

# Meeting the Home Language Mandate

## Practical Strategies for All Classrooms

Karen Nemeth

**O**n a recent visit to a preschool classroom in Camden, New Jersey, I observed this wonderful conversation. The assistant teacher had just joined a child who was using collage materials and glue to make a picture of his own face.

**Ayudante** [Assistant]: ¿Qué haces? [What are you making?]

**Niño** [Child]: Esa es mi cara. [That's my face.]

**Ayudante**: Veo que le pusiste pelo. El pelo es color marrón, como el tuyo. [I see you made the hair. It is brown, just like yours.] (*Gently ruffling his hair, she smiles warmly.*) ¡Que bello es! [So beautiful!]

(*The child smiles and touches his own hair, then the yarn he has glued on his picture, then touches his own hair again.*)

**Ayudante**: Son del mismo color, marrón. ¡Dibujaste el pelo igual al tuyo! ¿Se siente igual al tuyo? ¿Cómo se siente tu pelo? [It looks like the same color, brown. You made the hair look the same! Does it feel the same? How does your hair feel?]

**Niño** (*touching his own hair*): Bien. [Good.]

**Ayudante**: Si, se siente bien, y yo pienso que tu pelo se siente suave. ¿Qué crees de tu pelo, se siente suave o aspero? [Good, and I think your hair feels smooth. Does your hair feel smooth and soft?]

**Niño**: Suave. Mi pelo se siente suave. [Smooth. Yeah. Mine is smooth.]

(*They touch the yarn hair on the picture together.*)

**Ayudante** (*picking up the mirror from the table and showing it to the child*): Mira tu reflejo en el espejo. ¿Cómo te ves? ¿Qué vas a hacer ahora con tu dibujo? [Now you can see your reflection in the mirror. How do you look? Now, what are you going to do with your picture?]

**Niño** (*picking out some sequins*): Voy a ponerle ojos. [I'm going to make the eyes.]

**Ayudante**: Esas son lentejuelas. ¡Parecen ojos! Son redondos y brillantes. Mírate en el espejo. ¿Son tus ojos redondos y brillantes? [Those are sequins. They look like eyes. They are round and shiny. Let's look in the mirror. Do your eyes look round and shiny?]

This simple interaction brought a smile to my face; I was seeing home language support in action. So many times I have visited classrooms that are fortunate to have bilingual staff, yet as soon as an observer enters the room, non-English language is hushed. Often, teachers and assistants are embarrassed to let an outsider hear them talking with children in their home language—or even fearful of getting in trouble. When I do hear another language being spoken, it is usually a strident “*Sientate!*” [Sit down!] or other classroom management remark. To hear this assistant’s rich, affectionate, engaging conversation with this young child in their home language was a revelation.

### The home language mandate

All children deserve to have conversations like this one every day—in their own languages. Put yourself in the shoes of a 4-year-old who is adjusting to school for

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critical to their bond with their families (Wong Fillmore 1991).

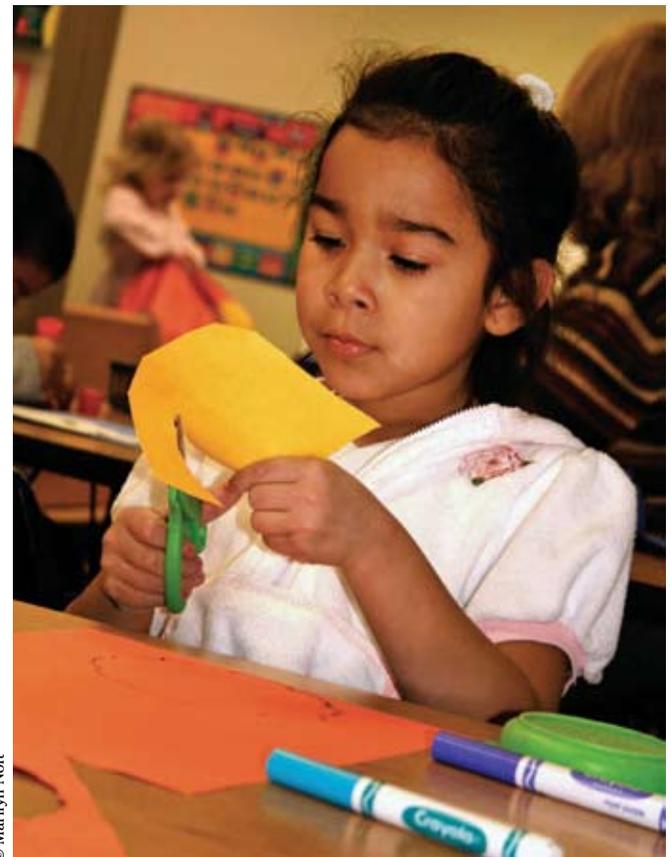
By supporting the home language of each child while scaffolding their English learning, educators (and society) have much to gain and nothing to lose. Being bilingual is surely an asset in today's

