



# CHAPTER 4

## Effective Instruction in a Transitional Kindergarten Program

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<http://www4.scoe.net/ims/webcasts/cf/index.cfm?fuseaction=archivedDetail&eventID=140&archiveID=253>

Effective Instruction in a Transitional Kindergarten Program (YouTube with Captions)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qv7x2Up4HC8>

The transitional kindergarten (TK) year strongly influences student expectations for school as well as their goals for lifelong learning. Class routines, activities, and experiences influence a student’s level of enthusiasm and excitement for learning. TK teachers should be aware of the implicit and explicit messages they send to students in their program design and daily interactions. Reflecting on the educational experiences TK teachers provide for their students is central to instructional planning.

As discussed in chapter 3, TK teachers carefully plan and organize the curriculum for their students. When selecting an appropriate curriculum focus in a given area, TK teachers consider their students’ backgrounds, reflect on their current developmental levels and assessed needs, and then carefully develop a plan toward established goals. TK teachers are intentional in this planning, “the intentional teacher . . . acts with knowledge and purpose to ensure that young children acquire the knowledge and skills (content) they need to succeed in school and in life. Intentional teaching does not happen

by chance; it is planful, thoughtful, and purposeful. Intentional teachers use their knowledge, judgment, and expertise to organize learning experiences for children” (Epstein 2007, 1).

The TK teacher intentionally links thoughtful curriculum decisions with carefully selected instructional strategies and related activities that align with both the curriculum and the developmental needs of students. This chapter provides an overview of strategies that align with TK curriculum and, when applied with purposeful intent, provide students with highly effective instruction and a positive TK experience.

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### **Using Knowledge of Child Development to Guide Instructional Strategy Decisions**

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Educators of young children are charged with facilitating the cognitive development of children while also building their understanding of the

### ***Vignette***

*Mr. Wright has been reflecting on his students’ progress in math. Based on his observations and informal assessments, he decides that most of his students need more opportunities to work with one-to-one correspondence and additional modeling and practice to understand that when counting objects, the number name of the last item counted represents the total number of objects in a group. As he plans his instruction for the following week, Mr. Wright knows he needs to carefully select activities that will align with his goals, so he decides to model counting familiar objects in the classroom during large-group instruction. He will begin by laying out 10 carpet squares, counting each one, and then asking, “How many are there altogether?” He will use a specific signal when he says “altogether” (bring his hands together to form a circle) to cue the appropriate response. He will then invite students to stand on each square, repeat the counting sequence, and ask how many altogether with the cue and repeat the process with different numbers as time and attention allows. He will engage the rest of the class by having them count on their fingers as students are counted and use the same “altogether” signal in response. To reinforce this lesson, Mr. Wright will circulate during free exploration and engage students in informal discussions that focus on one-to-one correspondence and on being able to state the total number of objects (e.g., “Let’s count the number of blocks in your stack. Oh, there are 10 blocks altogether”). Students who count accurately and identify the total number confidently will have opportunities to build on their knowledge at the Math and Manipulatives Area.*

routines and expectations of school. Young children’s brains are still under construction, their vocabularies are expanding, their ability to attend to tasks and manage impulses is increasing, and the connections between concepts and experiences are fusing together to create knowledge. Children are also acquiring the important social skills needed for peer and adult–child relationships. Development is a complex, interwoven process (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2000). The skills and knowledge that are needed do not emerge in isolation; they influence and shape each other as they develop. In this section, a holistic approach to TK education with an emphasis on developmentally appropriate practice is discussed.

### **Knowledge of Child Development as a Foundation for Instruction**

To provide TK students with quality education that supports all areas of development, educators should be knowledgeable about key aspects of cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. A background in child development will assist TK teachers as they plan curriculum and related instructional strategies that are engaging and appropriately challenging. Teachers who understand the complexities of development are better able to observe students during learning experiences. Responsive teachers check for understanding, monitor children’s progress, and individualize instruction to match the emerging needs of the learners (Ritchie, Maxwell, and Bredekamp 2009).

