

Valuing Students' Linguistic Repertoires

by Jackie Whiting

Recently, I have been invited by a cohort of teachers to lend my problem-solving capacities to challenges they are facing in their classrooms. The conversation began something like this: "We don't know if you can help us, but we will try anything at this point." Their consternation was over how to best support the learning of multilingual students whose progress in both language acquisition and the curriculum is concerning them.

Our collaboration began with conversations about these students and the other students in their classes. We considered the students' interests, first-language literacy, motor skill development, and technology access. We talked about their families and cultural backgrounds. And, we discussed the teachers' needs, goals, and hopes for all of their students. I visited classes and watched the students in action. Then, I got to work building digital, interactive learning games and curating print and digital books for the class, and finding board and card games that would help with language and skill development as well as build an inclusive classroom community.

I learned the term "multilingual learner" from world language and English speakers of other languages (ESOL) specialist Kemen Holley. The term multilingual learner reframes how I think about these students to a vision that is asset-based and not filtered through a deficit lens. I am not multilingual, or even bilingual, and I see this as a personal deficit. These students—some starting at very young ages—are developing capacities and proficiencies that make them valuable global citizens. By referencing their growth according to their ability and potential rather than their needs, we validate their identities and teach all students to value multicultural experiences and communities.

I frequently find when a teacher asks for my support working with a particular student that what's good for one just may also be good for many. That does not mean that one size fits all; it means that ALL students—really all people—deserve and benefit from multicultural learning experiences that take into account the array of assets, experiences, and identities students bring with them to school every day. When educators adopt an assets-based perspective, they have "multiple entry points and opportunities to honor students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and build teaching upon what students already know" (Snyder and Fenner 2021).

This is a new realm of collaboration for me and at the outset of this work I never thought it would result in the writing of this piece. The deeper I dive into this collaboration and my own learning about culturally responsive teaching and multilingual learners, the more I realize how many layers of literacy are involved for both the students and the educators. Previously, when I planned information literacy lessons and considered obstacles to quality information access, I thought about vetting sources, understanding bias, crunching data, and even social-emotional self-awareness. This is the first time I have considered the language in which the information is constructed. Just imagine, when these five- and six-year-olds are high school students studying the Cold War, how powerful it will be when they can do research about the Contras and Sandinistas in both English and Spanish!

For this type of learning to happen in many schools, there needs to be a reframing of how we understand, appreciate, educate, and include multilingual learners. As Caitlin Fine and Melissa Braaten explain: "in schools with de facto English-only language policies and practices, many emergent bi/multilingual students make a daily decision not to publicly display their bi/multilingualism for fear of getting into trouble or because experience tells them that their ideas will not count within the classroom." As Fine and Braaten suggest, let's think of these students as having a linguistic repertoire. To do so means validating their identities and including all students in the process of communicating and clarifying expectations, content, and learning in as many ways as necessary so that all learners mutually learn and thrive.

To that end, what can we do as librarians to support the information literacy of the multilingual students in our school? And, how can what we do to nurture the development of those students benefit and expand the learning of all students? For starters, expanding library signage to include multiple languages helps multilingual learners to orient in our learning space and helps all students recognize the diversity of their learning communities and pay attention to the challenges that language can pose when someone is navigating an unfamiliar place. Our collection development provides multiple ways to support learning and enhance linguistic appreciation. Certainly, multilingual databases help emergent bilingual students access the information they need. Multilingual texts affirm for all students—both those who speak only the primary language of the school and multilingual learners—the value and challenges of linguistic prowess. Rather than hiding their first language or the language spoken at home, emergent bilingual students can celebrate their nascent bi- or multilingualism, and monolingual students might aspire to become multilingual. Becoming versed in the variety of technology tools that can assist students who are learning in an unfamiliar language makes librarians—particularly ones teaching in a school without an ESOL program or without expansive TSOL support—valuable collaboration partners for classroom teachers. Consider Google Lens, Read&Write for Google Chrome, and other easy-to-use tools. No longer should assets like these be relegated to specialized programs when features of these tools can assist all students with their information access and communication!

The more multicultural and inclusive the educational communities and learning experiences of our students are, the more authentically curious they will be about the world

around them. The more curious they are, the more information they will seek, the more culturally aware they are, the more comprehensive that information must be in order to be satisfying. Information literacy, in any language, is essential to learning and productive citizenship. Information literacy in multiple languages fosters global citizenship. Please share how you support the information literacy of emergent bilingual students and their teachers!

Resources and Further Reading

Tools

- Read&Write for Google Chrome. <https://www.texthelp.com/products/read-and-write-education/for-google-chrome/>
- Google Lens. <https://lens.google/>

Online Multilingual Book Collections

- WorldStories. <https://worldstories.org.uk>
- Worlds of Words. Globalizing K-12 Lists of Children's and Young Adult Literature. <https://wowlit.org/links/globalizing-common-core-reading-list/>
- Unite for Literacy. <https://www.uniteforliteracy.com/>
- Storybooks Canada. <https://storybookscanada.ca/>
- International Children's Digital Library. <http://www.childrenslibrary.org/>
- Global Storybooks Portal. <https://globalstorybooks.net/>
- Bloom Library. <https://bloomlibrary.org/>

Print picture books that honor the home language and multilingualism

- *Mango, Abuela and Me* (Medina, 2017)
- *Grandfather Counts* (Cheng, 2000)
- *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2001)
- *Dreamers* (Morales, 2018)
- *A Fish in Foreign Waters* (Caputo-Wickham, 2015)

Print picture books that celebrate culture

- *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners* (Ho, 2021)
- *Where Are You From?* (Mendez, 2019)
- *The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family* (Muhammad, 2019)
- *Islandborn* (Diaz, 2018)
- *If Dominican Were a Color* (Recio, 2020)
- *Fry Bread* (Maillard, 2019)
- *Our Skin: A First Conversation about Race* (Ralli and Madison, 2021)

Lists of Print Books that Contain Multiple Languages

- "Top 10 Bilingual Books" *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/17/top-10-bilingual-books>
- "Children's Bilingual Multicultural Picture Books" Diverse Book Finder. <https://diversebookfinder.org/content/second-language/>
- "Celebrate Reading in Two Languages: A Bilingual Booklist" Colorín Colorado. <https://www.colorincolorado.org/booklist/celebrate-reading-two-languages-bilingual-booklist>.
- Bilingual Books (English/Spanish" Common Sense Media. <https://www.common Sense Media.org/lists/bilingual-books-englishspanish>

Works Cited

Fine, Caitlin G, and Melissa Braaten. "Expanding Science Sensemaking Opportunities for Emergent Bilinguals." School Library Connection, November 2021, schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2269554.

Snyder, Sydney and Diane Staehr Fenner. *Culturally Responsive Teaching for Multilingual Learners: Tools for Equity*. Corwin, 2021.

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