

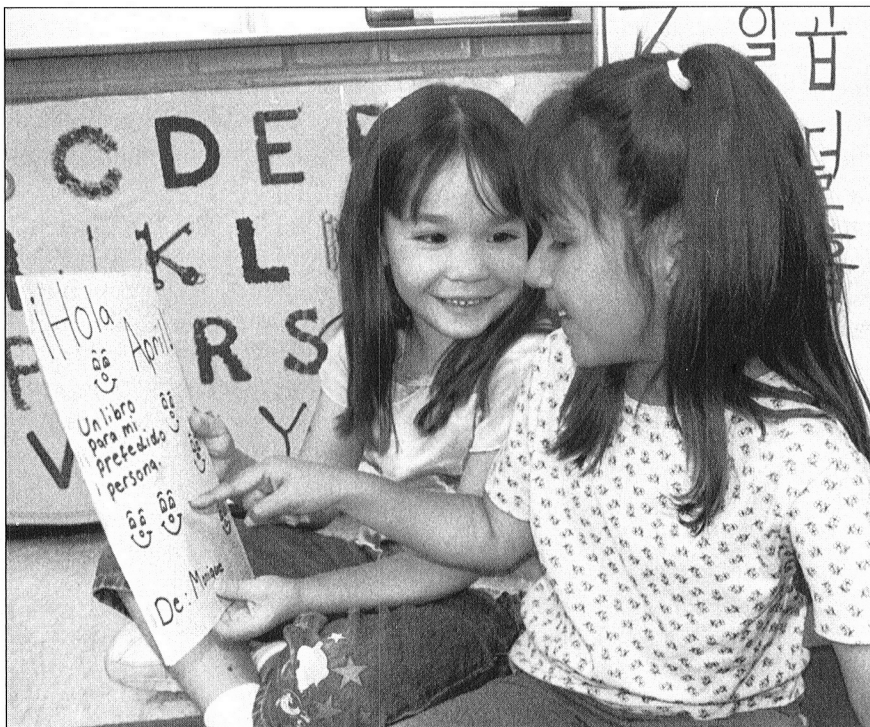
Fostering Multiliteracy in a Linguistically Diverse Classroom

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How does a monolingual teacher support linguistic diversity in a classroom of children who speak many different native languages?

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Fostering Multiliteracy



However, in this classroom, the teacher is actively working to foster not only their linguistic awareness and skills in English, but also in their native languages.

The purpose of this article is to describe our collaborative work within this multiliterate classroom and to provide some suggestions for mainstream teachers who are interested in supporting linguistic diversity. We believe that any teacher can foster multiliteracy in the classroom without being a speaker of those languages. The first step is to understand the importance of first language literacy in the teaching of English as a second language. The next step is to recognize common misconceptions about the teacher's role in multiliteracy development. The final step is to surpass these misconceptions by creating a classroom that fosters multiliteracy.

During the last 20 years, many articles and books have been written about first language literacy and its importance in the teaching of English as a second language (Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Freeman & Freeman, 1991, 1992, 1993, 2001; Faltis & Hudelson, 1994; Krashen, 1999; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1990; Schwarzer, 2001). Researchers have looked for ways to maintain students' first languages, not only as a resource for

The school year is well under way in Alexia Haywood's classroom when a new student from Turkey joins them in October. Alexia greets the girl and her father and chats with them while the other children listen attentively. She then gathers the children around to meet the new student. They are immediately interested and bombard her with questions. The first question that bursts forth from the energetic group is the expected "What's your name?" The

next question is less anticipated, "What language do you speak?" These children assume that the new student must speak another language besides English. Alexia's classroom is a linguistically diverse Central Texas pre-kindergarten class in which 14 of the 16 students are bilingual. Like many other second language learners in the United States, they are acquiring English as a second language through the regular curriculum.

their second language development, but also as a resource that should be developed before those languages are lost (Fishman, 1980; Peyton, Renard, & McGinnis, 2001). Many advocates of the development of students' native languages perceive first language literacy instruction as a job primarily suited to bilingual, ESL, or heritage language teachers working in maintenance-oriented programs. We believe that fostering multiliteracy can be the domain of any teacher interested in developing the languages represented in his/her classroom.

