Nurturing Home Languages to Engage and Empower Multilingual Families in Early Childhood Education Settings

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ABSTRACT

A pressing matter for early childhood educators is the need for strategies to engage families of Emergent Bilingual/Multilingual (EB/EM) children in their classroom. Research shows that EB/EM children experience negative academic and social outcomes when their home languages are not supported in the classroom and positive outcomes when their home languages are supported. The family is the greatest source of home language support for EB/EM children and their educators. Establishing partnerships with families through linguistically appropriate family engagement efforts allows children to maintain their home languages while learning a new language, helps educators teach each child effectively, and allows families to support their child's education in the classroom, home, and community. This article aims to integrate the concepts of empowerment, funds of identity, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and translanguaging into practical strategies for educators to establish and nurture engaging partnerships with multilingual children and families.

KEYWORDS
Emergent multilingual learners; early childhood education; Head Start programs; family engagement

Parents are a child's first teachers. This familiar saying is frequently heard and repeated by educators, but how often is its deeper meaning truly considered? The parents, family members, and caregivers raising a child are not only the child's first teachers, but also their lifelong teachers. Long before the child enters our classroom, their families have introduced them to their home languages and instilled skills to prepare them for school and life. After children leave our classroom the teachings and influences of their families continue.

As educators, we must recognize that all children come to our classroom with funds of identity- the rich interconnection of cultural practices, knowledge, and language that shape their sense of self. These funds of identity are deeply tied to their families, communities, and lived experiences, and serve as valuable assets for learning. Our responsibility is to support and nurture these identities of cultural and linguistic strengths. In this article, the term Emergent Bilingual/Emergent Multilingual (EB/EM) will be used to honor the home languages of children who speak a language(s) other than the dominant classroom language (Garcia et al., 2008).

By intentionally partnering with families, particularly historically underrepresented groups like marginalized families of Emergent Bilingual/Emergent Multilingual (EB/EM) students, educators can create trusting and mutually beneficial relationships. These partnerships help educators to integrate the funds of identity that EB/EM children bring to the classroom, fostering their confidence and enhancing their engagement in learning both inside and outside the classroom. This article outlines practical strategies for engaging families of multilingual learners, with a focus on Latine families while also addressing families from diverse backgrounds.

Theory to Practice

The following frameworks guide this article: Family Empowerment and Enablement, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, Funds of Identity, and Translanguaging. These theories inform this article by providing a foundation for implementing strengths-based classroom practices and family engagement strategies to honor cultural and linguistic diversity.

Family Empowerment and Enablement

Historically, many efforts targeted toward families have operated using a deficit-based approach (Compton-Lilly et al., 2019; Dunst & Trivette, 2009). Even some current strength-based programs operate in neodeficit ideologies that continue to treat families and their languages as deficient (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). In contrast, family empowerment and enablement focus on the family's strengths, resources, and goals, as well as enhancing the family's competencies. The concepts of enablement and empowerment come from the Family Systems Assessment and Intervention Model, which

was originally created for use in Early Intervention programs but can be applied to any program with the goal of recognizing and growing the strengths of families (Dunst et al., 1988). Enablement refers to help-givers "creating opportunities for all family members to display and acquire competencies that strengthen family functions" (Dunst et al., 1988, p. x). Empowerment is "a family's ability to meet needs and achieve aspirations in a way that promotes a clear sense of intrafamily mastery and control over important aspects of family functioning" (Dunst et al., 1988, p. x). The educator's role is enablement, creating opportunities for families to display and develop competencies to strengthen the family and their connection to the early childhood education program (Dunst & Trivette 2009; Dunst et al., 1994).

Viewed through the lens of empowerment, families are seen as competent, resourceful, and capable. Educators serve as facilitators, creating authentic opportunities for families to utilize their existing strengths and resources while also supporting the development of new skills. Enablement can include activities arranged by the educator that provide families opportunities to support their child's learning and foster the home-to-school relationship. In addition to the examples shared in this article, these might include celebrating children's culture through guest reading, family engagement workshops, cooking nights, and family game nights (Koralek et al., 2019).