There are several resources to assist educators as they review and apply promising practices based on research in child development. The California Preschool Learning Foundations, created and published by the California Department of Education, highlights the progression of diverse skills and areas of learning for children at 40 and 60 months of age. Additional information can be found in the highlight titled “The California Preschool Learning Foundations—A Map for Instruction” in chapter 3. Another resource to promote appropriate

### **Vignette**

*Miss Sanchez observes Olivia working with a collection of small beads and yarn at the Art Area. She watches as Olivia carefully slides each bead onto the yarn before commenting, “Olivia, it looks like you are working hard on this project. Tell me about it.” “It’s for my mom. It’s a necklace,” replied Olivia. “How special! I think she will be excited to see the necklace you have made,” reinforces Miss Sanchez. She pauses a moment as she recalls an earlier conversation with Olivia at arrival time. Miss Sanchez has an idea to extend Olivia’s child-initiated play to further her writing skills. “I remember you telling me you had a special treat with your mom on your walk to school today for her birthday. It sounds like you two had a lot of fun,” says Miss Sanchez. “I wonder if you would like to make a card to go along with your gift?” “I know ‘M-O-M,’ but I don’t know how to write ‘Happy Birthday,’” says Olivia softly. “I bet you could learn with a little help from our Language and Literacy Area word cards. I will get them for you and come back to get you started.” “Okay,” Olivia replies with a wide smile. A short time later, as Olivia makes progress on her writing, Miss Sanchez returns to provide descriptive feedback: “You are doing it! You have written ‘Happy’ and are almost finished with ‘Birthday’! It looks like the word cards helped. I am proud of you, and you must be proud of yourself for writing such big words!”*

expectations for educators and guidance for instruction is *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8* (Copple and Bredekamp 2009), a publication offered by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). This

### Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Transitional Kindergarten Classrooms

As outlined in Section 48000 of the California *Education Code*, TK is the “first year of a two-year kindergarten program that uses a modified kindergarten curriculum that is age and developmentally appropriate.” It is recommended that educators review and reflect on resources aimed to promote developmentally appropriate practice. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8* (Copple and Bredekamp 2009) provides an introduction for teachers to offer TK students appropriately stimulating and challenging environments and instruction. The publication (Copple and Bredekamp 2009, 10–15) introduces the following principles of child development and learning to inform practice:

- All the domains of development—physical, social and emotional, and cognitive—are important, and they are closely interrelated. Children’s development and learning in one domain influence and are influenced by what takes place in other domains.
- Many aspects of children’s learning and development follow well-documented sequences, with later abilities, skills, and knowledge building on those already acquired.
- Development and learning proceed at varying rates from child to child, as well as at uneven rates across different areas of a child’s individual functioning.
- Development and learning result from a dynamic and continuous interaction of biological maturation and experience.
- Early experiences have profound effects, both cumulative and delayed, on a child’s development and learning; and optimal periods exist for certain types of development and learning to occur.
- Development proceeds toward greater complexity, self-regulation, and symbolic or representational capacities.
- Children develop best when they have secure, consistent relationships with responsive adults and opportunities for positive relationships with peers.
- Development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts.
- Always mentally active in seeking to understand the world around them, children learn in a variety of ways; a wide range of teaching strategies and interactions are effective in supporting all these kinds of learning.
- Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition, and social competence.
- Development and learning advance when children are challenged to achieve at a level just beyond their current mastery, and when children have many opportunities to practice newly acquired skills.
- Children’s experiences shape their motivation and approach to learning such as persistence, initiative, and flexibility; in turn, these dispositions and behaviors affect their learning and development.

publication expands the approach to meeting children’s developmental and learning needs to include the consideration of culture, the individual, and the individual within a group of learners.

### ***A Balanced Approach to Teaching and Learning***

Integrated lessons in the TK classroom are most effectively conducted through a balanced approach that includes a wide variety of student-initiated, teacher-directed, and teacher-guided learning activities. As young learners work purposefully to explore their learning environment, they participate as active investigators in experiential and hands-on activities. Student-initiated work and exploration allow TK students to learn in a “hands-on” fashion (Jacobs and Crowley 2010). Explicit instruction is an effective tool for presenting ideas and skills, but it should be balanced with student-initiated opportunities. Young learners are dynamic explorers who benefit from intentional teaching that invites reflection, encourages repetition and practice, and reinforces critical thinking. TK students are “learning to learn”

(Heroman and Copple 2006, 62). They develop the skills and dispositions that foster school achievement such as independence, appropriate risk-taking, perseverance, initiative, creativity, reasoning, and problem solving.

As discussed above, active learning encourages discovery and promotes problem solving. When students are engaged in purposeful play, they are active learners and motivated participants in their learning environments. Through their senses, choices, and social interactions, students build their understanding of words and concepts and make meaningful connections across experiences and content areas. They work from familiar and meaningful themes to develop deep understandings of language, patterns, relationships, and other academic content (Heidemann and Hewitt 2010). Teachers who attend to the emerging interests of students and provide them with opportunities to explore, investigate, and review content standards tap into students’ natural curiosity to further their learning and skill development.

