



TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Multilingualism, Identity and Diversity in the Early Years Policy Recommendations

In both Europe and the United States, large scale immigration has led to increasingly diverse populations, posing new challenges and opportunities in early childhood settings. The changing demographic, cultural, and linguistic environment of early childhood classrooms and programs raises important and fundamental questions. In an effort to effectively serve young children and families from diverse backgrounds, programs, cities, and states must balance competing values: color blindness vs. recognition of difference; cultural diversity and pluralism vs. social cohesion. The traditional pedagogical models and approaches to addressing diversity have come under strain with the development of “superdiversity” in classrooms –in which children represent not just one or two languages and cultural backgrounds, but often several. Such diversity renders many traditional approaches – from monolingual submersion to dual language programs – increasingly unsustainable. And while general principles of best practice in truly multilingual classrooms may be drawn from successful innovative strategies, no single model or program has universal applicability. Instead, policy solutions must account for local contexts to properly and effectively mitigate inequalities of opportunity for the most disadvantaged children.

While the framing of the issue of superdiversity differs across the U.S. and European contexts, the central concerns being faced on both sides of the Atlantic are similar. Inadequate resources, entrenched and often negative attitudes about diversity, the need for effective professional development and training, conflicting policies at the state and local levels, and insufficient research on best practices and long term effects of innovative programs pose complex challenges to policymakers and practitioners. In both cases, the need to provide early childhood policy solutions that recognize and value the linguistic competencies children bring to the classroom is imperative. Approaching policy responses from a strengths- based standpoint helps to focus policy conversations about early childhood education that build on children’s native language and cultural assets instead of viewing multilingualism as a problem to correct. While political and social contexts vary, consensus on a few key fundamental issues can be applied to broader policy recommendations in both the US and the EU. Important considerations for policymakers looking to address the complexities of multicultural and multilingual diversity in early childhood settings include the following:

- **Policies that encourage development of native language competencies and the preservation of cultural heritage are needed to ensure program quality, equality of opportunity and broader social integration. Most traditional monolingual language policies neglect growing research on the importance of children’s first language to their**





TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

emerging cognitive and literacy development. Moreover, preservation and celebration of diverse cultures help develop social and emotional capacities and facilitate inclusive and tolerant classroom environments.

- Creative uses of students' own native linguistic capabilities are central to many innovative program initiatives designed to effectively tap into and utilize student strengths. Such strategies can serve multiple purposes, such as developing plurilingual competencies in Ireland's primary school model (see text box below), or building tolerance and mutual understanding as in Northern Ireland's Pilot Programme.¹
 - At the state and local policy levels, native linguistic competencies can be included in expansion and quality improvement efforts to gain a more holistic understanding of young children's development, as exemplified in Illinois' inclusion of home language instruction in their transitional models and quality and certification systems.²
 - Promoting native language development and multicultural learning environments for all children promotes inclusion and equality, and avoids the negative social and developmental consequences of separation and segregation of subgroups of children from their peers.
- **Continuous professional development and training of the early childhood workforce, particularly in supporting linguistic and cultural competencies, should be central to quality improvement efforts. Professional development across the early childhood space is necessary to ensure teacher competencies are adequate to meet the increasingly complex needs of diverse classrooms.**
 - Prevailing—and often inaccurate—beliefs among practitioners about second language acquisition and myths about the superiority of monolingual practices demonstrate a need to accelerate training both in research findings and effective practices.³
 - An emphasis on developing cultural competencies and best practices should be part of both preservice and in-service training of Early Childhood programs.⁴

¹ Cite David Little and Deirdre Kirwin presentation, Sioban Fitzpatrick presentation

² Cite Reyna Hernandez presentation

³ Cite Van Vermaet article

⁴ National Education Association, "Promoting Educators' Cultural Competence To Better Serve Culturally Diverse Students," Policy Brief (2008): http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB13_CulturalCompetence08.pdf





TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

- Competencies in cultural and linguistic responsiveness at all levels of policy (local, state, federal) are needed to best serve diverse communities.⁵
 - While a staff that reflects that cultural and linguistic diversity of the young child population is desirable, an equally if not more important goal should be to develop all staff, multilingual or otherwise, to be sensitive and trained to work effectively in diverse classrooms.
- **Effective leadership, whether at the school, local/district, or state levels is critical to ensuring home language is acknowledged as an important resource in early childhood policy. While expansion of programs for early childhood is becoming increasingly popular, the need for culturally responsive and appropriate policies depends on leaders who are willing to advance initiatives that value the needs of language minority children and families.**
 - At the school and program levels, leaders open to innovative practices and well versed in multilingual and multicultural pedagogies are essential to creating a positive school environment and can ensure that the strengths of home language and family and parental resources are fully utilized (see text box).
 - At the state level, leadership can take the form of advancing innovative program models, as in the case of Ireland, or in implementing language development standards and assessments tailored to linguistic minorities.⁶
 - At the federal level, creative use of resources to promote innovative practices can highlight effective programs and encourage similar practices across local jurisdictions.