world. The case for the home language mandate has been established, but the how-to manual has not yet appeared. Teachers and directors need guidance on how to support all the different home languages they encounter in all the different contexts of the preschool day. There won't be one right answer. But solutions can be found in the creativity

the first time in a place where most people speak a language he or she doesn't understand. Supporting the child's home language is not just a luxury—it is a necessity. Throughout the United States, experts are voicing the same message: we must support the home language development of all young children. We have heard this home language mandate at the national level from the Office of English Language Acquisition (Pinkos 2007), Office of Head Start (2007), National Literacy Panel (August & Shanahan 2008), NAEYC (2005), Patton Tabors (2008), Linda Espinosa (2008), and the National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics (2007).

The research base for this expert consensus addresses early literacy and cognitive and social-emotional development. Studies summarized by the National Literacy Panel (August & Shanahan 2008) did not reveal any short-term or long-term academic advantage to total English immersion programs for young children. On the other hand, children who learn literacy skills in their home language are likely to transfer those skills effectively to English (Paez & Rinaldi 2006).

And educators must consider what children can lose when their home language is not supported. While children may quickly acquire superficial ability to converse in their new language, it may take from four to eight years for school-age dual language learners to reach full academic fluency—even longer for young children (Collier 1987). Preschool children cannot afford to miss out on content learning in their first language during the early years as they work on becoming fluent in English. And these children's social-emotional development may suffer. Research shows that dual language learners who do not receive support in their home language are more likely to be socially isolated, victims of bullying, and viewed negatively by teachers (Chang et al. 2007). They are also likely to lose their expressive ability in their home language, which is so



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and resourcefulness of individual teachers and the support and leadership of their administrators.

### Considering the issues

As a field, early childhood education strives for developmentally appropriate practice, differentiated instruction, and inclusion for all children. Teachers know that “one size fits all” policies are not likely to work with young children. Dual language learners (DLLs) present unique challenges to programs in meeting these goals. Many educators will recognize the following dilemmas:

“We have space for 30 children in our bilingual classes, but we have 40 dual language learners in the program this year. How should we make placement decisions?”

“We have one bilingual teacher, and we can serve all of the program’s dual language learners in her class. But then those children will have no contact with children who speak English. Isn’t this separation bad for the children?”

“We want to support each child’s home language, but we haven’t been able to find any resources in Gujarati, and no one on staff speaks this language. Where can we turn?”

Variables That Influence Effectiveness of Program Support for Dual Language Learners	
More Effective	Less Effective
Highly qualified teacher	Less qualified teacher
Teacher who is fully fluent in all of the languages needed in her classroom	English-only teacher
Language supports integrated into regular daily curriculum	Pull-out lessons for dual language learners
Including DLLs with their English-speaking peers	Isolating DLLs in separate bilingual education classes
Bilingual education strategies	English As a Second Language strategies
Dual language immersion program with full program supports in place	No experience with intentionally addressing the needs of DLLs in preschool
Detailed data from home language surveys and family interviews	Little, if any, specific information about home languages or family practices
A curriculum that includes explicit supports for DLLs	No formal curricular supports or materials that address DLLs

Of course, no two dual language learners are the same, and no two teachers (or classrooms) are equipped in the same way. But well-prepared early childhood teachers have plenty of strategies from which to choose one that can be effective with a given child.