### **The Developing Brain and Play-based Instruction in the Transitional Kindergarten Classroom**

Active learning through purposeful play is important to the development of the child’s brain. From birth, experiences shape the formation of neurons and synapses building important connections that influence language, cognitive, social–emotional, and physical development. Although some sections of the brain are fully formed in early childhood, others are still under construction well into adolescence (Copple 2012). One area that develops over time is the cerebral cortex. The cortex controls and regulates executive functions such as language, cognitive reasoning, and decision making. Developmentally, young children struggle with abstract lessons and instead show greater competencies and understanding in concrete, hands-on, learning contexts. Purposeful play that invites engagement, promotes peer interactions, and encourages problem solving provides the ideal framework for concrete learning while also setting the stage for future abstract, logical thinking. Educators who prompt students to make plans, implement ideas, and evaluate outcomes encourage young learners to express their intentions and reflect on their actions and discoveries (Hohmann, Weikart, and Epstein 2008). Through this adult-guided and student-focused process, children begin to see themselves as accomplished thinkers, decision makers, and problem solvers.

Utilizing an active learning approach in the TK classroom does not mean implementing a *laissez-faire* (“let them be”) style of teaching (Miller and Almon 2009). Rather, student-initiated work balanced with thoughtful direct instruction maximizes learning. Children learn through relationships with supportive, skilled adults (Epstein 2007). The TK teacher observes, plans, and implements on-the-spot teaching based on work that is initiated by the student. In the opening vignette of this section, the teacher capitalized on a student’s plan to craft a birthday gift for her mother by extending the project to include a writing task. Everyday play is rich in such academic learning, and with scaffolding it can be rich in language, literacy, mathematics, and problem solving if teachers carefully plan and facilitate experiences. A teacher first works from the student’s interest to ensure a meaningful learning experience and builds upon this interest to extend opportunities for learning. Teachers who see themselves as facilitators of learning recognize the value of student’s purposeful play, and they continually promote conceptual development through thoughtful support and scaffolding.

### **Summary**

To meet students where they are and build on and extend what they know, it is imperative that TK teachers understand important milestones in child development as well as the overlapping nature of developmental domains. Teachers who are knowledgeable about the progression of cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and linguistic development are better able to plan learning experiences that engage TK students in meaningful discovery through play-based instruction. As demonstrated in UDL, engagement is the cornerstone of ensuring student access to the learning setting, and play is one approach for building student interest. Additionally, an awareness of motivation in early learning, with an emphasis toward creating a learning goal orientation, is central to fostering enthusiasm

for school and persistence in the face of difficulty. Educators who make it a priority to provide students with a wide variety of both student-initiated and teacher-guided learning opportunities meet young students’ developmental needs and provide a strong foundation for their educational journeys. In this way, measurement of student outcomes can be monitored in an ongoing fashion throughout the day when incidental teaching opportunities emerge. Furthermore, how students demonstrate those critical milestones can be captured in the context of activities in which they are engaged.

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## **Daily Routines**

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Young students thrive in settings that are predictable and consistent. In all TK classrooms, the daily routine and the schedule of events have an important influence on student behavior. A student’s ability to engage, focus, and successfully complete tasks is especially contingent on routines and transitions that are consistent and balanced. Although consistent routines are important, flexibility may be necessary for students who need additional time to complete tasks. The TK year is one of growth and significant change in cognition and social–emotional competence. Sensitivity to the individual needs of students is important in shaping a routine that evolves to meet the developmental needs of children. Attention should be placed on varying the format of instruction, individual and group experiences, and organizing transitions (Thompson and Twibell 2009).

### **Structuring the Daily Routine**

In comparison to older kindergarten students, most TK students have limited attention spans. They are in the early process of developing the impulse control required to focus on tasks that are not of their choosing. It is for this reason that TK teachers may consider beginning the year with more time dedicated to student-initiated work

### Vignette

The students in Mr. Dao's TK classroom are preparing for a field trip to the local neighborhood market. During the class meeting, Mr. Dao reviews the visual schedule of the daily routine. "Today is a special day. As we talked about yesterday, we will be visiting the neighborhood market to help us plan our market in the Dramatic Play Area. I want to review our day with you one more time before we begin small-group work. First, we are having our class meeting (points to picture on schedule). Second, we will go to small groups (points to picture on schedule). Third, we will have choice time (points to picture on schedule). Fourth, instead of going outside (removes picture from schedule), we will go on our field trip (adds new picture of students walking together) to the neighborhood market." Mr. Dao repeats the field trip rules before dismissing them to small group. As a final cue, he adds, "I will post our daily routine back on the door if you need a visual reminder of our plan for the day."