Hudelson (1987) pointed out that a strategy that is effective for developing literacy for a monolingual child is also effective for helping children develop literacy in their mother tongue *even if the teachers do not speak all the languages of the students*. Furthermore, Freeman and Freeman (1993, 2001) and Samway and McKeon (1999) report ways monolingual teachers can support students' first languages. This article builds on and expands prior research in this area in the following ways:

- It addresses common misconceptions about multiliteracy development and the implications of these misconceptions for mainstream monolingual classroom practice.
- It expands the audience involved in discussing multiliteracy to include monolingual mainstream teachers.
- It changes the focus from maintaining native language literacies outside of school to fostering them within curricula in order for students to become balanced bilingual and biliterate people.
- It suggests activities monolingual teachers can use in their daily classroom practice to help children in general and multilingual children in particular achieve some level of multiliteracy. These simple activities can

have a long-lasting impact on changing students' perspectives about their native languages from that of problem to resource (Ruiz, 1991).

TEACHERS' ATTITUDES ABOUT NATIVE LANGUAGE USAGE IN SCHOOL SETTINGS

Teachers' attitudes about native languages in schools can be summarized as:

- forbid native languages
- allow native languages
- maintain native languages
- foster native languages

To *forbid* the development of multiliteracy is to ignore children's home languages. Many teachers are unaware of their students' native tongues and believe that their main job is to foster English literacy development. By forbidding native language literacy, however, they are often denying children the opportunity to acquire their home language as an important gift and inheritance and as an integral aspect of their identities.

Other teachers *allow* students to use their native languages in select school settings. For example, children are allowed to use Spanish

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during recess, and it is fine for one child to translate for another during class time. However, the use of home languages is only allowed for the purpose of teaching or de-

veloping the English language. This option treats native language usage as a "passing illness" that, once cured, will go away.

Maintenance of the native language by the community has been an uphill battle for a long time. Many language minority communities explore options of weekend schools and afternoon programs in order to maintain native languages. Sometimes, schools and school districts, under pressure from language minority parents, agree to create classes or afternoon clubs. Most of these classes happen after school or as extracurricular activities. Moreover, only those minority languages represented by a large number of speakers in the school or district are afforded this opportunity. These programs are not frequently taught by the regular classroom teacher, but by a "special" teacher who knows the language of the students. In Alexia's school, for example, Chinese and Korean students are pulled out for native language maintenance instruction. Of course, language minority children are segregated during these classes. Under these conditions, students perceive a duality in their language learning—school is mainly interested in developing English, while home and community settings are mostly interested in the development of English and the native language.

Fostering biliteracy or multiliteracy development in the school setting seems to be the most radical approach. In our opinion, there are at least two feasible options: dual language/bilingual programs and monolingual teachers fostering multiliteracy in the mainstream classroom.

In the dual language/bilingual programs, students are expected to attain high levels of oral and writ-

ten proficiency in both languages. Successful dual language/bilingual programs have been widely documented (Freeman & Freeman, 1991). Such programs necessarily serve large minority language populations within a given school or district. When possible, dual language/bilingual programs are the ideal choice of instruction.

In Alexia's case, the demographics of her classroom (6 Korean speakers, 4 Chinese speakers, 3 Spanish speakers, 2 native English speakers, and only 1 Turkish-speaking child) made the dual language/bilingual program option impractical. Therefore, she decided as the mainstream teacher to foster multiliteracy development in her linguistically diverse class.

Monolingual classroom teachers can foster multiliteracy in children's home languages. Teachers can inquire about students' languages, not simply as part of the home language survey or for district reports, but to locate someone in the school and home communities who can help to foster the students' languages within the classroom. Schools and communities can become partners in the development of lifelong multilingual/multiliterate individuals who are aware that their native language and literacy is a precious resource for the school community.

