

## FAQ Guide for Program Directors and Administrators on Early Literacy for Multilingual Learners (MLs)

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### QUESTION #1

**What are some “look fors” or indications of a high-quality literacy practice for MLs in the preschool / Transitional Kindergarten (TK) classroom?**

Becoming a reader is a process that occurs over years—and it doesn’t look the same at all points along the process. Most young children (ages 4 and 5) aren’t ready to attend to print, and what is typically thought of as reading instruction (e.g., sounding out letters to form words) isn’t developmentally appropriate or effective—but there are powerful and important PRECURSOR skills to be focused upon in early education that are developmentally appropriate, that set the foundation for learning to read and write later, that are aligned, and articulate with a good literacy program in first grade and up.

In the early years, children need positive and plentiful exposure to and immersion in the world of print. Print access and a print-immersive and content-rich environment is a major research-proven piece of what it takes to socialize children to reading and literacy, and start them on the path to becoming readers. You would see:

- Multiple engaging interactive read-alouds
- A classroom library with plentiful books of various genres (stories, informational, etc.) and representing a diversity of cultural and human experiences, including books in students’ home languages
- Posters and signs with visuals and text in various languages

In the early years, children need to build their oral language and vocabulary so the words they will later encounter in books have meaning. The world children inhabit is named and talked about. In a preschool/TK classroom that is focusing on building oral language and vocabulary you would see:

- A lot of student talk (to peers, with adults)
- Teachers narrating what they are doing and thinking aloud using expressive language
- Teachers actively engaging children in multiple exchange conversations
- Multiple structured activities that engage children in talking as part of the activity
- Adults modeling the use of descriptive language so that children hear and begin using complex and expressive words

As you visit classrooms, listen to the language being used. Engage children in telling you about what they are doing, thinking, and learning. In an effective early literacy classroom, children will have and use descriptive vocabulary to share their learning, their ideas, their observations, and their feelings.

Other important indicators of a strong early literacy classroom will be chants, rhyming games, rhyming books, children and adults speaking in a variety of languages—this builds phonemic awareness. Teachers will be modeling concepts of print and how print works—as they sound out and write out a word on a chart, thus modeling directionality and the basic correlation of sounds to letters, and as they comment on the books they are reading aloud (e.g., “See here on the cover...”, “Let’s turn the page and find out...”). Memory and visual recall skills will be strengthened through things like story retell, dramatic play linked to a book children have heard, barrier games, etc. Young children’s connection to writing is cultivated through their own storytelling, through drawing and then dictating about the drawing to an adult who writes it down, and through a writing center with plentiful materials for children to create their own books. Be sure you can see on the schedule (or have described to you explicitly) where and when MLs are receiving the English Language Development (ELD) instruction necessary in parallel with literacy instruction.

For MLs, it is absolutely crucial that their early immersion in print and their early experiences with literacy be in **both languages** to the degree possible—and draws upon their family literacy practices as well as what is done at school. So book loan programs to families, times when family members come to the classroom to read to small groups of children in their home languages, workshops for families on family literacy, and incorporating as much of the home language as possible in the daily interaction and activities of the program.

## QUESTION #2

### What are key indicators that a literacy curriculum is appropriate for MLs?

In addition to purchasing extensive classroom libraries of books in multiple genres (e.g., good literature, high quality informational text with visuals related to the content being taught, books in the languages of the children/families and representing cultural diversity), a high quality language arts/literacy *curriculum* is important because it lays out a systematic scope and sequence of skill development, addresses grade level standards, and provides the teacher with the architecture of units of study over a year. The curriculum should be constructed around themes so language and literacy are embedded in learning about something. Curriculum does not stand alone. It is a tool put into the hands of teachers to deliver responsively to the students in front of them. And, because MLs require some specific and different instructional approaches to literacy development, the selection of curriculum should be based on the degree to which it incorporates a comprehensive approach that explicitly and comprehensively meets the needs of MLs and the degree to which it supports teachers in responding to their MLs. Here are questions to ask and things to look for:

- Does it support a comprehensive and integrated approach to literacy—addressing all essential components (*including foundational skills, oral language development, building vocabulary and background knowledge, comprehension and meaning-making skills, cross-language connections, writing, and active engagement with high quality text*)?
- Does it support teachers in differentiating instruction for MLs at varying proficiency levels? Does it provide ELD materials (based on ELD standards) that link to the content and that focus on how English works?
- Are there content themes within which the language/literacy work occurs—and are these related to grade-level standards in those disciplines (i.e., science, social studies)? Are the themes of sufficient duration (4-5 weeks) to allow for building background knowledge and vocabulary?
- Does it include resources for teachers on supporting transfer and cross-language connections for MLs in developing language/literacy?
- Does it include high quality literature and reading materials that model expressive and complex language, and have helpful visuals that engage students and are culturally inclusive?