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) requires a "critical, emancipatory vision of schooling that reframes the object of critique from our children to oppressive systems" (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 3). CSP is an approach that "sees the outcome of learning as additive rather than subtractive, as remaining whole rather than framed as broken, as critically enriching strengths rather than replacing deficits" (Paris & Alim, 2017, p.1). This pedagogy encourages teaching practices that foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism with the overall goal of educational transformation.

Funds of Identity

The term funds of identity, inspired by the funds of knowledge, refers to valuing the wealth of knowledge held by each child's cultural heritage, native language, knowledge of their home country, personal life experiences, and well-being (Este-

ban-Guitart et al., 2014; Gonzalez et al. 2005; Moll et al., 1992). The typical educator-child relationship is often shaped by the child's performance during specific, isolated classroom activities. However, it is critical for educators to take the child's funds of identity and their world outside of the classroom into account (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2014; Moll et al., 1992). Artifacts for including the child's heritage can include family photographs, cultural videos, drawings, maps, and objects that bridge the gap between in-school and out-of-school cultures. Every child brings unique experiences, knowledge, and assets to a classroom and when recognized, these children have the potential to engage in culturally and linguistically inclusive learning environments (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Translanguaging

In addition to being inclusive of each child's funds of identity, it is critical to value and affirm their home languages. Translanguaging is the practice of using one's entire linguistic knowledge. When learners engage in translanguaging, they flexibly draw upon all the features of their linguistic repertoire (Otheguy et al., 2015). The child's home languages and the dominant language, which in U.S. schools is most often English, are used for communicating to gain and share information. Among multilingual children, translanguaging is a common practice at home, school, and in their communities. When applied to the classroom, translanguaging supports multilingual children in using multiple languages to enhance their comprehension as they learn alongside their monolingual peers. By adopting and promoting translanguaging in the classroom, educators encourage multilingual children to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire, using all their languages to support their learning. This framework recognizes and celebrates the existing knowledge and language practices of minoritized communities (García et al., 2017).

Combined, these frameworks support the use of educational practices that acknowledge and make use of the family's strengths, including home languages, cultural identities, family relationships, and home learning practices.

Family Engagement

The Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) defines family engagement as:

> A collaborative and strengths-based process through which early childhood professionals, families, and children build positive and goal-oriented relationships. It is a shared responsibility of families and staff at all levels that requires mutual respect for the roles and strengths each has to offer. Family engagement focuses on culturally and linguistically responsive relationship-building with key family members in a child's life. (n.d., paragraph 1)

Family engagement influences, and is influenced by, social contexts such as race, culture, language, socioeconomic status, and levels of physical and cognitive ability. Despite this, many engagement expectations and practices are based on the expectations of white, middle-class, monolingual English-speaking families (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; McWayne et al., 2013, 2021). Without appropriate linguistic resources and support, multilingual families may have difficulty communicating with their child's educators to discuss their child's progress, their goals for their child, and their home learning practices making effective engagement difficult. If the assets and strengths of EBs/EMs are ignored or minimized, early childhood education programs can perpetuate inequities and inequitable education (García, 2009).

Learning additional languages benefits children of all ages and can lead to academic, social, and cognitive advantages, yet, without supports, EB/EM children can fall academically behind their monolingual English-only speaking peers (Espinosa, 2018; Bak et al., 2014; August & Shanahan, 2010; García, 2009). Many EB/EM children enter early childhood programs using their home language. Continued use and development of an EB/EM child's home language(s) is crucial so that it is complemented by, not replaced by, the dominant language. Replacing a child's home language with English impedes their cognitive abilities, language and literacy skills, as well as social and family connections (Wong-Fillmore, 1991). Families are vital in maintaining a child's home language, yet monolingual bias often pressures bilingual parents to hide their bilingualism, underscoring the need for support in valuing home languages as assets (Gar-

cia & Kleifgen, 2018).

When family members are engaged in their child's education, EB/EM children experience positive academic and social-emotional outcomes (Sheridan et al., 2010; Sheridan et al., 2011). These include improved language, literacy, and math skills (Mendez, 2010; Sheridan et al., 2011), less disruptive classroom behavior (Mendez, 2010), lower rates of retention in elementary, middle, and high school (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999), greater assessment gains, and higher graduation rates (Barnard, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2003).