The reality of many mainstream classrooms is that teachers are already making efforts to include multicultural literature in their language arts curriculum while providing culturally relevant themes (Norton, 1990; Tway, 1989). However, native languages continue to be overlooked as a crucial aspect of multicultural education (Nieto, 1992). Very few teachers use students' native languages as a resource to enhance their multicultural curriculum (Reyes, 1992), in part because of

prevailing misconceptions about multiliteracy development.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT MULTILITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Before monolingual teachers can create a multiliterate classroom, they must first address some of the commonly held misconceptions about multiliteracy development.

Misconception #1: Monolingual teachers cannot foster multiliteracy since they are not multiliterate.

Reyes, Laliberty, and Orbansky (1993) state that, "monolingual language arts teachers cannot tap into native languages because they do not have a working knowledge of other languages" (p. 659). Of course we agree that multiliterate teachers are necessary to tap into *all* the re-

is socially constructed (Goodman & Wilde, 1992), creating a multiliterate learning community is crucial for fostering multiliteracy. Although a monolingual teacher cannot actually "teach" students' native languages, that teacher can create a multiliterate community.

Misconception #3: Teachers who do not know how to write in languages other than English cannot foster writing in the students' home languages.

Teachers can enlist the help of others to provide students with rich multiliterate print environments. They can develop a multiliterate classroom library to use during sustained silent reading times in their classes. They can also encourage parents to bring magazines, coupons, newspapers, bottles, and other objects containing

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sources available to a multiliterate child. However, we believe that monolingual teachers can tap into *some* of the resources available in students' native languages, even if they do not have a working knowledge of those languages. What they do need to know is what is good for language learning—environmental print in the different languages, language use for authentic purposes, using authentic materials with authentic audiences, taking risks, etc.

Misconception #2: The classroom teacher is the only person who can teach languages in the classroom.

Teachers do not need to be the only ones teaching in the classroom. They can create, with the help of students, parents, siblings, elders, clergy, and other community members, a multiliterate learning community. Since we know that literacy

print in order to give students real life experiences in their native languages. These changes may seem small, but they can have a big impact on students' appreciation of their native languages.

Misconception #4: Teachers who do not understand their students' home languages cannot assess their language proficiency in those languages. It is not necessary to know Hebrew in order to be able to assess whether or not a child can read fluently in Hebrew. If the child stumbles over every other word, looks for help, or sounds like a monotonous reader, these are likely signs that the child is not comfortable reading in the home language. Of course, sometimes children may look like they are reading while they are "inventing" meaning from the printed page. These creative inventions in

the native language are also a positive sign of literacy development!

Biliterate community members can help teachers assess students' native literacy proficiency. Dong (1999) makes the case that second language teachers need information about students' native literacy learning in order to tailor their curriculum to students' needs. In doing so, teachers are sending a message to students that their home languages are acknowledged and valued, instead of dismissed or ignored. Moreover, this cross-cultural literacy awareness benefits both students and teachers in building a community of learners since their native literacy and native cultural backgrounds are considered rich resources instead of obstacles.

The teacher can ask students questions about the readings they have done in their native languages such as, What is the story about? Who is the main character? For example, if the teacher does not know Chinese and the child is reading a book like *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Martin, 1992) in Chinese, the teacher may be able to recognize the same Chinese character for "bear" in two different places and ask the child to point to the word for "bear." If the Chinese character does not look the same each time, the teacher can ask the student for an explanation. It may become apparent that the child is not able to read the conventional text. In that case, the teacher can also utilize parents or other community members to help in assessing the student's proficiency in the native language.

Misconception #5: Monolingual teachers can help children become multiliterate even if the teachers do not learn their own heritage languages. Monolingual teachers can help children appreciate the value of their native languages if they show an interest in their own home lan-

guages. Many teachers in the United States come from families born in different countries (e.g., France,

to the school from all around the world, bringing 17 different languages. Alexia typically had four or

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Germany, Poland, Italy, etc.). Teachers can look up their last names on the Internet and see what languages and countries appear on the search engine. They can also interview family members about their language backgrounds and construct a Family Language Use Tree to trace their family history of written, read, and spoken languages through several generations (Schwarzer, 2001). Teachers can learn how to write their own names in the home language writing system of their ancestry (Cyrillic, Hebrew, Arabic, Chinese, etc.). Additionally, teachers may want to explore simple phrases such as: "How are you?" and "My name is _____." in their own heritage languages. This may seem to be a strange activity to do in classes with multilingual students and a monolingual teacher, but we contend that teachers can also be learners and model this voyage into multiliteracy.