Scoil Bhride is a primary school in Dublin, Ireland, where almost 80 percent of students are non-native speakers of English, and represent over 40 different languages and cultures. While this level of diversity makes it impossible to formally teach all of the existing home languages in the classroom, staff and teachers work to encourage parents to maintain and develop students' home language and incorporate this philosophy and approach in all aspects of teaching and learning in the school. Through strong vision and leadership from the school's principal, Deirdre Kirwan, a plurilingual culture where children are fully encouraged to use their diverse linguistic skills and embrace their cultural backgrounds—an environment which benefits all the school's students, including those who are monolingual.

⁵ Cite Sharon Yandian presentation

⁶ Cite David Little and Deirdre Kirwin presentation, Jennifer Amaya Thompson and Erin Arango-Escalante (WIDA) presentation



TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

- **Family inclusion and engagement can significantly contribute to the success and effectiveness of early childhood programs. Both government agencies and private and philanthropic organizations, especially through strategic partnerships, can uniquely combine resources and collaborate efforts to expand and facilitate effective family friendly early childhood programs.**
 - Many innovative models at the local level combine family/parental education and literacy in order to develop the home skills needed to support children’s growth, and to empower parents to see themselves (and children to see parents) as “first teachers.”⁷
 - Programs that are successful in engaging with diverse families intentionally reach out to parents who may not speak the dominant language using interpreters, family liaisons, and culturally trained staff to ensure that they are able to communicate meaningfully with teachers and other staff members.
 - Engaging migrant families also promotes cross-cultural dialogue and more effective integration in the broader community.
- **Over-reliance on limited assessment systems fails to capture the complexity of early childhood development, including important social, emotional, and self-regulatory measures that are often more predictive of future success. A holistic approach to early learning – including measures of both academic and non-academic outcomes—is necessary, and assessment tools and systems should reflect this important philosophy.**
 - Authentic assessment, including assessment of bilingual and multilingual competencies, can and should be an integral part of quality systems and policies to ensure accountability and public support.
 - While critical to evaluating program quality and improving services and child outcomes, assessment must be carried out holistically and in alignment with developmental and cultural variability in order to be useful.

⁷ Cite Briya ECE, Centro Nia programs.





TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

The World-Class Instruction Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium is an organization that seeks to advance academic language development and academic achievement for linguistically diverse students through high quality standards, assessments, research, and professional development for educators across the United States. In 2013, the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care adopted WIDA's Early English Language Development Standards: *Massachusetts Guidelines to Support Dual Language Learners, 2.5 – 5.5 of age*. This instrument, which is aligned with the state's early learning guidelines as well as its K-12 curriculum, ensures that the specific linguistic needs of Dual Language Learners are being met in their early learning programs, with multilingualism firmly framed as an asset rather than a disability.

➤ Language development standards, such as WIDA's Early Language Development standards in both English and Spanish (see text box above), can be an important evaluation tool that could be expanded to other languages to better assess linguistic development of bilingual and multilingual children.

• **Additional longitudinal research on strategies to promote bilingualism and multilingualism in early childhood is needed. Currently, little is known about long-term outcomes of specific programs and educational models, and most existing literature fails to capture longitudinal data.**

➤ Important outcomes resulting from early childhood programs take many years to become evident. Given the wide variability in children's development, it is difficult to draw valid conclusions about long term effects based on the current research, and studies limited to only a few years may not provide an adequate portrait of program outcomes.

➤ Short-term assessments generally provide only limited and discrete information, often with little predictive value, and should be used with caution.

- Despite the political and other challenges to undertaking longer term research, such investments will be needed as the complexity of super-diversity continues to complicate identification of best practices and promising interventions in the early years.
- Development and expansion of critical research provides an opportunity for philanthropies and other non-governmental players to provide a critical contribution to this field.

The challenges of increasing linguistic and cultural diversity require policymakers to rethink how to approach expanding access to quality early childhood programs for our youngest and most vulnerable learners. As consensus grows about the critical importance of providing high quality education in the earliest years, it is essential to keep in mind the value of children's linguistic,





TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

cultural, and familial diversity as resources, not impediments. National and federal level pressures to impose monolingual and standardized academic benchmarks in the early childhood space must be reevaluated. Promoting existing research on the importance of home language support and expanding the research base of promising practices in early childhood innovations for multilingual environments are critical to this effort. Eliciting the strengths that migrant families bring to the education of their children, the cultural enrichment of welcoming classrooms, and to the broader social fabric should be central concerns at all levels of decision making about early childhood policies.