Family Engagement Practices of Latine Multilingual Families

To overcome challenges to family engagement, educators must make intentional efforts to learn about families, their funds of identity, and how they support their child's learning at home and in the community. Studies including Latine families of children enrolled in Head Start showed that participants tended to view family engagement in terms of home and family-focused activities rather than school-based activities (McWayne et al., 2013, 2021). Latine family members often supported their child's learning in ways not generally recognized in mainstream American educational systems. To support linguistically diverse children and their families, educators must become curious learners willing to transition to a home-to-school model of partnering with families (McWayne et al., 2021; Morita-Mullaney, 2021). When educators leverage EB/EM children's language practices by teaching through a translanguaging lens and pedagogy, there is an opportunity to close the academic achievement gap experienced by EB/EM children (García & Li 2014; García 2009; Song 2022). The following strategies are for educators aiming to create a culturally and linguistically inclusive classroom.

Strategies for Incorporating Translanguaging Practices in the Classroom

As you interact with the children in your class, include phrases and 3-5 key vocabulary words in the EB/EM child's home language during circle time, storytime, group activities, routines, and informal interactions. Teachers do not have to be fluent in another language to translanguage, rather, they are creating a space that does not limit their EB/EM children to using only one language. Translanguaging exposes monolingual children to the sounds of different languages and supports multilingual families by valuing their home language and affirming multilingual identities.

Incorporate the EB/EM Child's Funds of Identity into Curriculum. To thoughtfully integrate the backgrounds of culturally and linguistically diverse children into the curriculum, start by learning about their families. When engaging with multilingual families, consider involving a translator or another adult family member who can assist with translation. Be sure to note the translator's relationship with the child. Learn about the child's home country, cultural traditions, home language(s), interests, hobbies, skills, etc. Use this information to inform the curriculum, to create opportunities for family members to engage in curriculum development, and to be included in classroom learning activities in meaningful ways. Consider a hypothetical Head Start classroom with a newly enrolled child named Roberto, whose family recently immigrated from Mexico. The teacher, Ms. Lee, takes proactive steps to learn about his cultural background. Ms. Lee discovers that Roberto's family celebrates *Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). His *tia* (aunt) is bilingual in English and Spanish, his mother speaks only Spanish, and his father frequently travels between Mexico and the United States. Ms. Lee also learns that Roberto enjoys playing outside with his younger brother and has a passion for creating art.

To integrate this knowledge into the curriculum, Ms. Lee plans a classroom activity about global traditions in November and intentionally includes Dia de los Muertos. Roberto and his peers make colorful paper marigolds, a key symbol of the celebration, used to honor deceased loved ones. To foster an inclusive environment for Roberto's home language, Ms. Lee checks out the bilingual text, *I remember Abuelito: A Day of the Dead Story* from the library. She also sends a note inviting Roberto's mother and *tía* to be guest readers, providing an opportunity for family engagement and fostering a deeper cultural connection in the classroom.

Frontload Keywords and Cognates in the Child's Home Language with Visual Support. Prior to starting a lesson, provide EB/EM children with three to five keywords and cognates that carry the meaning of a story or content material. Cognates are words shared between languages with similar spelling, pronunciation, and meaning. These words serve as a direct connection to the child's home language and can be printed to provide visual language support. Display keywords and cognates on an easel or chart paper. Use this as an opportunity to provide a realistic image (visual support) of the keyword. When adding labels, it can be helpful to color code each additional language, being consistent with the colors used (Spanish in pink, Hindi in black, English in blue, etc.). Teachers can use the colors to support EB/EM children's learning with instructions like "In Spanish, elephant is elefante which are the letters in pink." Consider sending the key vocabulary words home with EB/EM children and asking families to contribute by adding the home language translations. The example in Figure 1 illustrates how multiple languages can be integrated into a lesson and into the classroom with meaning and purpose.

