

COUNCIL  
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PROFESSIONAL  
RECOGNITION



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# THE FUTURE IS HERE:

Meeting the Needs of  
Multilingual Learners

**“Diversity is a resource, not a problem to be solved,” according to Linda Espinosa, an expert in the field of early childhood education and a former Advisory Board member of the Council for Professional Recognition.<sup>1</sup>**

Our multilingual, multicultural classrooms are the best seedbeds to start preparing young learners for life and work in our interconnected world. Yet many local policies and practices have largely cast the wealth of languages our children speak as an obstacle to overcome, not an opportunity to embrace. A culture war is now underway between two camps: advocates of English-first education and those of home-language instruction. But we need new approaches as our nation’s young learners become an increasingly diverse group, representing a vast spectrum of languages and cultures. This diversity within diversity — or superdiversity as it is called — demands that educators find new ways to honor the languages and cultures of all the children and families they serve.

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## **SUPERDIVERSE CLASSROOMS: A SNAPSHOT OF WHAT’S AHEAD**

**I**t always has been important to show respect for diversity, but the stakes are higher since immigrant children are now the fastest-growing segment of the nation. A demographic upheaval is underway, and the data point to the seismic dimensions of this ground-breaking change. In California,

44 percent of children come from families that don’t speak English at home. In Washington, DC, the percentage of children from non-English speaking homes has erupted to 9 percent from 6 percent over the past decade. In Maryland, it has nearly quadrupled, and in New Jersey, it has ballooned six times during the same period of time.<sup>2</sup> The numbers vary by state, but broadly speaking, just one in eight teachers has a bilingual background while nearly one in four students speak a language besides English at home.<sup>3</sup>

The vast range of the languages our children speak has made it a challenge for educators to communicate in group settings. While Spanish remains the dominant language among immigrant groups, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, for example, speak different dialects than Central American families and their children.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the past decade has brought native speakers of at least 350 languages to U.S. shores: Arabic and Nepali, Korean and Kru, Somali, Kiswahili (Swahili) and more. Many are refugees who belong to minority groups with their own unique languages and cultures. For example, Dallas has drawn many Hakha Chin speakers who suffered human-rights abuses under Myanmar’s military regime. Minnesota and Wisconsin are home to many speakers of Hmong, who fled ethnic cleansing in Laos. Throughout the U.S., our communities and classrooms teem with a polyglot population that offers us new perceptions of the world.

Successive waves of immigration have swept in radical change, transforming our nation’s preschools and child-care centers into a melting pot of different races, languages and cultures. Step into today’s multilingual classrooms and you’ll see a



snapshot of tomorrow's workforce. The future is here. Yet most local policies and practices remain frozen in the past. The early child-care field needs the kind of laws that have led K-12 schools — with varying degrees of success — to identify English learners and assess their language skills.<sup>5</sup>

As a result, early childhood educators sometimes feel challenged as they face classes/groups in which a handful of children speak Spanish, a few speak Kiswahili (Swahili), one speaks Arabic, and another speaks Hmong. With the resources they have, it's hard for them to fully harness the promise of the multilingual classroom for expanding children's horizons, building tolerance and bridging cultural gaps. Instead, it often seems like a Tower of Babel, filled with the din of many different languages, as one educator revealed in a woeful tone of frustration:

*“The thing is, I am a bilingual teacher. I have a bilingual credential even though I have been teaching in an English classroom. I know how important home language is. But with seven different languages in my classroom, I can't speak the languages of most of my students. I knew I wasn't supporting them the way I should so I didn't feel effective. I speak Spanish and English, but I thought I needed to speak all the languages of my students to teach them well. If I can't speak their language, how can I help? It felt horrible. It's like I can teach if I know your language, but what can I do if I don't speak it?”<sup>6</sup>*

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## RESEARCH AND REALITY

As early childhood educators, we must surmount a number of roadblocks to build our own bridge ahead. We must engage families who don't speak English in their children's education. We must recruit a multilingual teaching force and find more college faculty, now a rare asset, who can teach early childhood education in more than one language. We must increase access to early childhood education and boost enrollment by making families more aware of the programs available to them. As newcomers to a region, many immigrants face isolation and lack connections to the resources that their communities provide.<sup>7</sup>

The dissonant babble of voices opining on these issues has given genesis to some promising programs. In California, the Sobrato Early Academic Language or SEAL program stresses vocabulary, talking, and role playing among students, extensive training for teachers, and parent involvement.<sup>8</sup> In Texas, San Antonio's Harlandale school district has Pre-K students learn English and Spanish together so they can help one another through instructions and assist each other in the language they know best. In New York, Mayor Bill de Blasio expanded the city's Pre-K program by \$300 million, opening up tens of thousands of slots for low-income children. He stressed the need to tailor the program for immigrant children, but his earnest endeavor didn't provide enough time or training for teachers to gain the cultural competence they needed.<sup>9</sup>

Similar problems have dogged state efforts, according to a recent report from the National Institute for Early Education Research. Of the 35 state Pre-K programs discussed in the report, only five states —

Kansas, Maine, Minnesota, Nevada and Texas — employed at least seven of nine policies surveyed, which include permitting bilingual instruction, providing extra funding and assessing children in their home language. And while research has shown that a qualified teacher is key to raising student achievement, only six programs in five states required lead teachers to have training in educating preschoolers whose home language wasn't English.<sup>10</sup> Despite extensive research, and all the insights it has yielded, actual practice lags as states confront the multilingual teaching shortage.