and choice. Even as the year moves on, offering students multiple opportunities for purposeful play will continue to be an important part of the daily routine. A minimum of 45 minutes of uninterrupted choice time is considered best practice (Tomalison 2009). Student-initiated work should be balanced with teacher-directed learning experiences that are shorter in length and infused with integrated learning and movement. As students settle into the program structure, TK teachers can increase the length of adult instruction, while extending these learning concepts through hands-on, small-group experience. Furthermore, teachers should consider placing activities that require student focus and attention at the beginning of the day when students are fresh, alert, and ready to learn.

### Facilitating Student Understanding of Routines and Transitions

While daily routines are important, the transitions that guide TK students from one activity or setting to another also warrant thoughtful consideration. As in all classrooms, the effective use of time is critical. When TK students are responsive to cues from adults and are able to engage in daily routines independently and transition smoothly, more time is available for learning and exploration. Therefore, to maximize student learning and engagement, teachers should carefully plan the length of time for learning activities and the number of transitions. Expectations for each routine and transition need to be thoughtfully planned and then taught, modeled, practiced, and reviewed as necessary. Instruction should be clear and concise and make use of auditory and visual cues to reinforce verbal prompts.

It is important for TK teachers to promote group and individual understanding of routines. For example, a visual schedule of the daily routine, one that includes photos of the routine and captions, could be posted at the eye level of students. Portable pictures (e.g., small, labeled photos on a binder ring) may also be distributed to students who require individual reminders of program activities. This format allows time for comprehension, and it offers individual support where necessary (e.g., "Tobin, let's look at our picture schedule. First we do small group, and then it's time to play outside").



Some students may struggle with managing their impulses and self-regulating their behavior to meet the classroom rules, especially during transitions. Implementing a short stretching and relaxation routine can assist students as they work to slow down their bodies and focus their attention. At the beginning of the school year, TK teachers may spend a great deal of time instructing students about acceptable behaviors during transitions (e.g., arrival, departure, cleanup, wait time, and in self-care routines). Songs, chants, and rhymes are useful strategies for teaching, cueing, and facilitating transitions. For example, the “cleanup song” indicates a change in routine and reminds all the students of their responsibilities during this time. Transitioning from an active experience to a quiet, more focused task may require additional teacher support as well. When a child exhibits difficulty in self-regulating, consider whether he or she needs additional support or modifications during transitions.

Students are also better able to meet standards for behavior when teachers prepare them for transitions (e.g., “Five more minutes until it will be time to clean up and move to your next activity”). Flexibility may be necessary when a student is fully engaged in an activity. A student who has been working with intense focus on an activity may need an additional minute to wrap-up the project before moving with the group. A brief check-in with the student can clarify the teacher’s expectation for transition (e.g., “I see you need another minute. Please join us at large group as soon as you put your work at the ‘work in progress’ station”).

### ***Group Learning Experiences***

Another important consideration in planning routines and transitions is accommodating the variations in group size that result from a thoughtfully responsive and engaging program. The size of the group should be contingent on the type of content being covered (Wasik 2008). Some learning experiences are better suited for individual exploration, while others are more

successfully implemented in small or large groups. During free choice time, students can choose to work independently or join others in cooperative projects. Those who are self-starters are able to move comfortably throughout the classroom, engaging in experiences that match their interest and temperament. TK teachers are then able to move in and out of interest areas, using these moments to extend the learning by engaging students in one-on-one conversation, problem solving, and inquiry (Jacobs and Crowley 2010).

Large-group experiences are ideally suited for promoting a sense of community, supporting conceptual development, and facilitating peer interactions. Whole-class instruction should focus on general introductions to concepts. The length of time for whole-classroom instruction should remain flexible and responsive to students’ needs. For example, a teacher may elect to read a short book to the entire class to introduce the concept of patterns to students. The teacher could then follow up with a small-group activity that prompts students to revisit and practice the content that was introduced in the book. Group selection may vary over time. Heterogeneous groupings are an excellent opportunity for students to model for and mentor peers who may benefit from additional support. Homogeneous groupings allow teachers to target teaching strategies to specific learning needs. TK teachers need to plan flexible group formations throughout the routine to expose students to a wide range of experiences with their peers.

