

Expand a Child's World: Involving bilingual families and English language learners in the classroom and at home.

According to the US Census Bureau, over 20% of the US population is of "foreign stock" - that is, they are either foreign-born or have at least one parent who was born in another country. In 2000, 47 million people in the United States spoke a non-English language at home, an increase of over 45% in just one decade. The number of native-born Americans with close ties to another country is expected to grow even more over the next few decades.

While these demographic changes present many challenges for educators, they also offer terrific opportunities to teach children about our world. Rather than trying to "Americanize" the ethnic community, we should make efforts to better involve English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students and bilingual families in the classroom by encouraging them to share their language and culture.

The benefits of such involvement are two-fold. First, it would teach a respect for diversity and build an interest in foreign languages and cultures among all students. Second, it would drive participation and build self-esteem among ESL and bilingual students with diverse backgrounds. It will encourage them to value their culture and language. This cultural involvement will help all children thrive in our increasingly multiethnic and multilingual communities.

Following are several suggestions for teachers of young children on how to involve ESL and bilingual families in bringing diversity into the classroom. Parents can build on these ideas at home and in playgroups, or suggest them to their children's teachers or daycare providers.

Celebrate international holidays or festivals. Let students or immigrant parents share with the class the meanings, traditions and unique foods related to the holidays they celebrate.

Read bilingual books out loud. Ask a bilingual or ESL student to read a book in his or her native language and then let another student read the same book in English. This involves the ESL student and helps support literacy development in both languages. It also exposes the native English speakers to the sounds and text of other languages. For classrooms with very young children, a bilingual teacher or parent can read the non-English version. If a native speaker is not available to read the foreign-language story, CDs or tapes of great stories are available in many languages.

Sing and listen to songs in other languages. Many young children, if encouraged, derive great pleasure from singing their favorite songs to friends.

Ask children to bring in stamps from other countries. Merylie Wade Houston, a founding member of the Early Childhood Diversity Network of Canada, suggests that children deposit envelopes from their family mail into a class mailbox. "After talking about the stamps and where they came from, you can use them to make simple cognitive games, such as lotto, bingo and memory cards."

Display multicultural posters. Make the classroom inviting by displaying posters that have text in other languages, illustrations of multicultural children or scenes from other countries.

By involving bilingual students and immigrant families in classrooms or daycare settings, we are demonstrating and teaching a respect for linguistic and cultural diversity. At the same time, we broaden the horizons of both native and non-native children.

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