The first step in preparing to meet the home language mandate is to take stock of the resources and challenges in your program, as seen in the examples above. The next is for teachers and administrators to consider the many variables that contribute to a successful plan for supporting dual language learners. There are many factors that influence the effectiveness of a program’s policies (see “Variables That Influence Effectiveness of Program Support for Dual Language Learners”).

In developing policies to support dual language learners, administrators and teachers also must consider factors that are beyond their control. In some programs, there may be only two different languages spoken by the children; every child will have some classmates who speak his or her home language. But in other programs, the children may speak many different languages, and sometimes only one child will speak a given language.



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Some parents will want their child to be taught using only English, even though it is not their home language. Some children will be receiving support in two languages at home, while others will enter the classroom knowing no English at all. Administrators have to recognize the complexities of their program's unique situation and reject simplistic policies. Teachers will need strategies they can modify to meet the individual needs of children.

A classroom that supports dual language learners sounds like any other effective learning environment, with children talking and singing. However, in this classroom, English is not the only language heard.

Often, songs are sung in the home languages of the children in the class. It is common to hear a child, a teacher, or a volunteer ask, "How do you say this word [sometimes holding or pointing to an object] in your language?" This open environment of learning and acceptance means that everyone has the courage to learn each other's language and no one needs to be concerned about making language mistakes. Listen to how the second language is supported through this simple conversation:

**Melanie:** I like your *falda*, Ms. Cindy.

**Teacher:** Thank you, but this is not a *falda*; it's not a skirt. It's a dress because it has the shirt part also. *En español, una vestida.*

**Melanie:** Ah, sí! I always forgetting that. *Pero no vestida*, Ms. Cindy. The word is *vestido*. You hear the *o* at the end? *Un vestido.*

**Teacher:** Yes, I do hear it now. *Vestido*. Thank you for helping me. I'm always forgetting about that.

**Melanie:** But it's okay because you tell me something and I tell you something. (*turning to a Vietnamese student*) How do you say *dress* in your language, Jacquelyn?

**Jacquelyn:** I not know today because my mommy don't let me to wear dress. But I can ask her the name when I see her.

It would be great if every classroom could be staffed with adults who speak all the languages of the children, but this is not realistic. Still, support for home languages can occur in any context with any teacher and any level of resources. The strategies below make it possible to improve and enhance almost any preschool program's effectiveness in engaging dual language learners.

## Supporting dual language learners

The following is a brief description of how a preschool program that supports children's home languages sounds, looks, tastes, and feels. Let's take a tour around the classroom.



**It is common to hear a child, a teacher, or a volunteer ask, "How do you say this word [sometimes holding or pointing to an object] in your language?"**

### How does it look?

- Culturally authentic pictures and posters appear all around the classroom and in the shared hallways and welcome areas. (Note: travel agencies, international tourist offices and bureaus, community organizations, and families can be excellent sources for these items.) Families know from the moment they first enter the building that they are welcomed and respected.
- Authentic items from each child's culture and language are available in all interest areas—not just pictures or toys. Parents have shared empty food containers, menus, games, dolls, musical instruments, clothing, and art supplies from their home countries.
- Books and games in the languages of all the children are evident. There are children's books, catalogs, and games in other languages. Some are from other countries; classroom volunteers have created others.
- Labels in home languages are posted throughout the classroom (with pronunciations, if needed) to help teachers use words in each child's language when discussing their play. For example, in the art area there are labels in the children's languages for easel, paint, brush, and drying rack plus color names and simple phrases such as, "Tell me about your picture" or "What did you make?"
- During circle time, the teacher uses props that correspond to new vocabulary. While discussing what mode of transportation brought each child to school that day, he

holds up toy trucks, cars, subway trains, and sneakers to emphasize the meaning of these words for dual language learners. The teacher uses gestures, voice changes, and facial expressions while speaking. Later he may assign language buddies, pairing two children who speak the same home language so the child who is more proficient in English can help his new buddy understand and share in the discussion or activity.

