

45 Strategies That Support Young Dual Language Learners

by

Shauna L. Tominey, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Practice
Parenting Education Specialist
Oregon State University
Corvallis, Oregon

and

Elisabeth C. O'Bryon, Ph.D.

Co-founder and Head of Research
Family Engagement Lab
Oakland, California

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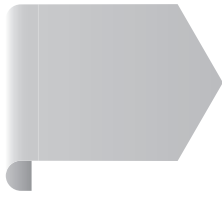
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STRATEGY

12

Create a Classroom Community

Creating a **classroom community** involves putting in place supports for DLLs as well as for all children in the classroom. Involving all children in creating a supportive classroom community is essential to ensuring that all children have the feelings educators would like them to have—feelings that will help children be ready to learn, such as security, support, happiness, excitement, curiosity, and interest. Creating a classroom community goes beyond giving DLLs the support they need to feel like part of the classroom. It also involves helping children develop the skills they need to have access to the same social and educational experiences as other children. Finally, creating a classroom community includes ensuring that all children learn to value their own culture as well as the culture and values of peers from backgrounds that are similar and different, showing genuine curiosity and interest in one another and viewing other beliefs and values with interest and compassion.

Children have a natural curiosity about one another, and many children are eager to make friends and build relationships with other children. Although it may seem like friendships will occur naturally in a classroom (they will!), support from educators is needed to ensure that children have the skills they need to build and maintain relationships in a way that is inclusive of all children in a classroom. Fostering positive relationships across diverse groups of children takes skill development, practice, and encouragement from educators. There are many factors that affect a child's ability to make friends with others, including the social skills that they have as well as their personality traits. Language difference is another possible factor. Children make adjustments to how they play with others based on the other children's language abilities. For example, children who speak the dominant language in a preschool classrooms have been observed to treat children who are dual language learners like infants (Tabors, 2008). By being aware of this potential, early childhood educators can help children learn and practice skills to reach out to their classmates in an appropriate way.

Although it may seem like friendships will occur naturally in a classroom (they will!), support from educators is needed to ensure that children have the skills they need to build and maintain relationships in a way that is inclusive of all children in a classroom.

Apply Strategy 12

- Help children learn one another's names as well as the names of teachers in the classroom. Sing songs or play games that encourage children to practice saying each other's names. Some names may be more challenging for children to say than others, depending on their language abilities and familiarity with the sounds in a language. Practice pronouncing each child's name accurately and help children do the same.
- Talk openly with children about the different languages that are spoken in your classroom. Share with children that some children in our class are learning English and that they may need our help practicing new words. Remind children who speak English as a first language that, just as they can help their classmates practice English, their

classmates can help them learn words in their home language. Encourage language learning to be a reciprocal relationship between children rather than a one-way exchange that only values English learning.

- Provide children with varied opportunities to get to know one another. For example, use a **think-pair-share** or “turn and talk” approach during large or small group times. Ask children to turn to the person next to them and share an answer to a question that you ask. As children are developing their comfort in the group and learning new vocabulary, keep questions simple or ask questions that only require nonverbal responses. These types of activities can help children practice language and vocabulary skills with their peers in a way that is not as intimidating as speaking in front of the large group.
- During partner opportunities, alternate between pairing children who speak the same home language (if possible) who can serve as conversation partners to help promote one another’s language development together with pairs who do not speak the same home language.
- Provide children with opportunities to teach one another in their native language. For example, if you count the days on the calendar together as a class every morning, alternate the language. Ask children in your class who speak Spanish or other languages to help the class count together in their home language. Providing leadership opportunities for all children (those who speak English as well as those who speak other languages) can help them develop pride in their own culture and language, convey competence to peers, build confidence in their ability to share their home language, and show that they are valued members of the learning community.
- Help children learn words in multiple languages that help them interact prosocially with one another. For example, at the beginning of the year, use books or role play to have children practice asking, “Want to play?” or “Can I play too?” in English, Spanish, or other languages spoken by children in the classroom. A list of vocabulary words in English and Spanish related to **prosocial behaviors** is included at the end of Chapter 3 (see Appendix 3.1).

Encourage language learning to be a reciprocal relationship between children rather than a one-way exchange in favor of English learning.

STRATEGY

13

Frame Diversity as a Strength

It is natural for children to notice similarities and differences between themselves and their peers as they learn about the world. They may notice something about the way another child speaks, they may want to reach out and touch another’s child’s curly hair if they have straight hair, or they may stare at another child who wears different clothing from theirs or at another child whose skin color is different from their own, especially if they have never seen this difference before. Many studies have shown that young children look longer at people, items, or phenomena that are new or unexpected.