FIGURE 1
Multilingual Vocabulary SupportSpeaking Children

Integrating multiple home languages into your classroom. Teachers may feel overwhelmed when multiple languages are represented in their classroom. However, with thoughtful planning and intentional support strategies, teachers can create inclusive learning experiences that support and represent all home languages. For example, in Ms. Lee's Head Start classroom, she plans to teach a lesson on the lifecycle of a frog in April. She begins by showing pictures of the frog lifecycle and introduces the key vocabulary words- egg, tadpole, froglet, and frog, in the languages represented in her classroom: English, Spanish and Hindi. Ms. Lee reads a story about frogs in English, pauses to ask questions in Spanish, and uses Google Translate to share the Hindi translation. She intentionally seats Roberto, a Spanish-speaking student, next to another Spanish-speaking peer, knowing they can provide mutual linguistic support. During story time, Ms. Lee points to a picture and asks her Hindi-speaking student, "How do you say this stage, 'egg,' in Hindi?" The EB/EM student may respond or may not know the word, creating an opportunity for learning and participation. Meanwhile, Roberto's peer supports him by explaining in Spanish, "First comes the eggs, then the tadpole." This intentional integration of students' home languages serves as a bridge to enhance their understanding and engagement, making the lesson more accessible and meaningful for all learners.

Learn and Use Basic Greetings, Phrases, and Content Concepts in the Child's Home Language. If an EB/EM child enters a monolingual English-only speaking classroom, they will eventually realize their home language is neither valued nor affirmed. By including important conversational words and phrases in each child's home language, children will feel welcomed in the classroom, that their home language is of great value, and that the educators support the continued use of the child's home language. Table 1 includes basic greetings and Table 2 displays instructional phrases that educators can readily incorporate into classroom routines. This can be applied across a range of home languages. Please note these can be adapted for languages that are represented in the classroom. Although Spanish is the predominant home language for EBs/EMs in the United States, it is crucial for less-represented languages, such as Hindi, to be celebrated and valued (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

TABLE 1
Common Greetings and Phrases

Greetings and Common Words		
English	**Spanish**	**Hindi**
Hello	Hola	namaste
Good morning	Buenos dias	shubh prabhaat
Welcome	Bienvenidos	svaagat
My name is ___.	Me llamo ___.	mera naam hai ___.
What's your name?	¿Cómo te llamas?	tumhaara naam kya hai?
It is nice to meet you.	Mucho gusto	aapase milakar achchha laga.
Please	Por favor	krpaya
Thank you	Gracias	dhanyavaad
Where is ___?	Dónde está ___?	kahaan hai ___?
bathroom	baño	snaanaghar
book	libro	kitaab

TABLE 2
Common Instructional Phrases

Common Instructional Phrases		
English	**Spanish**	**Hindi**
The title of this book is _____.	El título de este libro es _____.	Is kitaab ka sheershak _____ hai.
The author wrote the words to the story.	El autor escribió las palabras de la historia.	Lekhak ne kahaanee ke lie shabd likhe.
The illustrator is _____.	El ilustrado es _____.	Ek chitrakaar hai _____.
The illustrator made the illustrations, paintings, drawings, pictures, photos.	El ilustrador hizo las ilustraciones, las pinturas, los dibujos, las fotografías, las fotos.	Chitrakaar ne chitr, penting, chitr, tasveeren, tasveeren banaeen.
We are going to do a picture walk.	Vamos a hacer un paseo fotográfico.	Ham pikchar vok ke lie ja rahe hain.
What do you notice on this page?	¿Qué notas en esta página?	Aapane is prshth par kya dekha?

Enablement Activities to Empower Multilingual Families and Educators

Teachers can provide support to families and children through enablement activities. Enablement refers to a help-giver's actions that create opportunities for all families to empower themselves (Dunst et al., 1988). In this context, the teacher or another program staff member is the help-giver who creates engaging opportunities for culturally and linguistically diverse families to recognize diversity as a strength and asset, to share these strengths with others in the classroom and program, to facilitate family engagement, and to help families reach their goals. The following family engagement strategies provide opportunities to support continued bilingual practices and to engage multilingual families in their child's education.

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Bilingual and Translanguaging Read-Alouds

Bilingual and translanguaging read-alouds are opportunities for linguistically diverse families to share their literacy practices, languages, and cultures with the children, teachers, and program staff. This may include inviting families to read a book from their home, a book from the classroom's bilingual library, or by accessing digital books in various languages from the program's curriculum and/or assessment software such as the My Teaching Strategies Digital Children's Library.