- Activities and learning threads continue for days at a time, giving dual language learners a chance to reaffirm newly learned vocabulary and build on prior knowledge. Some of the children are fascinated by the goldfish and its bowl. Additional activities throughout the classroom encourage the dual language learners to practice their vocabulary about fish, water, swimming, food, plants, and breathing (Nemeth In press).

- To help children feel secure and that their basic needs will be understood, there is a *survival phrases chart* with photographs of children fulfilling basic needs, such as eating, sleeping, and entering the bathroom, in addition to the corresponding text. When a child wants something, she points to the photograph that portrays her immediate need and the teacher responds appropriately.

### How does it sound?

- Bilingual visitors join in classroom activities such as reading books or playing outdoors to engage children in rich, enjoyable conversations in their home languages.

- Children chatter happily with their friends and teachers in their home languages many times during the day, showing that their language is supported and encouraged.

- Music that genuinely represents every child's country or culture is

playing at different times of the day. Instruments from the various cultures are accessible during choice time. Some are purchased, others are homemade, but all are as authentic as possible.

- A child volunteers to act as the translator between children or between children and adults.
- Sometimes during small group activities, children are instructed in their home language. Dual language learners do not have to struggle with new vocabulary, so they can devote more attention to content learning.
- The teacher teaches familiar songs in more than one language and has asked parents what kinds of music they listen to at home with their children.
- Parent volunteers read books written in the home languages of the children.

### How does it taste?

- The teacher encourages conversations in children's home languages at mealtimes, even if she doesn't always understand. Teachers seat children who speak the same language at the same table to facilitate language-rich interactions.

- Families share snacks and meals from their home cultures to broaden everyone's experiences and help the class feel more like a community.

Family parties are delicious feasts, with food from many cultures represented on the tables. Potato salad sits beside flan, shrimp dumplings, and yucca. Parents, teachers, and adventurous children delight in sampling favorite treats and new flavors. As foods and recipes are exchanged, bridges of acceptance are built between adults and between children.

- Recipes from home form the basis for engaging math and science learning while also celebrating children's

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cultures and building on the learning they have acquired at home. The following activity is rich not only in flavor, but also in vocabulary and culture appreciation:

**Joseline's family is from El Salvador. Her mother is a shy woman with limited English proficiency who volunteered to lead the class in a cooking activity. She has brought in supplies to make pupusas with the children. As she speaks in Spanish to the class, the teacher follows her instructions and encourages the children to do the same. Later, all the children are eager to taste the Central American treat they helped to prepare.**

**Following the activity, the children write a bilingual recipe book, including notes about their experience, and dictate a thank-you letter in Spanish to Joseline's mother.**



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### How does it feel?

- Children feel welcomed, supported, and encouraged because teachers learned a few “survival words” in each language before school started.
- The classroom feels safe because the teachers do not allow any teasing, bullying, or isolation (Chang et al. 2007), and they help all of the children learn to communicate and play together.
- Families feel welcomed and respected because plenty of information is available to them in their home language.

### Conclusion

There are many ways for practitioners to address the mandate to support the home languages of the children in their classrooms. I have seen these strategies work wonders in linguistically diverse classrooms. Once teachers, administrators, and staff feel confident about supporting each child's culture, language, and individual development, all domains can develop naturally. Children will feel safe and accepted. Language and literacy skills can flourish.

Preschoolers who bring the gift of bilingualism to a program should be cherished and supported. Preschool should be a place of wonder, discovery, joy, friendship, comfort, and enchantment. Anything less and we are not doing our jobs! With support from mentor teachers, literacy coaches, master teachers, and administrators, preschool teachers can use their boundless creativity and solid understanding of young children to make the adaptations needed to provide high-quality early education that is meaningful and accessible to all children.

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