ALEXIA'S PERSONAL JOURNEY OF INVENTING A MULTILITERATE CLASSROOM

After teaching for four years, Alexia, a white middle class bilingual English/Spanish teacher, found herself in a different school and in a new situation. Alexia had previously worked with native Spanish-speaking students. In her new school, however, there was a much more diverse and international student population. The students came

five languages other than English represented in her classroom.

Many of Alexia's students were children of graduate students at a local university that attracts large numbers of international students. Many came to Alexia's school because their families lived in the graduate married housing complexes nearby. The children were in the unique and somewhat difficult position of coming to live in the United States at a young age without knowing for certain how long they would be staying, since families were as likely to remain in the U.S. as return home after the parents received graduate degrees. For this reason, those involved with the children's education were highly invested in helping the children to both learn English (to function in the United States) and maintain their first language (because of the prospect of returning to the home country).

Alexia was unsure about how to meet the needs of this diverse group of children. During her first year in this new position, she familiarized herself with her surroundings. She loved the diversity of the class, but it was not until the second year at the school that she felt ready to utilize this unique situation to its full potential.

It was during this year that Alexia and Charla met in a university-level bilingual education class and found that they were both interested in

native language maintenance. They then began working with David, a professor from that university who was also interested in fostering multiliteracy in the classroom. Together they decided to explore how a teacher who does not speak all of the languages represented in her class can still promote literacy in those languages. Alexia, David, and Charla saw that this classroom was a perfect place to start putting their ideas into action, and for a full semester, Charla conducted her M.A. thesis research in this classroom (Lorenzen, 2001).

Alexia began with changes that were simple. She labeled students' cubbies with their names in English or Spanish as she had always done, but she also had the students or parents write their names underneath in Chinese or Korean (two languages represented in the class with writing systems other than English). Alexia enlisted parents to help her acquire posters of all the different alphabets represented by students in the classroom. One Korean mother, who was an artist, hand-painted a beautiful alphabet in her native language for display on a classroom wall. Furthermore, Alexia got special funds from the school administration to buy books in Chinese and Korean.

As the year progressed, our collaborative team took on more challenges by asking, "How can we incorporate the native languages of the children to a greater degree in the class, especially in written form?" The following narrative of a special day in this classroom illustrates how progress toward the possibilities of a multiliteracy curriculum were evident in the day-to-day activities of the class.

A SPECIAL DAY IN THE CLASSROOM

There were 16 four- and five-year-old students in Alexia's class: 6 Korean speakers, 4 Chinese speakers,

3 Spanish speakers, 1 Turkish speaker, and 2 native English-speaking children. On this particular day, when the students arrived at school, they found more adults present in the classroom than usual. A special language project had been planned that required help from parents, other teachers, and members of the community who spoke the languages of the children.

This was the first time that we had attempted to implement a structured activity relying on parents as teachers. David and Charla were present, along with three Korean-speaking parents, two Chinese-speaking parents, a mother who spoke Spanish, and a father who spoke Turkish. The school principal also came to enjoy the day's activities.

The children were seated on the carpet in front of the calendars and

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alphabets that had been collected in the different languages. The class began the school day by saying, "Good morning" and "How are you?" in all five languages. Earlier in the semester, Charla had tape-recorded the phrases from various parents and a Chinese-speaking teacher at the school. Each phrase in each language was repeated three times with pauses in between so that everyone could practice. Alexia had written out the different phrases in the different languages and she pointed to them as the class recitation proceeded. This was an important strategy since it helped students' connections be-

tween the oral utterance and the written sentence (Goodman, 1993).

After going through the usual daily calendar rituals, the class was ready to begin the new activity. The culmination of a "creepy crawlies" unit was going to be a field trip to a local nature center to take part in a program called "Six Legs, Eight Legs, Many Legs." In preparing for the day's activities, Alexia had chosen four main concepts that she wanted the children to learn: a) insects have six legs, b) insects have three body sections, c) spiders have eight legs, and d) spiders spin webs to trap food.