- For dual language programs, are there aligned curriculum in other languages, and are they designed authentically around the specific language systems and do they utilize authentic texts written in those languages?

### QUESTION #3

#### What kind of professional learning opportunities will help our teachers more effectively teach reading to our MLs?

Besides family income and parent education, the number one determinant of student success is the quality of the teacher, the relationship between teacher and students within which learning occurs, and the degree to which instruction is responsive to students' needs. Fundamentally, a teacher's role should be focused on taking students where they are, understanding the assets, challenges, interests, and concerns of students, and shaping learning activities and supports in ways that engage and facilitate their literacy development. To do this, teachers need skills, knowledge, and capacity. Most importantly, they need to know their students.

Therefore, professional learning for teachers regarding literacy and MLs needs to combine learning about the process of literacy development for children with languages other than English and how it differs from literacy instruction for monolingual and English proficient students, with developing a toolkit of strategies that specifically leverage the power of children's dual language brains in developing their emerging reading and writing skills—all in tandem with an understanding of cultural and linguistically responsive pedagogy. Furthermore, teachers need clarity about the literacy standards and ELD standards. They need skills of observation and assessment that are appropriate for MLs, and the skills to assess the curriculum critically and flexibly through the lens of understanding their students so they can make professional instructional decisions that are effective and appropriate for students. This is a lot! Hence, investment in professional learning is critical.

Seek out professional learning that *specifically* addresses literacy and MLs, remembering that general approaches to literacy development for English proficient students is not adequate for MLs. Create an infrastructure of professional learning support that includes literacy coaches (with expertise in dual language literacy development), provide teacher time and collaboration formats to examine MLs literacy, work together, and plan to adapt instruction and curriculum accordingly. It is very helpful for teachers to be able to see what literacy-supportive learning environments look like—through visits and videos—and to observe and discuss other teachers' practices. Communities of practice and teacher networks focusing on literacy development for MLs can be particularly effective and can be arranged at the district or county office level. Finally, ensure that teachers have the materials and conditions to deliver effective literacy instruction for MLs.

### QUESTION #4

#### Does the same basic science-based literacy approach apply effectively to all students? What's different about literacy instruction for MLs?

While aspects of learning to read and write are the same for all children, the fact that MLs come to the task with two (or more) languages and are likely to be in classrooms where literacy is being developed in English only makes a significant difference. There are important ways that literacy development for students with two or more languages is **NOT** the same as for monolingual students. Bilingualism is not the presence of two separate language systems and identities; it involves the **intersection of two (or more) languages** within the mind and life experiences of our students. It is not that MLs have one language at home and turn it off at the schoolhouse door and then function solely in a second language, English. The presence of both language systems is a fundamental reality for MLs regardless of the language of instruction.

Language processing in the bilingual mind is distinctly **different** from monolingual literacy development, and this calls for different approaches to instruction. The new language and literacy system are being developed in the presence of and in interaction with an existing language system. This is not an incidental issue—it is central! And it also has implications for how we think about our goals of literacy education for MLs: *To leverage their dual language resources to become proficient readers and writers in and across their multiple languages!*

Specifically, literacy education for MLs needs to include cross-language connections, attention to what transfers and what does not from one language to the other, support for developing literacy in their home languages in addition to English, use of materials that are culturally inclusive, an emphasis on building the oral language and background knowledge in English that gives meaning to the words in print, and strong designated ELD that builds understanding of the structures and ways that English works.

If instructional approaches to literacy are designed for monolingual English speakers and do not respond to the dual language brain of the ML child, gaps will grow and English speakers will be privileged over MLs.

