It is important to parents that their children maintain their multilingual skills in order for them to keep close ties to all family members, to improve their chances for attaining promising future career opportunities, and to prepare them to thrive in an interconnected world. A growing concern for the parents is developing and maintaining their children's use of the home language. Some of the parents, however, reported that using the home language causes them distress and shame. Fourteen parents shared about various family engagement practices that supported their children's language learning and development. Lastly, most parents took into account their goals and fears regarding the language learning and development of their children when making decisions around enrollment in ECE programming. The findings points to the need to understand the complexities around Minnesota's growing population of multilingual families.

## Recommendations

This report highlights the critical need for language-focused family engagement approaches (Cuéllar, Blair & Mancilla, 2018) to relationships with families of multilingual children. We invite state leaders to explore ways to offer statewide support for language-focused family engagement across six key areas depicted in this graphic (see Figure 1). In addition, we offer the five recommendations below which are based on information that parents shared with the research team throughout their participation in the study or are implications from the study findings that could strengthen programming and services for young multilingual children and the engagement of multilingual families in ECE programs. The recommendations discussed in this report include:

- Establishing language statements of philosophy that inspire and motivate families and children to use their languages in all of their environments
- Providing ECE programs with structural guidance around the complexity of engaging parents of multilingual children
- Piloting ECE programs in additional languages
- Providing professional learning opportunities on anti-bias for program staff and families and strengthen communication around standards and procedures to address discriminatory attitudes and behaviors against any group, child, family, or staff member
- Providing professional learning opportunities for ECE program staff on engaging families through a language-focused family engagement lens



**Figure 1: Six Key Areas for Statewide Support for Multilingual Children and Families**



# WIDA™ Early Years

Wisconsin Center for Education Research  
University of Wisconsin–Madison  
1025 West Johnson St., MD #23  
Madison, WI 53706

Client Services Center toll free:  
(866) 276-7735

[help@wida.us](mailto:help@wida.us)

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