In the days preceding this experience, these concepts were explained to the parents who were going to help with the activity. The volunteers wrote the concepts in their native language so that the class would have them as written models to be read to the children. Alexia had prepared sheets of paper with the words for insect and spider written in all of the different languages. Each group of adults had enough copies of "insect" and "spider" in the applicable native language for all the students.

Alexia also decided to have the class sing "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" in all of the languages. Korean and Spanish versions of the song already existed, but there was no Chinese or Turkish equivalent. Two of the Chinese mothers and the Turkish father translated the song into their respective languages. The songs were written ahead of time on large pieces of chart paper.

Alexia divided the children into five groups according to their native languages (Spanish, English, Korean, Chinese, and Turkish). There was at least one native-speaking adult in charge of each group. All of the adults had the four concepts written out in their native languages and a

copy of the “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” song hanging nearby.

The children prepared for their hour-long language experience by getting into groups according to their own native languages. The adults discussed the four concepts of the lesson with the children in their native language. Each child then received a sheet of paper that had the word “insect” written at the top in his/her native language. The

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children attempted to write the word in their native language and to draw a picture of an insect incorporating the characteristics they had discussed using their native tongue. Finally, the students were encouraged to write a sentence in their native language related to the picture. The same was done for “spider.” The native language session ended by singing “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” in that language. After singing the song in their native language, the children switched tables. At this point, the students were working with languages that were not their first, or even their second language, so the sessions were shorter. By the end of the hour-long experience, each child had rotated through their own native language and at least one of the other languages represented in the room. The children learned how to say the words for insect and spider in the other languages and attempted to write the words by using the models provided by the parents. They ended each rotation by singing

“The Itsy Bitsy Spider” in the language of each one of the groups.

At the end of the day, the children took home all of their writing. “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” songs were hung in the classroom in all of the language variations, and the class continued to practice every day until each version was learned. Alexia found that in order to remember the pronunciation of the songs in all of the languages, she had to write out the words phonetically in English, which became an effective learning strategy. Alexia always made sure that she pointed to each word while the children sang the songs. After a few weeks of practicing the songs, Alexia had children volunteer to point to the words in their native languages as everyone else sang along. This strategy was extremely important in helping the students understand the relationship between oral and written language. The class went on to have other similar days during the course of the school year.

INCREASING USE OF NATIVE LANGUAGES

During this journey, several times we asked ourselves “How do we know that we are going in the ‘right’ direction?” Following kid-watching strategies (Goodman & Wilde, 1996), we recorded anecdotal records of literacy events that shed light on the learning that was occurring. For example, one day a Korean-speaking student asked Alexia why the names of the Spanish speakers were not written in English and Spanish like the names that were written in both English and Korean or English and Chinese. This observation prompted Alexia and the students to look at the Spanish alphabet and discuss that even though it sounded different than English, most of the letters were the same. They then examined the Korean and Chinese alphabets

and noted that the letters looked very different from English.

Alexia noted that students asked each other more frequently than in previous years how to say words in each other’s native language. One Chinese-speaking boy asked a Korean friend to write the word “Mom” in Korean on the envelope for a letter he wrote to his mother. Two Chinese-speaking girls loved to listen to a Spanish recording of the story “Snow White,” as it was one of their favorites in Chinese. When the Turkish-speaking student joined the class in October, the other students asked Alexia to get books and songs in Turkish like the ones in the other languages.

We found that our results contrasted with prior case studies that noted decreased use of home languages by multilingual children over time. Prior studies documenting multilingual children in monolingual early childhood classes found that there is a shift towards English use at home (Fillmore, 1991), and that less than ten percent of the overall writing of these children was produced in languages other than English in both the home and school settings. In most instances, writing in languages other than English appeared in only the home setting (Schwarzer, 2001; Kim, 2000). The students in Alexia’s class, in contrast, wrote much more in one day in their native languages than the overall amount reported by other researchers in longitudinal case studies in early childhood classes (Schwarzer, 1996, 2001; Kim, 2000). Alexia had noticed almost none of this the previous year, but it became common to see children writing both in English and in their native languages in her class throughout the school day.