## QUESTION #5

**I keep hearing about the science of reading. What does this mean for MLs?**

A science-based approach is always important. Reading (and literacy) instruction should build upon an existing research and knowledge base. For MLs, it is important to reference research that specifically addresses the specific needs of MLs, which are in significant ways unique and different from those of monolingual English speakers. Sometimes under the banner of “science of reading” there are assumptions that reading instruction is the same for all students. Some of the research upon which it is based is limited to English proficient and monolingual students. And sometimes the “science of reading” is interpreted as being primarily about phonics and decoding. Those interpretations of the research on literacy instruction are inadequate, do not draw upon the knowledge based about MLs, and can be harmful for MLs. Pay attention to whether the research and “science” that is being touted is actually research and science about MLs. Many decades of research have produced a research base for instructing language and literacy with MLs. That specific science describes a comprehensive, multi-dimensional, assets-based, complex, interactive, and integrated approach. It speaks to the contexts of literacy instruction (i.e., assets-based, print-rich and content-rich learning environments, culturally inclusive and responsive, the integration of language development (oral) with literacy and content, support for home language) as well as the essential skills. The science of reading for MLs recognizes the important interaction and integration of the components of literacy instruction. No one element has primacy or priority over another.

## QUESTION #6

**What kind of investments can make a difference in supporting MLs’ literacy development?**

A strong literacy program for MLs requires investment beyond the purchase of a good quality language arts/literacy curriculum. First and foremost, teachers need **professional learning** specific to literacy development for MLs. Second, teachers need high quality materials. They need **classroom libraries** of books to create the print-immersive and print-rich environment so important in developing literacy. These books should be diverse in genre (e.g., stories, poems, informational text), multicultural, representing the different languages of the children and families in the program, and linked to the thematic units and topics being studied as well as a variety of interesting topics. **Home-school book loan initiatives** are important—particularly where books are available in home languages—and are even more powerful if coupled with **family workshops** on supporting biliteracy development. Second, classrooms need **supplies for writing centers**, collaborative writing materials (e.g., sentence strip charts), and book-making. Investments in **literacy coaches** ensure that teachers have the support they need to engage in

meaningful formative assessments and plan based upon those assessments to differentiate literacy instruction. These literacy coaches should have expertise in second language development and dual language so they can bolster teacher expertise in cross language connections, in planning for aligned ELD instruction, and provide support in strategies to leverage the home language in the development of literacy.

## **QUESTION #7**

**How do we support and affirm our students' variety of home languages and cultures? What does this look like in literacy instruction?**

An assets orientation to literacy instruction is important for MLs. The goals of literacy education should be to support students to become proficient as readers and writers, and to see literacy as a tool, a resource, and part of their identities in and across their multiple language worlds. For this to happen, they need to see and engage with books in their home languages as well as in English, and they need to become familiar with authors and works of literature in and from their home cultures in addition to English. Furthermore, literacy development for MLs is not the same as for monolingual students. They enter into literacy with two or more language systems and identities, and literacy develops at the intersection of two (or more) languages. This calls for different approaches to instruction. When their home language is not invited into the process of becoming a reader and writer, MLs' literacy development is hampered. Conversely, when their home language is leveraged in the process of learning to read and write, it serves as a powerful facilitator of literacy. A school that affirms students' home languages and cultures builds biliteracy into the goals of literacy instruction, ensures access to books in the authentic language and voices of children's home cultures, incorporates cross language connections into literacy instruction, and supports families as partners in the literacy development of children.

## **QUESTION #8**

**What can I do as the instructional leader of our program and school to ensure a strong comprehensive literacy approach for MLs?**

Effective literacy programs are made possible by instructional leadership that ensures the conditions for good instruction and builds an infrastructure of support around teaching. The school and the district should have a clear asset-based instructional vision that embraces MLs, articulates goals of literacy for multiple languages and cultural worlds, defines basic instructional principles, and commitment to a comprehensive, integrated, and responsive literacy approach to teaching reading and writing that is based upon research on MLs. In addition, the instructional leader allocates resources for high quality, ongoing professional learning for teachers in overall literacy instruction as well as specific needs and strategies for MLs. Planning time and collaborative formats for planning are allocated and protected to enable teachers to engage in formative assessment and plan for responsive literacy instruction. The instructional leader creates formats and expectations that support the integration and connection between language arts, literacy, content areas, and designated ELD. The instructional leader ensures resources and investment in materials needed to create content-rich, language-rich, and print-rich learning environments, and the provision of high quality curriculum and materials. Finally, instructional leaders keep at the center the equity promise of access and equal educational opportunity for MLs—monitoring both the conditions of schooling and the progress of MLs towards literacy, and serving as an advocate always for MLs.