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There's no doubt “we need more early childhood teachers, who are fluent in multiple languages,” Espinosa has pointed out, “but that staffing may take decades to achieve.”<sup>11</sup> In the meantime, we must bridge the gap between the staunch apostles of English-first education and the fervent advocates of home-language instruction by acting on extensive research showing that early learners can pick up English without giving up their home language.<sup>12</sup> And these multilingual learners reap important benefits later on. Compared with students in English-only classrooms, multilingual students have higher test scores, fewer behavioral problems, better attendance records and more involved parents.<sup>13</sup> Early language learners who remain proficient in their home languages also are able to establish a strong cultural identity, maintain firm bonds with their families, and thrive in a global, multilingual world.<sup>14</sup>

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## CALLING ON COMMUNITY SUPPORT

We can nurture these future citizens of the world by taking new approaches in our preschools, where classrooms are more diverse than those in public schools. The data shows there is a higher proportion of dual-language learners in preschool than in kindergarten, a finding that points to the pressing need to identify emerging dual-language learners, then plan for instruction that will best serve them and their family members.<sup>15</sup>

Educators should build programs that include interactions in English as well as the children's home languages, opportunities for children to practice new vocabulary and skills, parental engagement and community outreach. Granted, all teachers cannot teach in all languages, but they can support all languages by introducing English during the preschool years while maintaining the home languages.<sup>16</sup> Effective programs for serving young learners from diverse language backgrounds include the following components:

- » Reading books in the children's home languages and having family members or community volunteers join in
- » Teaching children rhymes, letters and numbers in their home languages, an activity that also might demand community or parental support
- » Pointing out connections between words in English and the home language
- » Incorporating home languages into morning messages and greeting routines so children hear a range of languages, including their own

- » Letting parents know what topics the class will cover so parents can talk about them in the home language before the children discuss them in English
- » Setting aside time for adults who speak the children’s home languages to have chats with the children<sup>17</sup>

In addition, we should recruit a more diverse early childhood workforce because children tend to respond better to educators who resemble them and speak their language. The children feel more cared for, try harder and seem happier in class. They might even do better in school, so the pluses of having a diverse preschool workforce are clear.<sup>18</sup> The question is where to find them.

A promising pool consists of preschool teaching assistants and instructional aides, many of whom are already multilingual. Promoting the training of this workforce is the specialty of the Council for Professional Recognition, an independent nonprofit that provides the Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™ based on 120 hours of coursework and 480 hours of experience working with children. For more than 40 years, the Council has fulfilled its promise to support early childhood educators in whatever language they use in the classroom, family child care home, or as home visitors. And, to date, it has worked with educators in 19 languages — including world languages such as Spanish, Arabic and Mandarin and those for more specific populations, such as Haitian Creole, Navajo and Yup’ik spoken among Alaska’s Eskimos and Aleuts.

## CDA® ASSESSMENTS CONDUCTED IN OTHER LANGUAGES

- ✓ Arabic
- ✓ Chinese
- ✓ Haitian Creole
- ✓ French
- ✓ Hmong
- ✓ Kiswahili (Swahili)
- ✓ Korean
- ✓ Lakota
- ✓ Mandarin
- ✓ Navajo
- ✓ Portuguese
- ✓ Salish
- ✓ Spanish
- ✓ Sign Language
- ✓ Somali
- ✓ Russian
- ✓ Vietnamese
- ✓ Yiddish
- ✓ Yup’ik

## A GLOBAL SOLUTION FOR A GLOBAL NEED

As an international organization, the Council advocates credentials for all early childhood educators who work in any language and in any viable program. In 2013, the Council translated this vision into a concrete mission by creating a Department of Multilingual and Special Programs that ensures all multilingual candidates have the same chance to earn CDAs as English speakers. The department manages all translations of Council materials and recruits Professional Development Specialists (PD Specialists) who speak the candidates' own languages and can assess them in it during verification visits they make everywhere from Alabama to the United Arab Emirates.

The Council reaches the diverse candidates who can benefit from earning a CDA by partnering with community colleges and other early childhood organizations. For

example, Montgomery Community College in Rockville, Maryland, just got approval to teach CDA candidates in Spanish, a boon for the large Spanish-speaking community that lives nearby. CentroNía, a Washington, DC, nonprofit devoted to multicultural education, conducts CDA classes in Amharic to meet the demand for instruction among Ethiopians in the District.

