

Facilitating Positive Impressions with Multilingual Students and Families

Kathryn B. Chval

January 22, 2021

Source: <https://corwin-connect.com/2021/01/facilitating-positive-impressions-with-multilingual-students-and-families/>

As a young girl, my mother introduced me to the idea of **first impressions**. She emphasized how my physical appearance and my first words in new interactions would cause others to form an almost instant impression of me. She also explained that it would be extremely challenging to change negative first impressions once they were formed. I doubt that I accepted my mother's wisdom at the time, but as I aged, I recognized that first impressions carried considerable weight—both for those forming them and those for whom they are being formed. I also learned that, unfortunately, they facilitate and exacerbate existing inequities.

Psychology Today explains the concept, “It takes a mere seven seconds to make a first impression. People thin-slice others based on how a person looks and sounds, more so than their explicit verbal statements. Often, someone's first impression is influenced by implicit attitudes of which they are unaware, which explains impulsive actions like giving special preference to those with physical beauty or more easily trusting a person who has a babyface.”

I have often wondered how first impressions facilitate inequities and misconceptions in our school communities, especially in relation to multilingual children and families. To be clear, we have to consider first impressions from different perspectives: (a) What are first impressions that multilingual parents and children themselves form as they first encounter different people and experiences in schools? And (b) What can school personnel do so that multilingual learners and families are viewed by the rest of the school community as assets and leaders and thus avoid allowing implicit bias cause the formation of negative first impressions that may cause barriers for multilingual learners?

As educators, administrators, and advocates, we should:

1. Be intentional

I was invited by a school principal to facilitate a session about interacting with multilingual children and families with all of the teachers prior to the start of the fall semester. During the session, I posed questions such as:

- When a family transitions to your school and they enter the school for the first time, what does their first encounter look like? Feel like? In other words, what first impressions could the multilingual students and families potentially form about the environment and the people in the school? What first impressions do you want them to form?
- As multilingual parents/guardians drive into the parking lot or approach the front door of the school, what will they see and experience?
- When they are greeted in the office, their children's classrooms, or encounter others in the hallway, what will they experience in that first seven seconds? Will they feel welcomed and valued?
- What will be the first words they hear? First facial expressions they see?

- What will the images in the school lobby convey to them?
- Will their first impressions change in different contexts (e.g., school or class websites, after-school events, volunteer opportunities, or parent conferences) with different individuals (e.g., teachers, administrators, staff, students, or other families)?

In addition to considering the first impressions that multilingual students and families may potentially form from their new experiences, we also need to be intentional about how to position multilingual learners and their families as assets in our school communities. Investing in professional development and examining current policies, practices, and bias will be critical to success so that positive first impressions are formed.

The first step is to engage with and learn from multilingual families. For three years, our research team interviewed parents of multilingual learners in their homes and we share snippets of some of those interviews in [*Teaching Math to Multilingual Learners: Positioning English Learners for Success*](#):

In an effort to provide counter-stories to the deficit-oriented comments we had heard from some educators, we interviewed parents to learn more about the families of multilingual learners. We heard the incredible love that the families had for their children and that they would give up everything—would leave their homeland to come to the United States—so that their children could have what they hoped would be a better life. During these conversations with families, many truths were made evident. (p. 7)

Parents' expertise and experiences are too often underutilized. They also have great insights into questions such as:

- What did you learn about your children when you met with their teachers?
- What resources or materials could the school provide you so that you could better support your children?
- How could the school communicate with you about your children's progress in school?

Families who have been in the U.S. for several years can reflect back on their first impressions to inform current efforts. For example, in a recent conversation, one mother shared, "Feedback and grading were so different in my country of origin. We used numbers so letter grades meant nothing to me. What did a 'B' mean? I did not know what to do with the written feedback on my child's work. I was constantly forming first impressions and impressions changed in different venues. For example, I formed different impressions of other parents at a school event than I did on the soccer field."

Intentionally engaging with families and children about their experiences will help you form new norms for the school community including how to (a) facilitate school visits and tours for new families, (b) facilitate communication between families, teachers, and the school, (c) improve learning environments, and (d) enhance the lives of members of your school communities.

2. Consider impressions in relation to new realities

Throughout 2020, we acknowledged that the COVID19 pandemic exacerbated educational inequities that have always been present, but were not always acknowledged. As schools were forced to close and transition to online learning environments “overnight,” we witnessed troubling stories on social media and read headlines in the media specifically about multilingual learners such as these:

- [COVID-19 Spotlights the Inequities Facing English Learner Students, as Nonprofit Organizations Seek to Mitigate Challenges](#)
- [With Remote Learning, a 12-Year-Old Knows Her English Is Slipping Away](#)

New opportunities to form first impressions unfolded as children’s homes became classrooms on platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. In conversations with teachers, I heard reports of children being unfairly compared and judged for what resources appeared or did not appear in their backgrounds. I again wondered what impressions multilingual children themselves formed about school as they were thrown into these new learning formats and what implicit biases influenced the impressions formed about them and their families.

If your school or district is engaging in any remote learning, and as you engage in professional discussions about supporting multilingual learners, consider the realities and narratives that multilingual families and children are facing throughout the pandemic and will face post-pandemic.

- First, identify approaches to learn about the realities facing these families. For example, in our community, we are hosting online forums where these issues are being raised.
- Second, establish a team that will generate potential solutions to address the issues (e.g., ensuring device and internet access; identifying volunteers to interact with students; designing professional development related to teaching in online environments). In our community, undergraduates are volunteering to engage with multilingual students so that these students have the opportunity to develop academic and social competencies in non-stressful online environments.
- Third, identify a team and advocate for resources to implement the solutions.

3. Position multilingual learners as leaders

As we approach a new year, let’s consider new perspectives and form new impressions so that multilingual learners are positioned as leaders and multilingual families are viewed as assets in their school communities. Let’s be intentional about the experiences we want them to encounter in physical school buildings, virtual environments, and other community venues so that they form positive first impressions of our school communities. This effort is labor and resource intensive and our students deserve the investment. Who is willing to join efforts and raise their voices to be part of the solution?