By recognizing the rights of children to their own languages (http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Groups/CCCC/NewSRTOL.pdf) at an early age, early childhood educators perceive their young students as equally deserving of the cognitive, social, and creative benefits of multilingualism, and they respect children's human dignity and linguistic histories. In today's increasingly diverse and culturally complex early childhood classrooms, all children live within a linguistic “contact zone” (Canagarajah, 2014), an intersection of diverse languages, dialects, regionalisms, registers, and other linguistic and communicative varieties. A number of research investigations have pointed to the importance of students' and teachers' access to and uses of their language varieties both for academic learning and for young children's identity development. Yet questions remain regarding how early childhood educators/stakeholders can best establish the learning conditions that recognize and sustain the linguistic varieties children and their families bring to school. As with play, we believe that authentic culturally and linguistically responsive opportunities for students to access and utilize their languages in the classroom can cultivate a more democratic setting for children to learn and collaborate with others. In this brief, we highlight the benefits of linguistically responsive teaching and feature relevant research-based practices to inform future policies and practices for the early childhood classroom.

Linguistically Responsive Instruction in the Early Childhood Classroom

Monolingual values that privilege a singular standard of English narrow the possibilities for language and literacy achievement and engagement among linguistically diverse learners (Gort, 2015) and have contributed to the rapid language loss of many immigrant children (Zentella, 1997). In addition to highlighting the consequences of standard English-only practices, including reduced academic success and lower graduation rates for linguistically diverse students (Iddings, Combs, & Moll, 2012), researchers have documented how young children benefit significantly from linguistically responsive education (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008).

Learning with two or more languages provides linguistic, cognitive, and social advantages for students (Hornberger, 1990, 2003; Cummins, 2001; García, Bartlett, & Kleifgen, 2007). There is considerable consensus in recent research that linguistically responsive engagements in early childhood classrooms can positively shift community dynamics and allow young children to access identity positions of expertise, increasing their literacy investment, engagement, and learning. As Gort & Sembiante (2015, p. 7) have argued, linguistically responsive practices in the early childhood classroom can develop “children's linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge, support experimentation with new language forms, and integrate various languages and language varieties, while recognizing, validating, and expressing their shared bilingual identities.”

Policy and Classroom Implications

The most effective way to address monolingual values in the early childhood classroom and preserve students' right to their first languages is to take active steps to build metalinguistic awareness among young children through linguistically responsive practices. Developing this awareness includes understanding that diversity of language exists, exploring how these linguistic varieties function and have purpose, and appreciating the qualities of others' languages. These efforts are not at the expense of learning English. Instead, linguistically responsive practices are intended to engage young children in deep study of language in all of its forms and functions. Early childhood educators can achieve a linguistically responsive context by providing young children access to the following:

1. Linguistically responsive opportunities to play

Taking the rights of children seriously means that we must start by taking careful note of the linguistic resources which identify the youngest children in our classrooms. What language varieties do children practice at home? With their peers? Across contexts? What resources, materials, and invitations can be made available and used to engage young children in these language practices as they play and collaborate with peers in the classroom?
2. Linguistically diverse literature
For read-alouds, shared reading, and free-choice opportunities to read, it is necessary to have literature reflecting the language varieties of the families within the classroom and beyond. Developing habits of listening for and understanding how languages work in literature can contribute to students’ metalinguistic awareness. For a list of linguistically diverse literature for children, see https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/detailListBooks.asp?idBookLists=102. Also see the Early Childhood and Equity Brief on sharing diverse literature.

3. Family/community engagements for learning
Family and community members become essential to cultivating linguistically responsive spaces for young children. Early childhood educators/stakeholders often identify as predominantly monolingual and may feel ill-prepared to establish a linguistically responsive context. We encourage educators to partner with family and community members to organize events, units of study, practices, and other authentic collaborations to honor and learn from the languages practiced in and around the community in authentic ways.

4. Teachers’ expansive view of language
To support linguistically responsive conditions for young children, relevant stakeholders must acknowledge and develop language ideologies and beliefs that reflect a more expansive and integrated view of language differences in the early childhood classroom. Early childhood educators can better develop and use their emerging knowledge of the linguistic varieties in the classroom to scaffold students’ learning when they have reflected upon their own language beliefs and practices (de Oliveira, Gilmetdinova, & Pelaez-Morales, 2016). Educators/stakeholders can participate in professional learning communities to reflect and inquire into their own and their students’ language ideologies and practices by reading, discussing, and developing action plans inspired by their collaborations. (http://www.csun.edu/~Bashforth/305_PDF/305_ME3/OralLanguage/ExploringLanguageInLanguageArtsTeacherEd_Oral_LA_2006_.pdf)

References