### ***Summary***

The structure and organization of the daily routine have a significant impact on student behavior and learning. TK teachers who plan for a balance of active and quiet experiences, alter the length of child-initiated and adult-directed learning to match developmental needs, and offer group instruction in different sizes and composition ensure an optimal learning experience for all students. Transitions, though brief by design, also require thoughtful preparation. The use of visual and

auditory cues is an effective strategy for prompting students to follow the routine, and it supports the development of self-regulation skills.

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## **An Overview of Selected Transitional Kindergarten Instructional Strategies**

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It is critical for educators to thoughtfully and intentionally select instructional strategies and activities that facilitate the delivery of TK curriculum content (see chapter 3). Effective instructional strategies (a) promote access to the content, (b) ensure active engagement with the materials and/or the teacher and peers, and (c) facilitate progress toward TK goals. This section provides an overview of selected instructional strategies that are applicable to most curricular areas and form a strong foundation for an effective TK program. The following strategies are discussed in this section:

1. Develop and reinforce oral language.
2. Scaffold tasks and skills appropriately, and then remove appropriate scaffolding gradually to challenge students beyond their current level of mastery.
3. Use think-alouds to model thoughtful reflection and to complement and balance free exploration and independent problem solving.

### ***Cross-Curricular Instructional Strategies***

Effective teachers draw upon a large repertoire of instructional strategies when they plan instruction. One of the major challenges for teachers is deciding which instructional strategies are most closely aligned with the identified academic and social–emotional needs and goals of their TK children. The strategies below were selected for inclusion in this guide because they are applicable across most subject areas and support the growth and development of all children (with appropriate modification). Although these strategies are appropriate for all TK students,

additional strategies for English learners will be discussed later in this chapter.

Strategies:

1. Develop and reinforce oral language development in all content areas. The role of oral language development in both children's emotional development and cognition is significant (Copple and Bredekamp 2009). When children have the oral language skills to both listen to and understand others and to respond appropriately to make their needs known, they are less likely to experience frustration and more able to demonstrate self-regulation. As children's ability to orally comprehend and express language matures, they learn new vocabulary and gain more control over grammar and syntax (Epstein 2007). To support social–emotional, cognitive, and oral language development, teachers may take the following actions:
  - Intentionally introduce new words children might not encounter in everyday conversations and provide children with more accessible synonyms and examples of how the words are used (Copple and Bredekamp 2009).
  - Engage “individual children and groups in real conversation about their experiences, projects, and current events” (Copple and Bredekamp 2009, 157). One of the most effective strategies for engaging students in conversations is to invite interaction through thoughtful questions or comments. If students do not initiate conversation, the information in the following resource box may assist in promoting conversation.
  - Use “information” talk to narrate and describe what children are doing supports concept development and skill acquisition (Epstein 2007). For example, a teacher might say, “Jorge, I see that you are making a pattern with your blocks. You have a red,

then a green, next a yellow, and finally a blue block. Then you repeat the pattern . . . red, green, yellow, and blue. Perhaps you and Sam can take turns making and copying patterns.”

2. Scaffold tasks and skills appropriately to provide temporary support, then gradually decrease the scaffolding as children gain confidence and independence in completing the task.

Excellent teachers use scaffolding to help children progress in all areas of learning and development throughout the day. And their

scaffolding can take many forms. They might ask a question, point out a discrepancy, give a hint about an aspect of the problem or task that the child has missed, add a cue or support such as a picture or diagram, take a child’s hand, or pair the child with a peer so that the two can be successful with their combined strength. (Copple and Bredekamp 2009, 39)

Children develop and learn most effectively when teachers intentionally focus instruction on the concepts and skills that lie just beyond their current independent level, “Development and learning advance when children are challenged to achieve at a level

### A Suggested Model for Introducing Vocabulary

To bridge preschool foundations and kindergarten standards in science, Mr. Jeffers has been providing his TK students with opportunities to observe the physical properties of many objects and materials. He has decided to guide his students through an activity in which they will predict whether objects and materials will float or sink. Before he begins the demonstration, Mr. Jeffers needs to teach his students the meaning of the words *predict* and *prediction*.

He introduces the lesson by saying, “Yesterday, we talked about sinking and floating. Let’s review what it means if something sinks. Remember, we have signals for sink and float. Show me what happens when something sinks (e.g., closed fist dropping rapidly into lap). Now show me what happens when something floats (e.g., flat hand gently rocking back and forth). We observed that a rock would sink in water and a piece of foil would float. Today we are going to predict whether other objects will sink or float in this glass bowl of water. To “predict” means to think about whether something will happen or not. When we predict whether something will happen or not, we make predictions. Let’s say the words ‘predict’ and ‘prediction.’ Now let’s say this sentence: ‘When we predict that something will happen, we make predictions.’ The important thing about predictions is that we think about something that might happen in the future.”