## QUESTION #9

### What are some points of caution when implementing literacy instruction for MLs?

In addition to staying clearly focused on the comprehensive contexts and elements of effective literacy instruction for MLs, there are some tendencies to guard against:

- First, guard against the tendency to push-down reading instruction appropriate for first graders into the preschool and TK years. Focus instead in the early years on the *precursor* skills to literacy such as plentiful and engaging immersion in books, being read to, and early dictation. Spend time on rich oral language development and building proud vocabulary. This will pay off in a strong foundation for the later development of reading and writing skills.
- Second, guard against spending so much time in the school day on reading and writing skills and practice that other aspects of literacy are pushed aside (e.g., free choice reading and writing, interactive read-alouds) and other content areas are sacrificed. Be sure that MLs are provided access to the full curriculum (including science, social studies, the arts, math, etc.) and that literacy activities occur in and through those subjects.
- Third, guard against an English-centric or English-only focus on literacy—ensuring instead that MLs are exposed to and encouraged to develop literacy in their home language as well.
- Fourth, do not confuse ELD with English literacy—they are essential sister curricula that do not substitute for each other. MLs need both!
- Fifth, guard against the narrowing of literacy to just reading, and the narrowing of reading instruction to just a primary focus on foundational skills.

## QUESTION #10

### How can we collaborate with families to promote literacy for MLs?

When children arrive at school, they bring years of language-building experience, knowledge anchored in one or more languages, prior experiences with exposure to print, and early literacy practices. The teaching of literacy in school should build upon and come from the foundation of knowledge and language children bring—and seek to bridge a coherent connection between the literacy development occurring in school and the continued engagement with language and literacy at home.

Educators can collaborate with families to support MLs' literacy by:

- **Inviting family literacy practices into the classroom and through family sharing.** Children are exposed to print and its purposes in their home languages through family practices such as storytelling, songs, and engagement with everyday print materials (e.g. grocery lists, emails, recipes, books, etc.). Educators should recognize, respect, and value families' varied home literacy practices as cultural and linguistic assets to be integrated into classroom literacy instruction through activities that are culturally appropriate and support families to engage children in literacy activities at home.
- **Sharing information with families about the importance of promoting home language in children's literacy development.** Families need to hear how important their home language and family literacy practices are in supporting a child's overall literacy development, and be provided with information and strategies about how to do this. This can be done through strategy workshops, short blogs, or tips in newsletters for families on

things such as: interactive reading of books (in their home language) with their children, on the role of storytelling and strategies of narrative recall in building literacy muscles, on the value of oral home language development as a foundation for literacy, on building positive engagement with books in the home language, on incorporating writing into daily life at home, on cross-language connections and transfer between English and their home language, on accessing public libraries and community literacy resources, etc.

- **Integrating culturally inclusive and reflective materials.** Because literacy instruction that is decontextualized and devoid of relevance to the ML's home language, literacy, and life denies the assets that each child brings, and has the potential to erase much more than surface-level literacy practices of the home and community, educators must be vigilant about finding, incorporating into literacy instruction, and making available reading materials that are culturally inclusive and reflective of the strengths and contributions of children's communities.
- **Creating an inclusive climate of support for home language, culture, and bilingualism that embraces family and community.** Young children absorb attitudes about the status and value of languages and cultures, and quickly determine whether their family, culture, and language have a place and are respected in the school. This influences the degree to which MLs view literacy as relevant to them, and is a significant factor in subtractive patterns of language loss and rejection, which then have an undermining impact on language development, literacy engagement, and school participation. Programs in which MLs develop strong early literacy skills actively provide messaging that affirms the value of bilingualism and biliteracy, welcome and embrace families and communities, and celebrate the literacy life of the community (e.g., local authors and illustrators).
- **Drawing on community funds of knowledge and building strong community engagement.** In schools in which MLs achieve high standards, parents and community members are actively engaged in the classroom, and help teachers bridge and connect to community resources for learning. Efforts are intentionally designed and implemented to connect families to the learning children are engaged with in school. Teachers design and assign projects that strengthen home-school connections—engaging families in what their children are learning in school and utilizing family “funds of knowledge” in enriching education for all. Parents are provided information and workshops about how they can support their child's learning (e.g., strategies to strengthen children's oral language, writing, or reading). The school sends clear messages and provides strategies for families to support their students to engage with and continue developing/maintaining their home language and learning about and feeling connected to their home culture. Families are provided multiple opportunities to be informed about what their children are studying and what home/school projects reinforce that learning. Family and community members are utilized as experts and resources for student learning.