Bilingual read-alouds may be done by a single family member or in pairs with the family member reading the text in their home language and a bilingual family member or the teacher reading the same text in English. For example, at the end of their parent-teacher conference, Ms. Lee invites Roberto's mother and tia to read to the children during storytime. When the family arrives Ms. Lee asks Roberto to pick un libro from a stack of bilingual books, he selects T*he Very Hungry Caterpillar, La Oruga Muy Hambrienta*. Roberto's mother reads the Spanish text on the page, then his tia reads the same text in English. During translanguaging read-alouds the family member reads the book aloud using their entire language repertoire, interchangeably using the language of the written text and the languages spoken by the reader (García, 2020). Read-alouds using wordless picture books provides opportunities for translanguaging as the family member and the children interpret and read the story together using the visual cues in the pictures to tell the story (Moody & Matthews, 2022).

Engaging through Family and Child Together (FACT) Time

Family and Child Together Time (FACT) is a recent adaptation of Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time (Brizius & Foster, 1993; Paul et al., 2020). FACT Time is a multigenerational family engagement strategy that draws on the principles of translanguaging and funds of identity by valuing the diverse and cultural resources multilingual families bring to the classroom. This strategy embraces all family members, including extended family members such as a child's aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and other caregivers. Teachers plan a hands-on learning activity and invite families to be a part of the in-class activity with their child and the child's peers. The duration of FACT Time depends on the activity but usually lasts between 20 - 40 minutes. Regular planning and communication with families is critical for FACT Time to be successful because it encourages active participation and collaboration. A sign-up sheet can help ensure that all families are invited and participate at different times, preventing overcrowding in a busy classroom. The use of a childcare communication and management app may also help to schedule and manage FACT Time participation. FACT Time follows four steps aligned with family engagement

and literacy: Pre-brief, Observe, Interact, and De-brief (Brizius & Foster, 1993).

Pre-brief. The educator prepares the family members for the lesson or activity by briefly discussing the activity, providing materials and resources, and verifying that the family member has a clear understanding of what to expect during the activity. The family member is asked to join their child and encouraged to work with the child in their home language.

Observe. The educator models the mini-lesson or learning activity for the child's family member. Through modeling, the educator demonstrates how the family member can use new or existing skills to help their child complete the learning activity.

Interact. The family member interacts with their child as they complete the modeled activity together, preferably while using the family's home language.

Debrief. The family member and educator debrief by discussing what the family member observed in the lesson, and the educator provides suggestions and resources for extending this learning at home.

By encouraging families to use their home language during activities, FACT Time honors and leverages the rich linguistic repertoires and lived experiences of families as valuable tools for learning. This strategy also fosters a deeper connection between home and school.

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Partnering with Families in the Assessment of Children's Learning and Development

Families possess a wealth of knowledge about how their child thinks, learns, and behaves at home and in the community. This information is vital to a holistic understanding of the child's learning and development and to establishing home-to-school connections. Often, linguistically diverse families of young children have limited experience with the assessment expectations and processes in the U.S. education system (Antony-Newman, 2019). Inequities in the assessment process often fail to acknowledge or value these diverse identities, putting Emergent Bilinguals (EBs) at a significant disadvantage. Standardized assessments and traditional evaluation methods are frequently biased toward English language speakers, overlooking the linguistic and cultural strengths that EBs bring to the classroom.

Inviting families to contribute to their child's assessments is an enablement opportunity to support family empowerment using the child's and family's funds of identity. This allows teachers and families to recognize each other as co-experts who can build strong, reciprocal family-educator partnerships. Asking families to share examples of their child demonstrating skills and developmental milestones at home and in the community demonstrates that the family plays an important role in supporting and interpreting their child's academic and developmental progress. This collaborative effort requires providing families with information about learning standards, sources of data, and assessment processes in the family's home language. Sharing this information early in the year communicates to families that they are valued co-experts, which is essential to helping the educator learn about their child.

Teachers, or other staff members, such as a Family Service or Curriculum Specialist, may conduct home visits with interested families. These visits offer educators the opportunity to observe the child's skills, behaviors, and use of their home language in a familiar, comfortable setting. Home visits also validate and empower families by recognizing their home as an important learning space and affirming the importance of their cultural and linguistic practices. This approach helps families feel valued as key contributors to their child's education. When

conducting home visits with multilingual families, it's important to bring a translator or ask if the family has a bilingual family member. Additionally, preparing key talking points in the family's home language ensures effective communication and shows respect for their linguistic background.