Since he taught the concepts of “float” and “sink” following a similar instructional sequence the previous day, he quickly reviews their meaning. His students are now ready to examine a variety of objects and material, observe whether they float or sink, and create a class chart to record their predictions and the results of their experiment. To conclude the experience, Mr. Jeffers guides an engaging discussion to review and reinforce the meanings of the target words and to summarize their results. Mr. Jeffers knows that he will need to review these words frequently and encourage students to use them in future conversations with him and with their peers. He will also provide specific instruction in identifying support for predictions.

### Using Questions to Promote Conversation

Use questions or verbal prompts thoughtfully and intentionally. If the goal is to check for understanding or elicit formative assessment evidence about gaps in their knowledge or conceptual understanding, consider questions or prompts that are narrowly targeted and aligned with your goal, for example:

- Tell me how many red blocks you have.
- Can you make a pattern like mine?
- Show me how you can jump on one foot.
- What is the first sound you hear in \_\_\_?
- Tell me what happened first in the story.

If, as described above, the goal is to promote extended conversations to expand and deepen children's thinking, encourage reflection, and invite further exploration and discovery, consider using open-ended questions such as these:

- What would happen if \_\_\_?
- What do you notice about \_\_\_?
- What do you know about \_\_\_?
- If you moved/changed/removed \_\_\_, what could happen?
- What is another way you could \_\_\_?
- Can you think of an example of \_\_\_?
- Tell me about what you have drawn/made/constructed.
- What have you tried?
- What happened when you \_\_\_?
- What do you think about \_\_\_?

just beyond their current mastery, and also when they have many opportunities to practice newly acquired skills" (Copple and Bredekamp 2009, 15).

3. Use think-alouds to model alternative responses and strategies for dealing with challenges. Balance free exploration and independent problem solving with the use of intentionally planned think-alouds. When teachers think aloud, they verbalize their internal thoughts for children. Teachers slow the pace, pause to reflect, and orally model how he or she would think through a book, a difficult situation, or a challenging problem. The ultimate goal of think-alouds is to encourage students to internalize their own approaches to problem solving and to develop their own self-talk (Copple and Bredekamp 2009); however, many children initially need effective models. Consider applying a think-aloud approach across a wide variety of situations during the TK day. For example:

- As a teacher reads to the students and encounters a sentence with challenging syntax or difficult vocabulary, he or she might say, "I'm going to reread that sentence to make sure I understand what the author is telling me . . . Oh, now I understand. The author wants me to understand that \_\_\_."
- As a teacher discusses students' misunderstandings or social challenges, he or she might say, "I noticed that two of our friends wanted the same toy earlier today. Let me think. What would I have done if I were in that situation? I think I might have said, 'Sure, I'll share in a minute. Let's take turns' or 'Let's play with it together.' Or maybe I would have said, 'Let's stop and talk to the teacher about it.'"
- During phonemic awareness word play, a teacher might say, "Let me say that word

### Provide Feedback to Support Self-Efficacy, Reflection, and Persistence

Providing students with detailed feedback, descriptive of actions and effort, helps them attend to and invest in their work and promotes self-assessment and self-efficacy (Gartrell 2007)—for example, “When you counted the collection you said there were 16 dinosaurs.” Furthermore, educators can guide TK students to persist in tasks by providing encouragement and coaching (e.g., “Phew! That is a lot of dinosaurs. Let’s count again together”). Offering students detailed reassurance gives insight to the process of learning (e.g., “Together we counted 15 dinosaurs. We had a different number the first time. Hmmm . . . Let’s count one more time. Mathematicians often count their work twice”). As students accomplish goals, language and reinforcement should continue to focus on the students and their experiences. Instead of saying “Good job” to students, share observations with them and ask them questions. This invites students to elaborate and participate in their own reflective process. For example: “Fifteen! You got it! This time when you counted each dinosaur, you counted them once. What worked? . . . Yes, it looks like it helped to separate each dinosaur into a different pile after you counted them.” This intentional use of teacher talk supports focused attention, encourages perseverance, and reflects a strong belief that, with highly skilled intentional guidance, all children are capable of learning. Persistence, effort, the use of program resources, and adult support all impact an individual’s success (Galinsky 2010).

again slowly, so I can hear the very first sound. I think I will say it again. OK, I think I have it. Do you?”