When adults see young children stare, it sometimes makes them feel uncomfortable. As a result, an adult may tell them that it is not polite to stare or shush them if they are making

a comment about someone else (“Why is he wearing that?”). In doing this, however, we are sending children a message that talking about differences is not okay and is something that is frowned on or discouraged. To help children learn to appreciate both the similarities and differences between themselves and others (and use a strengths-based approach when considering the world), educators can help children learn appropriate ways to talk about differences and similarities. We can do this in a way that shows a genuine curiosity to learn about others as well as a desire to understand and appreciate other cultures, values, and beliefs.

Apply Strategy 13

- Choose classroom themes that celebrate the similarities and the differences within your class as strengths. Embedding multicultural messages as part of regular themes and classroom practices communicates the message to children that culture is all around them, not just a part of certain times of year (such as holidays) (Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2010). For example, rather than inviting children’s families to share their favorite traditions with the class once a year during the winter season, consider making this a regular occurrence throughout the school year. The conversations that accompany these experiences are critical to helping children view multicultural lessons with an open mindset (e.g., “This is a holiday that my family does not celebrate. I think it is really fun to learn about new holidays and traditions.”).
- Talk about similarities and differences within your class. Chart eye color, hair color/length, favorite foods, likes/dislikes, favorite stories, or family traditions. Point out how wonderful it is to have so many children in the class with similarities as well as differences and that it is these differences that make each of us unique and special. Finding a way to creatively display artwork or classroom graphs and charts that highlight similarities and differences is one way to celebrate the message that “as a class, we value our similarities and differences.”
- Help children identify and share things that make them special. Giving children an opportunity to share their strengths and to celebrate those strengths as a class can help build children’s cultural and personal identity and boost self-esteem. Talk with the class about how important it is to help other people feel good about themselves. Share that it can be scary to feel like you are different from other people, so it’s very brave to share things that are unique about yourself or your family. Teach children words they can say to support one another when they share (e.g., “Thank you for sharing.” “That’s cool! I never knew that before!” “I like the way you do that.” “Can you tell me more about that?”). Communicate to children that by helping other people share and feel good about who they are, they can help one another feel proud, accepted, and valued.
- Teach children how to ask questions about differences and similarities they notice between themselves and their classmates and families. For example, if you overhear a child pointing out something he or she notices about another classmate (e.g., “Why does he wear glasses?”), guide the two children in having a conversation about the difference (“Walter was wondering why you wear glasses. Can you tell us about your glasses?”).
- Have open conversations with children about stereotypes and biases. For example, as you paint class portraits, talk about how great it is to see so many similarities and differences (e.g., “we all have two eyes, but our eyes come in many different colors”), but also share that sometimes people treat other people badly because of how they look, especially when they look differently or act differently from one another. Sometimes people treat one another differently because of the color of their skin or because they are a boy or a girl. Share with children that this is unfair and not how people should treat

one another. Intentionally tackling stereotypes and biases during early childhood when children are developing their beliefs about the world will help them to be aware of and less likely to adopt biased viewpoints. This is critical to helping support the development of compassion and understanding in an increasingly diverse global society.

- Model a positive perspective toward diversity. When children share something about themselves, their home value, or culture, show and express genuine interest. You might say, “Wow. I never knew that before! That is so interesting.” “I am really glad to learn about that.” “I really like that tradition.” “My family does things differently from yours, but isn’t it great that there are so many different ways families can show each other they love each other?”
- Diversity exists within many forms in the classroom. It exists in terms of language, culture, abilities, socioeconomic status, age, and developmental levels as well as in other ways. Regardless of their background, treat all children in your classroom as competent, capable learners. When children experience challenges throughout the day (e.g., having difficulty communicating) or demonstrate difficult behaviors (e.g., having a temper tantrum), use empathy to frame the child’s experience to the child and to other children. Use words that consider the child’s perspective: “I know you wanted a turn. It’s disappointing that we ran out of time.”
- Other children look to you to set the example regarding how they should interpret their classmates’ challenges. Children are often curious about the challenges that others are having. Watching others experience challenges, seeing how other children manage these challenges and how these challenges are supported (or not supported) by adults teaches children about effective and ineffective strategies, as well as who they can look to for support in the classroom. During and after experiencing a challenging situation with a child, it is important to realize that other children are likely to have taken away important messages from the interactions. Framing children to one another as learners helps children empathize with their classmates and see you as a source of support and understanding (e.g., “Sometimes Turner has tantrums. He’s learning how to show us when he’s angry. Maybe we can help him practice telling us with his words so that we can help him.”).

Intentionally tackling stereotypes and biases during early childhood when children are developing their beliefs about the world will help them to be aware of and less likely to adopt biased viewpoints.

CHAPTER CONCLUSIONS

There are many ways early childhood educators can help create a supportive classroom community for children from diverse backgrounds. Getting to know children as individuals, anticipating their needs as you get to know them, and helping children to build positive and supportive relationships with one another can create a classroom environment in which all children feel safe and supported. Framing diversity as a strength in your classroom can also help children to develop skills they need to effectively communicate with others from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and ultimately lead to a more compassionate and understanding classroom community.

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