**Reciprocal Communication through Family Dialogue Journals**

When selecting a communication format for working with multilingual families, remember that families may not be able to attend a family engagement opportunity held during the day or evening. Family Dialogue Journals (Allen et al., 2015) enable family members to gain insight into what their children are learning and to integrate children's home lives into the curriculum. This family engagement strategy provides families with a shared responsibility for student learning and an opportunity to integrate family funds of identity into the curriculum (Allen et al., 2015). Educators generate journal entries by asking questions such as, "What have we learned this week that has been the most interesting?", "What could you teach your family?" or "What do you want to tell your family about what we learned in class?" (Allen et al., 2015). To further tap into the child's funds of identity, ask questions like, "What do you like to do as a family?" or "What is your family's favorite thing to do on the weekend?" (e.g. Figure 2).

The Family Dialogue Journal excerpt (see Figure 2) depicts a teacher initiating dialogue through the journal. The child, family members, and educators have opportunities to contribute through drawing or writing. Monolingual educators can contribute by receiving help from a translator or using a free translation application, such as Google Translate, or an Artificial Intelligence (AI) writing tool, such as Translate Now- AI Translator.

Although translation apps may not always be entirely accurate, when no human resources are available, educators can inform families that they are using these translation apps. This way, if errors or misunderstandings arise, family members can assist the teacher in clarifying the information. This two-way language support can empower families by fostering collaboration, encouraging the use of the family's home language, and improving communi-

cation. Additionally, it helps build a sense of trust as the teacher demonstrates a commitment to ensuring clear and effective communication.

FIGURE 2
Family Dialogue Journal Excerpts from Teacher
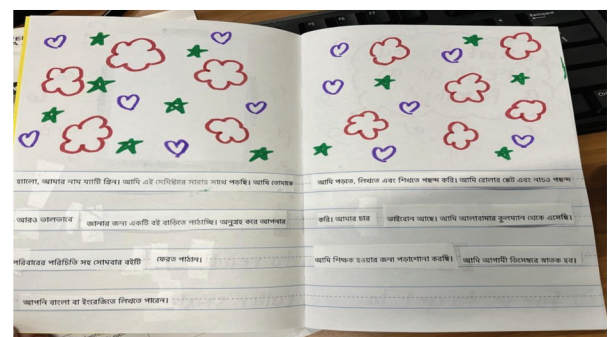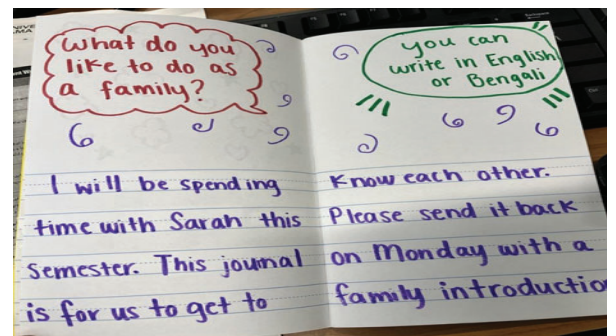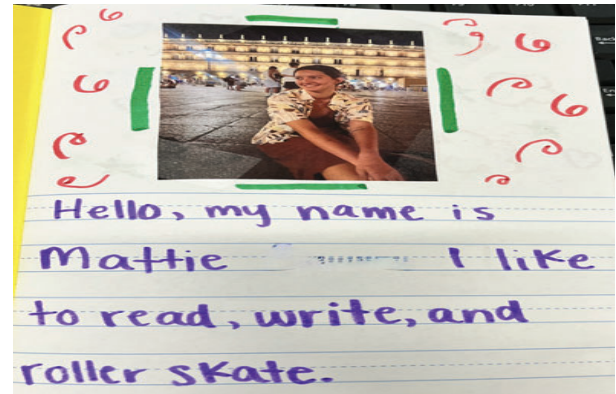
Conclusion

The classroom and family engagement strategies presented here create opportunities for educators to build meaningful partnerships with children and their families, particularly marginalized populations such as linguistically diverse children and families. By incorporating these strategies as foundational components of the classroom environment, educators communicate to families that they are valuable contributors to their children's education and recognize the family's home language as an asset to their child's learning and development. Using and building upon these strategies during the preschool years establishes early partnerships between empowered families and educators that will benefit the children, the family, and educators throughout their educational experience.

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