- As a teacher models how to solve math problems, he or she might say, “Let me think. I have three blocks here on the table in front of me. José, will you put two more blocks on the table. Now, I want to know how many there are all together. So I will touch each one and say a number as I touch it. I think I will go slowly so I can be sure that I count correctly . . . Now, let me think again, the last number I said as I touched the last block was five, so I think there must be five blocks. I think I will count them one more time to make sure I am correct.”

### Summary

With thoughtful attention to the oral language environment, the appropriate use of scaffolding, and the balanced use of think-alouds, TK teachers support children’s learning across curricular areas. A modified kindergarten curriculum that challenges students, provides an active and engaging learning environment, and utilizes effective instructional strategies will support TK students for success in kindergarten.

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## Transitional Kindergarten/ Kindergarten Combination Classrooms

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TK/K combination classrooms are becoming a widespread reality as school district administrators work to expand the availability of TK programs at various school sites. In a classroom that includes both TK and traditional kindergarten students, differentiated instruction will be important for addressing the developmental diversity between the two groups of students. TK curriculum needs to focus on exposing students to California’s Common Core State Standards for kindergarten, as well as

the Content Standards for California Public Schools (kindergarten), while mastery of the standards is the focus for the kindergarten year. The needs of TK/K students will vary throughout the duration of the school year with diversity in skill and ability across both cohorts; teacher observations and professional collaboration are necessary to plan appropriately. This section will discuss strategies for creating collaborative workspaces and routines, differentiating instruction, and addressing family expectations. As teachers design an appropriate environment and plan responsive instruction for a TK/K combination class, they need to consider their class composition.

### ***Environments and Routines in Transitional Kindergarten/Kindergarten Combination Classrooms***

Initially, preparing for a TK/K combination classroom may seem challenging, but teachers can be reassured that many of the components used in TK classrooms benefit traditional kindergarten-age

children. A place for gathering as a community, spaces designated for work in progress, displays of student work, and learning areas stocked with materials that comfortably challenge students are considered developmentally appropriate practice for early elementary classrooms (Copple and Bredekamp 2009). Such spaces, by design, permit flexibility and may be adapted over time to meet the differentiated instructional needs of all students. See chapter 6 for additional suggestions for differentiating instruction. For example, a Dramatic Play Area supplied with open-ended materials (e.g., cash register), and guided math and literacy experiences (e.g., coin sorting tray and word wall) invites a language-rich foundation as well as a focus on sorting, counting, and writing. How teachers structure and organize table activities can also encourage different entry points for learning. During small-group time, teachers can organize materials and differentiate activities designed for exposure and mastery.

### ***Vignette***

*The students in Mrs. Peterson’s TK/K classroom are busy at work. Activities are dispersed throughout the room. Some students assigned to work in small groups are practicing simple addition and subtraction skills. The small groups are made up of a mix of kindergarten and TK students. They assist one another in their work with some support from Mrs. Peterson, who moves about checking on individual and group progress. Elsewhere in the classroom, the remaining students work in different learning areas. Some students choose to play in the sensory bin counting the scoops of water needed to fill different containers. “This one didn’t take as many scoops! Only five!” exclaims one child. At a different area, four students play a board game with a parent volunteer’s assistance. Mrs. Peterson has strategically placed this adult to draw attention to math skills such as one-to-one correspondence and cardinality. “Let’s count the number of dots on the dice together. One, two, three (they count on the first die) . . . four, five, six, seven, eight (adding the dots from the second die). You get to move eight spaces!” Two other groups of students play with Unifix Cube trays at the Math and Manipulatives Area and write numerals on the whiteboards at the Language and Literacy Area. In 20 minutes, Mrs. Peterson will transition the students to a large-group learning activity focused on letter and word recognition. She has carefully planned a lesson that will engage all learners—the TK students and the kindergarten students—at every stage of development and understanding.*

### **Differentiated Learning Experiences for the Transitional Kindergarten/Kindergarten Classroom**

The following activities are intended to illustrate methods for differentiating learning across the TK/K continuum. The same instructional materials and activities can be used to provide exposure to basic skills and concepts, as well as learning opportunities that are appropriate for students who are moving toward mastery. See chapter 6 for additional information related to differentiating instruction.