The Council also has worked with Empowered Child Care Consulting in Dearborn, Michigan, home to one of the largest Middle Eastern communities in the state. Over the past two years, 150 Arab immigrants in Dearborn have had CDA training, provided in both Arabic and English, and at least 75 more have joined the current cohort of 42. While many accept positions in Arabic-speaking early childhood programs, Head Start and state preschools, other organizations recruit these educators because they bring cultural competence and language support to the growing number of Arab children in U.S. classrooms.

## GLOBAL EXPANSION OF CDA® CREDENTIAL





The Arabic CDA program breaks the language barrier and eases the fear of testing that many candidates feel by providing email support, audio recordings in Arabic and one-on-one meetings with instructors.

“The supportive process offered in CDA training is key to the women’s success and leaves them with the knowledge and passion they need to work in the child-care field,” said Najwah Dahdah, owner of Empowered Child Care. And while giving Arab children the education they need, these candidates also get a greater sense of success and inclusion in their adopted nation.

While it’s great to get a fresh start, you shouldn’t forget your roots, so the Council works with tribal communities to keep their languages alive. For example, early educators are earning their CDA credentials in Salish, an endangered language spoken in parts of British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest.

“Staying with the language is very important to me,” said Anthony McKinsey, an early childhood educator in Washington state. Like other candidates, he said he found that communicating with children in Salish doesn’t just preserve the language.

“It also helps children have a deeper bond with their families, have a greater sense of confidence, and connect better with their culture,” he said.<sup>19</sup>

The Council has made connections of its own by working with international groups to ensure the Council’s high standards don’t get lost at sea as CDA training spreads beyond our shores. Relationships with

early childhood organizations in Spanish-speaking and Latin American countries are a natural outgrowth of the Council’s expertise in producing materials and providing CDA assessments in Spanish. In collaboration with these organizations, Council representatives have spread the word about the CDA at conferences and other events in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Brazil and Peru.<sup>20</sup>

“It also helps children have a deeper bond with their families, have a greater sense of confidence, and connect better with their culture,” he said.<sup>19</sup>

Formal partnerships also exist in Panama and Puerto Rico, where a 2016 law required all educators in child-care centers and preschools to earn a CDA.<sup>21</sup> In Panama, the Council signed an agreement with an educational organization- 123 EDU, S.A. - to provide CDA training. Last year, it began conducting in-country training for PD Specialists, and it plans to offer CDA-focused webinars tailored for Panama’s early childhood workforce.

“We expect the relationship with the Council to give us support that allows us to stay at the forefront of changes in early childhood education,” said Berta Mariñas De Janón de García, director of professional development at 123 EDU, S.A.

The Council’s progressive views on early childhood education also have made an impact on the traditional cultures of the Mideast. In 2012, the Council partnered with the nonprofit Arabian Child to introduce the CDA to the United Arab Emirates, where government officials were so taken with

the results that they approved the CDA as a valid credential for lead teachers in nurseries and preschools. Since 2013, the Ministry of Social Affairs has made the CDA a required credential for UAE teachers and their assistants, boosting demand for it in the region.<sup>22</sup>

“We now have candidates from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and we are looking to grow into neighboring countries,” said Samia Kazi, general manager of Arabian Child.

China is another country where there is a need for early childhood education because there is no national education system for children ages birth to 5; kindergarten in China begins at age 6. The Council officially launched a pilot program with ChinaWise in September 2017. The CDA training and competency requirements have received significant interest from Chinese government officials and university leaders.

The Council is also filling a need for qualified educators in Egypt, a nation without a robust model for early childhood education. A trailblazing CDA pilot program began in 2018 with 28 candidates, who all completed their training. The program expects to have 30 candidates in 2019 and they’re needed in a nation where only 40 percent of children age 3 to 5 get any early childhood education and just 28 percent of 4- to 5-year-olds go to preschool. This is “far from the nation’s goal of 80 percent enrollment by 2030,” said Muriel Baskerville, a former PD Specialist from the U.S. who works with Dr. Hassan El Kalla, an educational reformer, on ways to strengthen Egypt by advancing education.

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## ADVANTAGES OF SPEAKING IN A MULTITUDE OF TONGUES

Whether you’re in Egypt or here in the U.S., one way to help children get a head start is by giving them a broad perspective that makes them citizens of the world. And it’s true for all children, both immigrant and American born. As the global economy keeps expanding, we must plant the seeds of diversity, understanding, and tolerance early on. The multilingual classroom is the ideal place to start preparing young learners for life in our multiracial, multicultural nation. As Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell explained, “The nation’s future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth ‘out of a multitude of tongues.’ ”<sup>23</sup>

The early experience children get in today’s multilingual preschools will give them an edge in tomorrow’s cosmopolitan workplace. As educators forge new paths in our superdiverse classrooms, they must take care to give tomorrow’s leaders the traits they need. And they must face the truth of the words written by French political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville after he toured the young American republic in 1831.

“Demography is destiny,” he pronounced — and immigrant children are now the destiny of our nation. So vive la difference!



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