

Embracing Multicultural and Multilingual Families: Transforming Education, Empowering Communities

A Research to Practice Summary

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing and valuing the strengths of immigrant families and emergent multilinguals (EMs) is crucial in today's diverse classrooms. Many of these students face systemic barriers, including limited access to high-quality education, culturally relevant pedagogy, and mentorship in STEM fields. This article explores practices for cultivating inclusive learning environments through reflexive practices, culturally responsive literature circles, authentic cultural celebrations, and family engagement initiatives. By drawing on frameworks such as Family Empowerment and Enablement, Funds of Identity, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, and Translanguaging, this article emphasizes the role of reflexive practices in preparing educators to support diverse learners. Through these practices, educators can foster meaningful school-family partnerships, affirm students' linguistic and cultural identities, and create equitable learning experiences that empower EM students and their families.

KEYWORDS

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

In today's diverse classrooms, recognizing the strengths that immigrant families and multilingual learners bring to the learning environment is crucial. Many of these students have been affected by global crises, with millions displaced due to war, violence, and persecution (International Rescue Committee, 2024). In the U.S., approximately 10.3% of students are designated English Learners (ELs) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), yet the term "Emergent Multilinguals" (EMs) more accurately reflects their linguistic diversity and cultural richness. Unfortunately, general education and pre-service teachers often prioritize English acquisition over multilingualism and may lack the preparation needed to

support diverse learners effectively. This can lead to lower expectations and reinforce stereotypical perceptions of students in urban schools (Liou & Rotherham-Fuller, 2019). Furthermore, neglecting an EM student's home language development in favor of English can result in lost cognitive and literacy advantages that come with developing proficiency in multiple languages (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

To address these challenges, it is critical to prepare teachers to recognize and nurture the assets that students of color, emergent multilinguals, and recent immigrants bring to the classroom. Teachers must adopt a mindset that values diversity, actively learning from and embracing the rich stories and cultural backgrounds of their students. This article draws on frameworks such as Family Empowerment and Enablement, Funds of Identity, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, and Translanguaging, which advocate for valuing the cultural assets of immigrant families and creating inclusive, strengths-based learning environments that address educational inequities (Dunst et al., 1988; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Grant & Ray, 2023; Paris & Alim, 2017). Additionally, it highlights the role of translanguaging in affirming home languages, encouraging multilingual learners to use all of their language knowledge, also known as their linguistic repertoire, to enhance comprehension and honor the language practices of minoritized communities (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015; García et al., 2017). We present two professional development practices, and two implementation practices teachers may use to support their engagement with emergent multilingual families.

Professional Development Practices

Engage in Reflexive Practices

Early childhood educators work not only with the children in their classrooms and centers but also with the children's caregivers and other family members. The interactions they have with children and families can positively or negatively impact their relationships. In order to build strong, beneficial relationships with others, one must first spend time in reflection and then engage in ongoing reflexive strategies. Reflexive practices relate to ongoing, critical questioning and exploration of personal beliefs, values, assumptions, and expecta-

tions as well as the practices employed when working with children and families (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Ryan & Walsh, 2018). As it relates to creating, maintaining, and supporting relationships with EM students and their families, reflexive practices help educators to think critically to acknowledge and challenge potentially negative attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and stereotypes about people from different backgrounds. By asking oneself "Why?" and "How?" questions, such as, "Why do I believe that certain behaviors indicate that a family does or does not support their child's learning?," "Why do I believe that a certain trait is a family's strength or weakness?," and "How do my culture and life experiences help me understand or misunderstand the children and families I work with?" educators can learn more about their own deep-seated beliefs and create opportunities to reconsider their understanding of the values, practices, and behaviors of the children and families in their early childhood education (ECE) classrooms and programs. These questions also allow educators to reconsider their initial assumptions about families and see strengths in the family's cultural and linguistic practices. Educators may engage in reflexive practice by keeping a private, personal journal or by participating in reflexive coaching activities with other educators.

While reflective and reflexive practices are not directly family engagement strategies, engaging in these practices is necessary if educators wish to establish and maintain authentic, respectful partnerships with children and families and create enablement activities that facilitate a family's empowerment. The following practices create opportunities for educators to engage in reflective and reflexive practices that may lead to a greater understanding of and empathy toward EM students and their families.

