

A pair of hands, one larger and one smaller, are shown from the side, cupping a small, vibrant green seedling with several leaves and a mound of dark soil. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting. The lighting is bright and natural, highlighting the textures of the skin, soil, and leaves.

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Early Literacy Learning for Immigrant and Refugee Children

Parents' Critical Roles

According to the United Nations, nearly a quarter of a billion people now live outside their country of birth, and it is predicted that this number will increase dramatically over the next decade or so.

Many of these individuals and families have experienced trauma from conflict and war and have difficulty in accessing adequate housing. The adults are often unemployed or underemployed and unable to find work in jobs for which they were educated or trained.

This international movement of people means that, increasingly, teachers and educators work with immigrant and refugee children and families who often speak a different language, have different cultural practices and beliefs, and may face a number of barriers and challenges as they settle in their new homelands.

With respect to the early literacy education of children from these families, parents have a critical role to play, a point that must not be overlooked by teachers and policy advocates.

There are sound reasons for educators to encourage [families] to continue to use their first language with their children.

First or Home Language Maintenance

Families may want to learn the language of their new country (such as English) as quickly as possible, but there are sound reasons for educators to encourage them to continue to use their first language with their children:

- It is important that children's first language skills are well established when they begin learning to read and write in a second language.
- The cognitive benefits of being bilingual last across one's life span.
- There is a rich history of bilingual education, such as French Immersion in Canada, demonstrating the feasibility of *additive bilingualism*, which is maintaining one's first language while learning a second.
- Children who maintain their first language while learning the language of their new country can continue to communicate effectively with parents and grandparents, who sometimes have difficulty communicating in the new language.

Simply put, there are compelling reasons for immigrant children and families to maintain their first languages and no reasons to lose them.

Cultural Models of Learning and Teaching

“Cultural models” are the assumptions we have about how the world works. Many immigrant and refugee families have different cultural models of, or beliefs about, literacy learning and teaching.

For example, in Western countries, families are typically expected to play an important role in helping children become literate. However, some immigrant parents believe that teaching children is the responsibility of the schools, not their responsibility. Other families come from cultures where early literacy means rote memory, an emphasis on discrete skills, and daily practice in workbooks instead of reading children’s books, drawing and “writing” stories or messages using emergent spelling, singing songs or reciting rhymes, listening to poems and stories on a tablet, and so forth.

Likewise, in some cultures, precision and accuracy are paramount in early learning, and families do not appreciate or understand the importance of children’s early attempts at meaning making such as “pretend” reading, invented spelling, or early scribbling and drawing, which are promoted in early literacy classrooms in North America.

We need to understand that families may come with beliefs and practices that differ dramatically from ours but that worked in helping children become literate in their own countries.

“Family literacy” has become virtually synonymous with the notion of parents reading books to children.

Literacy Activities and Practices Differ Among Families

In much of the professional literature and in brochures, newspaper advertisements, and pamphlets that provide advice to parents, “family literacy” has become virtually synonymous with the notion of parents reading books to children.

However, in some social and cultural groups, adults reading books to children is not a common practice, but children do see their parents and other family members reading and writing for different purposes as they go about their daily lives.

In some communities, adults tell stories to children but do not read storybooks to them. Likewise, in some immigrant families, children support their parents by acting as “literacy brokers,” performing tasks that require reading and writing (and not the other way around, as is generally assumed). And in some families, siblings support each other’s learning as they play school or help with homework.

Codeswitching

As noted, many immigrant children speak a language other than the language of instruction (e.g., English) at school. However, as they acquire or learn an additional language, they continue to rely on their own language and engage in “codeswitching” (or what some now call “translanguaging”). That is, they go back and forth between using their first language and the new, additional language, often within the same utterance or sentence.

Codeswitching is a valuable learning strategy, as it allows children and older students to grasp concepts and construct meaning in their first language and then apply that to their second language. Young children also feel more comfortable and confident in classrooms where codeswitching is accepted.

Transferring Knowledge Across Languages

Learning to become literate in a second language is very challenging. For example, the written codes of the two languages often differ. However, there is promising research indicating that considerable transfer of knowledge occurs between an alphabetic language such as English and, say, Chinese, which uses characters or logographs.

Children who learn literacy strategies and skills in their first language will benefit as they become literate in a second language. Again, this is a sound reason to encourage parents and family members to continue to support their young children’s literacy learning in their first language, as it will benefit their learning of the dominant language in school.

Immigrant and refugee children and families present unique challenges in the countries where they resettle. As we work alongside them, employing best practices reflecting

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contemporary knowledge, and not political dogma, ideologies, misinformation, and myths, is important.

Historically, many immigrant and refugee children and families have lost their home languages quickly. However, there are compelling cognitive, cultural, linguistic, psychological, and social reasons for educators to encourage and support families in maintaining home languages.

We live in a globalized world and will be working increasingly with diverse populations. Most teachers believe strongly in social justice and want to educate all children to the best of their abilities. Immigrant and refugee families want their children to do well in school and to have a good life, and they see literacy as a powerful tool in achieving these goals.

Note. A longer version of this brief can be found at <http://literacyworldwide.org/pcr>

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The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 75 countries. With 60 years of experience in the field, ILA believes in the transformative power of literacy to create more successful societies, healthy communities, and prosperous economies. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policy-makers. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org.



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