Chapter 5
Culturally Diverse Families
Suggestions for Working With Linguistically Diverse Families

When working with families who do not speak English as their first language, encourage them to speak with their child in the home language and support families in the following ways:

- Loan native language books, stories, and materials to families to use during interactive reading activities.

- Include families and extended relatives in the classroom as language models to read to the class in their first language or tell stories, provide translation, and teach the class new words. The United States Census Bureau (2000) noted 47 million people (over the age of five) spoke a language other than English in their homes.
Suggestions for Working With Linguistically Diverse Families

- Allow students to maintain their native culture and language. Research shows that students who maintain their cultural identity and native language have more academic success (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory [NWREL], 1998).
- Recruit volunteers to serve as guides for the families’ first year in a new school setting. Ideally, these mentors should speak both English and the families’ native language. If that is not feasible, then offer the services of translators when possible.
- Work with your district to offer district-wide meetings for families with limited English proficiency, complete with translators to ensure information is disseminated and questions are answered (Clayton, 2003).
Suggestions for Working With Linguistically Diverse Families

• Keep families informed about their child’s language development in the acquisition of English. Compared with learning only one language, bilingualism may result in a slower growth in vocabulary. Also, one language may become dominant for the speaker, which is normal (Espinosa, 2005). This can be confusing and upsetting for families who notice the child depending on her native language less.
Suggestions for Working With Newly Immigrated Families

- Focus on helping the child become successful in school. School success is embraced and encouraged by families, most specially immigrant families.
- Provide families with resources for their lifelong learning goals by sharing resources for English classes, job training, GED classes, and job opportunities.
- As a key person in the adaptation process for an immigrant family, you may be the “ambassador” of American culture. Provide explanations and reasons for our way of life, from special celebrations and holidays to the foods served in the school cafeteria.
- Depending on the stage of adaptation, you may be using translators and interpreters with recently arrived immigrant families; as the teacher, you must always be the person responsible for a child’s school progress—translators are to be the background voice during meetings and conferences. Ideally, professional translators should be used, but realistically, finding these translators is not always feasible. Teachers may need to get creative and find local resources within the community, such as military personnel who have lived abroad, or electronic translation sources, such as free or commercial Internet sites and computer programs. Remember, there may be some parents who are not literate, and you should not rely only on print communication.
Suggestions for Working With Newly Immigrated Families

• Be aware of **intercultural communication**, which includes more than just language, but also the relationships between people who are different in values, role expectations, and rules in social relationships (NWREL, 1998).

• Encourage family engagement. Many families come from cultures where teachers are not questioned and family engagement in schooling would be considered rude and disrespectful (NWREL, 1998). Thus, involvement in the educational process may be a new concept for many immigrant families. Therefore, continuously reach out to your students’ families with suggestions of ways they may be involved with their child’s education.

• Seek to understand the causes of immigration and particular concerns of your students’ families. As stated earlier, immigrants come to the United States for various reasons, and no two immigrants’ experiences are the same. Understanding why students’ families immigrated will assist in developing a positive relationship with immigrant families.
Suggestions for Working With Religiously Diverse Families

Research the major religions or belief systems practiced within your school community. Take notes on any restrictions within the religion that may influence your classroom instruction and your students. Investigate festivals or celebrations that could add richness to your curriculum.

Be aware of school district policies relating to how religious information is shared, and also make sure families are aware of the district policies and legal rights concerning religion. Have a chat with your principal about his approach to working with families who bring up faith-based concerns. You may be reluctant to approach the issue of religion with families; however, to be respectful of all families, you must be aware of any religious limitations for particular students.
Suggestions for Working With Religiously Diverse Families

- Remember, students also have the right to express their religious views during a class discussion or as a part of a written assignment or activity. Young students’ opinions are often based on their families’ values and may be controversial, but warrant a discussion. Be prepared that certain units of study, such as evolution or religious holidays, may lead to questions and discussions relating to faith or religious beliefs.

- Recruit another teacher as a mentor to help you with community religious issues. If you are concerned that a conversation with a family member about religious concerns may become confrontational or accusatory, ask your administrator, mentor teacher, or family involvement coordinator to be a part of the meeting.
Respecting and honoring the different families represented in your classroom through your teaching practices and classroom environment is not an easy task. In fact, it will be a lot of work! However, as a professional in the field of education, you will be supporting the basic principle of family engagement as a part of healthy child development and learning for children from diverse families. Your work will also benefit your entire class, as all your students learn to accept and appreciate each other's similarities and differences.