Literature Circles with Culturally Responsive Texts

The U.S. teaching workforce, especially in early childhood, is predominantly composed of white, monolingual female educators, creating a mismatch with the growing diversity of student populations (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022a). To address this disparity, literature circles were implemented as a collaborative learning strategy to enhance cultural awareness among pre-service teachers (PTs)

(Boudreau, 2021). This study took place in a pre-service teacher course at an urban research university using purposive sampling. To capture participants' voices, emotions, and evolving perspectives, thick descriptions were gathered from written reflections, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect their identities (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participants (n=25) were undergraduate students in Elementary or Early Childhood Education in the university's teacher preparation program. Over 10 weeks, PTs read a designated section of the culturally and linguistically responsive text, wrote a reflection, created a mixed media page, and participated in an in-class literature circle.

In small groups of four to five PTs, participants took on rotating roles, such as discussion facilitator, note taker, and timekeeper, and engaged in weekly discussions guided by reflective questions. These discussions encouraged PTs to critically examine cultural perspectives, their own assumptions, and the challenging journeys many emergent multilingual students face. Weekly discussions were led by guiding questions, such as, "What part of the reading made you think differently about something or someone?;" "As a future teacher, what steps will you take to ensure you build trusting relationships with families of all cultural backgrounds?"

Additionally, PTs used mixed media journals to represent their comprehension, incorporating both visual elements and a variety of mediums to express their understanding of the weekly section of reading.

One of the selected texts, *My Family Divided: One Girl's Journey of Home, Loss, and Hope* by Diana Guerrero, provided a powerful narrative of the experiences of undocumented immigrant families. The memoir details Guerrero's personal journey as the daughter of Colombian immigrants who were detained and deported while she was at school. By engaging with such reflective literature, PTs developed a deeper understanding of the hardships faced by millions of undocumented immigrant families and the emotional toll on children in these situations. Figure 1 illustrates a mixed media journal entry and two excerpts from one PT candidate's reflections.

FIGURE 1

PT Candidate's Mixed Media Journal Work Sample



Excerpt from PT Candidate on the impact of Guerrero's story: "I really enjoyed learning more about Guerrero's family. I can't imagine how she must have felt after her mom got arrested. She must be incredibly devastated and heartbroken. My mixed media journal entry (Figure 1) represented the terror she must have experienced." Excerpt from the PT Candidate on the impact of the book: "The story has profoundly impacted my understanding of what children in similar situations go through. I thought I was empathetic before, but now I have a clearer perspective on how quickly these children have to grow up. The book also highlights how difficult the citizenship process can be. It feels like the government makes it incredibly difficult for undocumented individuals to obtain citizenship without risking deportation, which only worsens the situation because many are too afraid to apply."

"I thought I was empathetic before, but now I have a clearer perspective on how quickly these children have to grow up."

A thematic analysis identified two overarching themes from the reflections: (1) Current and future inclusive classroom teaching practices, which included the subtheme of inclusive family engagement activities, and (2) Challenges of immigrant families and students, with the subtheme of immigrant children's advanced maturity level. Overall, the literature circle discussions, individual reflections, and mixed media journal work samples helped bridge the gap between PTs' limited knowledge of immigrant families, the challenges these families face from their home countries to the U.S., and the steps PTs plan to take to support EM students in their future classrooms. Additional culturally responsive young adult texts included: *When Stars Are Scattered* by Omar Mohamed and Victoria Jamieson, *Refugee* by Alan Gratz, and *All the Stars Denied* by Guadalupe Garcia McCall.

Implementation Practices

Collaborate with Families to Plan Authentic and Respectful Cultural Celebrations

Celebrations of holidays and observances of other important dates and events are common in ECE programs in the U.S. They may vary by classroom, involve center- or program-wide activities and observations, or they may play no role in the ECE program. For programs that include holiday celebrations and observances, it is essential to authentically include and learn about all represented cultures equally (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019). Inauthentic or misinformed cultural activities and celebrations may be well-intentioned but can create misunderstandings, depriving EM students and their families of the opportunity to share their cultural identity with others.