Alexia was able to foster the native language literacies of the students in her class despite not being a profi-

cient user of all of the languages. Furthermore, her students showed signs of increased awareness of and interest in others' home languages. Based on our experiences in Alexia's classroom, we created a list of ten ways monolingual teachers in mainstream classrooms can start their own journeys to foster multiliteracy.

TEN BEGINNING IDEAS FOR MONOLINGUAL TEACHERS TO FOSTER MULTILITERACY

1. *Create a multiliterate print environment in your classroom.* Place multilingual posters throughout the class to illustrate the alphabets of the languages spoken by class members; the names of the children in their own language and in English; or phrases in all of the languages, such as hello, good morning, good afternoon, goodbye, good job. Use some kind of transliteration so the teacher can point at the written words while using them with students.
2. *Use literature in students' native languages.* Create opportunities for students to share children's literature in their first language. Ask a parent or a sibling to read a book in the first language for the class, or to read to children who speak that language. Books in all the languages spoken by the children should be included in the classroom library for silent sustained reading or as resources for a project. Audiotaped versions of the books can be included in a listening center.
3. *Create a multiliterate project to be conducted by a community member in the native language.* Multiliteracy projects could include dialogue journals, weekly individual literacy meetings in the native language, translation projects for the community, or letters to the grandparents or family members in the home country.
4. *Create predetermined and relevant curricular language centers that are supported by multiliterate community members.* Invite multiliterate people from the school or community to help teach relevant class themes in other languages. Clearly communicate the expected outcomes to community members.
5. *Assess students' literacy in their first language.* Teachers need some idea of students' linguistic levels in their native language. If a child can read independently, challenge that child to read some of the books in the classroom library. However, if a child is just beginning to read in his/her native language, having a community member read a book with the child may be more beneficial.
6. *Start learning some words in the students' first languages as well as your own heritage language.* Simple phrases such as: "How are you?" "Good job!" and "See you tomorrow" may have a profound impact on students' understandings of the importance of their native languages. Teachers can encourage this feature by making the effort to learn their own family heritage language as well as that of their students.
7. *Create audiotaped cassettes with greetings, basic conversations, songs, stories, etc. in the students' first languages.* Students should hear other people using their native tongue in the classroom. Teachers can start a collection of community-produced audiotapes or videotapes of parents telling a story in another language, a brother reading a book to his sister, or other situations involving a native language speaker.
8. *Involve community members as active participants in the class.* Parents, community activists, clergy, volunteers, and staff personnel are valuable resources for appreciating language diversity as an asset. Student awareness of language can be encouraged, for example, by creating a Family Language Use Tree (Schwarzer, 2001) for each child. A school language tree could show which class has the most languages, which child or family speaks the most languages in the school, etc.
9. *Find ways to translate environmental print as well as school letters into all of the languages available in the learning community.* Students should see authentic uses of their native languages even if not required by law. It is important to have some signs written in different languages (e.g., Exit, Principal's Office, Welcome to Memphis Elementary School, etc.).
10. *Use the students' culture and experiences as a catalyst for multiliteracy development.* Use students' backgrounds and cultural assets as a resource by inviting students to share issues related to their cultural background throughout the year. When students talk about their cultural traditions, they often use native language words in their English presentations (e.g., Bar Mitzvah, Quinceñera, fajitas, Powwow, etc.). Children can translate the words by explaining their meaning, but it may be cumbersome, and the native language word is usually still required within the English explanation.

Using native language words creates a wonderful multiliteracy learning opportunity. Ask students to write a list of words in their home languages, followed by the English explanation, so that the words can be posted for class. This simple tool

may enhance students' literacy development in their home languages.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As a collaborative team, we observed many wonderful things over the course of the year. The lessons learned from Alexia's classroom give us hope that mainstream teachers can indeed foster language sensitivity, tolerance, interest, and even literacy in languages in which they are not proficient. Ideally, many people and institutions would come together to make such a project successful, but it all starts with the teacher. It is our hope that other teachers, principals, researchers, and policy makers can continue the work of creating classrooms and schools that truly value the cultural and linguistic diversity of our children.

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