COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT FOR YOUNG ENGLISH LEARNERS

STRATEGIES FOR LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN THE EARLY GRADES.

By Karen N. Nemeth
At a recent meeting, a principal of a suburban elementary school said she was addressing the growing diversity of languages in her school by hiring bilingual paraprofessionals. When asked what they specifically do in the classrooms, the principal realized she wasn’t sure how to answer that question. There was no plan in place. In addition to not having a language plan, schools often leave the task of educating English-language learners (ELLs) to specialized staff. However, one point has become clear across the field: Children who speak different languages are not just the responsibility of specialists. Schools that have the most success with diverse populations have a buildingwide or districtwide planned approach to supporting diverse languages seamlessly from preschool through the elementary years.

**The Full Picture**

The numbers are overpowering: More than 11 million young children in the United States live in homes where a language other than English is spoken, and there are more than 150 languages spoken by elementary school children. Even though we know that young children whose home language is not English make up the fastest growing segment of our population, the data that are really important to principals are the number of English learners in each building and the languages they speak.

Many schools use assessments and home language surveys to identify students as ELLs or limited English proficient for the purposes of placing them in English-language development services, such as English as a Second Language or bilingual education programs. The reality is that there are many more students who have not been identified, or students who meet standards for basic English proficiency but still understand and speak other languages.

Even students who have been identified for English-language development services will also participate in general education classes, art, physical education, and special education. They will use the nurse’s office, the school bus, the cafeteria, and the guidance office. Whether a school has one English learner or many, the success of each child contributes to the success of the entire school, which requires all faculty and staff members to be involved.

**Research Informing Practice**

A surprising finding has come up repeatedly in recent reviews of the research. The concept that young children progress better in English when they also receive continuing support of their home language is a critical finding in two research articles, Fred Genesee’s “Myths About Early Childhood Bilingualism” (2015) and Debi Ackerman and Zoila Tazi’s “Enhancing Young Hispanic Dual Language Learners’ Achievement: Exploring Strategies and Addressing Challenges” (2015). Preschool programs often use the term dual-language learner (DLL), rather than English-language learner, to highlight the need to support both of a young child’s languages as he or she develops. It is not easy to overcome the myth that more English exposure will build English skills faster. Apparently, simple exposure is not sufficient to build deep, lasting academic language.

What works is a more intentional strategy to build on each child’s prior knowledge of concepts and vocabulary that the child has learned in his or her home language, and to make explicit connections between the home language and English. This builds the child’s foundation of knowledge that informs his or her learning as the child develops English proficiency and academic language. In other words, the goal for the early years should be to focus on content learning—on making sure children understand what is being taught. The more content they learn, the stronger the foundation they will have to build academic language in English throughout their primary school years. Research also shows that culturally appropriate input, displays, and materials help ELLs/DLLs connect and engage for better learning outcomes.

Schools with increasing diversity face challenges such as assessing students; planning effective services; supporting inclusion and assimila-
and literacy and change as the children grow and develop.

Some strategies—such as using numerous visuals, giving students more time to absorb new vocabulary, providing multiple opportunities to practice oral language in small groups, and hands-on explorations—can be effective for ELL/DLL students from pre-K to third grade. Other strategies have to be adapted from grade to grade to match the children’s abilities and readiness.

These items are recommended for inclusion in a comprehensive plan:

- A thorough review of applicable regulations and standards—principals may be familiar with the regulations that apply to elementary schools, but rules for preschools are often quite different;
- A vision or leadership statement that captures the approach of the school and all school community members;
- A summary of professional learning goals for all staff who are considered important for supporting diverse languages in the school;
- A human resources guide to recruiting, interviewing, hiring, and supervising diverse staff;
- A screening and assessment policy;
- A plan describing how English-language development services will be assigned and implemented at each grade and how transitions from grade to grade will be facilitated;
- An additional plan describing how English learners will be supported in all other areas of the school experience and how adaptations will be made to improve the success of curriculum activities at each grade level;
- Details regarding when and how teachers and paraprofessionals will use English and other languages during the school day at each grade;
- A review of classroom environments and materials needed to support English learners in culturally appropriate contexts; and
- A detailed plan for supporting and engaging diverse families.

**Staff Training and Development**

A new report from the Education Commission of the States, *ECS and National Experts Examine: State-level English Language Learner Policies* (2015), recommends that teachers and administrators should all be trained in ELL instruction methods and cultural competency. This recommendation can be extended to all school community members. A comprehensive language plan with the elements listed above can facilitate this kind of training.
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and ensure that all aspects are covered. When bilingual teachers, paraprofessionals, and other staff are hired, guidelines for how and when each language should be used and supported will go a long way to leveraging those language resources to better outcomes for the whole school.

With a language plan in place, principals and supervisors can make better choices for formal and informal staff development. Since diversity is a given in most districts, administrators should feel empowered to call on their curriculum providers and professional development providers to do the work for them. Whether it’s a math workshop or a language arts/literacy presentation—or any professional development event—the presenter should be able to explain how their content can be adapted to work with children who speak different languages.

While some schools arrange for specific training on strategies for teaching ELLs/DLLs, the future will see a more blended approach that supports effective teaching across the curriculum in diverse schools. Principals should not have to choose between a science workshop and an ELL workshop; trainers should be able to combine those needs in one unified session.

Literacy practices at home can contribute significantly to each child’s success in school. This is particularly true for children who are new to English. Encourage families to read, talk, sing, and play with their children in their home language because that has been found to support both continuing home language literacy and successful outcomes in English acquisition. Go beyond the “special event” approach to family engagement and develop a plan to connect with every family in ways that take their individual assets and needs into account.

A Good Plan Begins With Principals

It is important to remember that there are no one-size-fits-all answers to the growing level of language diversity in elementary schools. Each school needs a plan that is based on the students and their languages, the curricula being used, the languages spoken by staff, applicable regulations in each state and district, and the resources available in different languages. This combination of factors creates a unique environment that must be addressed by school leaders using a language plan framework.

Consider looking to national organizations beyond the usual educational administrator options. The National Association for Bilingual Educators, International Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, National Association for the Education of Young Children, National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness, and Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes are great places to expand awareness of best practices for educating ELLs/DLLs in early education.

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DO THIS
Want to implement the ideas in this article? Try these steps to get started.

• Help students build a foundation of knowledge by focusing on content learning.
• Develop a language plan for young learners that features strategies like using visuals and hands-on explorations.
• Ask professional development presenters to explain how content can be adapted to work with ELLs.