The planning of cultural activities and celebrations must include the families of that culture to avoid stereotypical displays and activities. By asking the families of EM students to take the lead in planning and guiding educators and other families, learning goes beyond the typical "holidays and heroes" celebrations and activities (Derman-Sparks et al., 2015). When families have opportunities to share their culture and traditions with their children, educators, and other families, they experience empowerment.

One way to honor the cultural and linguistic identities of all families is to recognize and celebrate the cultures represented in the classroom or program. Engage families in this process by inviting them to share important dates, traditions, and ideas to create meaningful, authentic learning experiences. For example, families may want to introduce the Lunar New Year, a significant celebration observed in many Asian countries, including China, Vietnam, Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore. The holiday marks the beginning of a new year in the traditional Chinese calendar and is often celebrated with the color red, symbolizing joy and good fortune in Chinese culture. Other holidays and traditions to explore may include Kwanzaa, a celebration of African heritage; Holi, a vibrant festival of colors celebrated in India; or Día de los Muertos, a Mexican holiday honoring deceased loved ones. Asking the families of EM students to share how they observe cultural celebrations and activities leads to a deeper understanding of a variety of cultures that move beyond popular stereotypes to create a culturally inclusive environment. However, it is important to respect the wishes of families who do not wish to share this information.

In ECE programs that do not include holiday activities or celebrations, educators may invite families to take part in classroom learning activities that include teaching children about different cultural practices and traditions through sharing songs, stories, games, or food. Another option is to host a center- or program-wide family culture exhibition event, perhaps to coincide with International Mother Language Day in February or the International Day of Families in May. By inviting all families to prepare a display of artifacts of their culture, families share their funds of identity with the other children, families, and educators. In addition to visual displays, families may work together to include cultural storytelling, games, and songs as part of the event.

Again, it is important to respect the wishes of families who do not wish to share this information about their family, but to invite them to enjoy the event with their children. Whether these activities or celebrations occur in the classroom or in a center or program event, educators will have created enablement opportunities that facilitate family em-

powerment. Families are empowered by using their funds of identity to share their culture with children, families, and educators who otherwise may never have such an experience.

Family Engagement Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Nights

In addition to center- or program-wide cultural exhibitions, educators can organize family engagement STEM nights to strengthen collaboration between schools, families, and communities. Research highlights significant barriers to STEM education for underrepresented cultural and linguistic groups, including Emergent Multilinguals (EMs). These barriers include disparities in educational quality, limited opportunities to apply STEM skills, a lack of mentorship in STEM careers, and the absence of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Family engagement initiatives, such as STEM Nights (Figure 2), help address these challenges by fostering meaningful school-family partnerships. As illustrated in Figure 3, translated instructions encourage all families to engage and participate in family engagement nights. Research has shown that such collaborations lead to improved academic outcomes, including higher grades, better attendance, enhanced social skills, more positive school behavior, and increased graduation rates (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

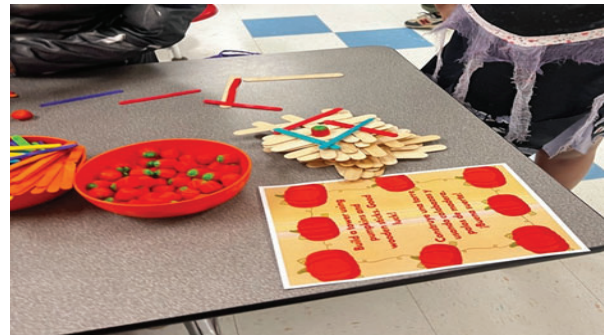
FIGURE 2

EM Children Engaging in STEMtacular Family Night



FIGURE 3

Bilingual Materials for STEMtacular Family Night



Conclusion

This article offers valuable insight into how pre-service and in-service teachers can intentionally reflect on their own pedagogy and foster authentic partnerships with linguistically and culturally diverse families. Additionally, it presents practical, student- and family-centered strategies for integrating families into the curriculum. These strategies empower educators to recognize and leverage the cultural and linguistic strengths of EM students and their families, enriching the experiences of educators, children, and families throughout the program.

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