- Tangram blocks (California Preschool Learning Foundations, Geometry 1.2; Kindergarten Common Core, Geometry 5 and 6):
  - » Exposure: Guide students to copy directly on top of a tangram design card.
  - » Building toward mastery: Instruct students to first copy a design card on the desk top, and then find different ways to make the same design (i.e. use trapezoids instead of hexagons).
- Pattern stamps (California Preschool Learning Foundations, Algebra and Functions 2.1 and 2.2; also tied to Common Core Mathematical Practices):
  - » Exposure: Guide students to use stamps to create an AB pattern.
  - » Building toward mastery: Instruct students to use stamps to make more complicated patterns. Encourage students to write what type of pattern they have created.
- Journal writing (California Preschool Learning Foundations, Writing Strategy 1.1; Kindergarten Common Core, Standard Writing Strategies 1.1):
  - » Exposure: Guide students to draw pictures to match the journal topic. Provide adult assistance to label student dictation.
  - » Building toward mastery: Instruct students to draw and label their own words. Provide resources to support independent writing (e.g., word cards, picture dictionary).

### **Daily Routines and Grouping in Transitional Kindergarten/Kindergarten Combination Classrooms**

The structure of the daily routine in the TK/K classroom should be adaptable to match learning needs. Initially, teachers may choose to create homogeneous groupings (e.g., small groups) based on grade level. It is likely, however, that even across ages and developmental stages in a TK/K classroom, students will possess different skill sets and abilities. Educators can modify these groups by mixing class cohorts based on the level of readiness demonstrated by individual students and opportunities for peer support (CDE 1999). There

are many benefits to such multi-age groupings. Students in multi-age groups demonstrate greater patience and acceptance for variations in behavior and performance (Katz 1995). Furthermore, research suggests that “cognitive conflict arises when interacting children are at different levels of understanding” thus prompting a language-rich dialogue that will deepen knowledge and understanding for both students (Katz 1995). Teachers can coach skilled partners to scaffold learning for their peers by asking questions, providing feedback, and offering instruction (Gnadinger 2008). Where there is misinformation provided by a peer, teachers may step in to offer additional support and corrective feedback.

To promote a sense of friendship and community learning, teachers may want to include both cohorts in large-group instruction. Sensitivity to group needs will be needed as developmental readiness may dictate shorter segments of direct teaching to maintain the attention of the TK student. Most students respond positively to integrated lessons about letters, numbers, shapes, and other concepts embedded into music and movement learning experiences. Both TK and K students can be included in such dynamic instruction. Transitions, however, may prove particularly challenging for TK/K combination classrooms. Traditional kindergarten-age students tend to adapt quickly to classroom rules and routines, but some TK students may require more formal support and practice. Direct instruction and peer modeling will likely benefit the TK students as they settle into the classroom routine.

Foundational to program design and decision making in a TK/K classroom are teacher observation and professional collaboration (Lester 2005). To effectively meet all learners where they are, teachers should consider the chronological age of each student, with a focus on the individual stage of development across the continuum of learning. Teachers who observe, collect a variety of student work samples, and use developmentally appropriate standardized assessment tools are able to adjust the rigor of the curriculum to match individual and group needs. They challenge all learners to accomplish tasks at a level that is just beyond their current mastery and offer students opportunities for repetition to become proficient at recently acquired skills (Cople and Bredekamp 2009, 15). Furthermore, teachers who coordinate efforts with school staff avoid redundant curriculum in the traditional kindergarten year for TK students. For example, a teacher familiar with specific traditional kindergarten seasonal activities (e.g., Five Little Pumpkins), may choose to modify the curriculum to a different area of focus (e.g., Five Little Apples) while still emphasizing the same standards for learning.

### ***Communicating Expectations for Transitional Kindergarten/Kindergarten Combination Classes***

TK programs are new to most families. Designed with the intent to provide a two-year learning experience, parents of students enrolled in TK/K programs may express confusion about the design, purpose, and formation of the combination classroom. Additionally, TK parents may not understand guidelines for kindergarten promotion, assuming their child will move from TK directly to first grade. To establish and maintain positive home–school partnerships, teachers must communicate openly and frequently with families. A TK/K parent orientation can explain the educational and curricular progression, the benefits of mixed-age groupings, and long-term goals for students' education. Providing a two-year kindergarten program takes into account individual needs and promotes exposure and mastery opportunities for every student. Administrators and teachers can encourage families to become involved in their children's education through volunteer opportunities at home and school. The more families are engaged in school events and the more informed they are about classroom curriculum, the more likely they are to understand and appreciate the value of the TK year and the benefits of participating in a combination classroom.

### ***Summary***

TK/K combination classrooms present unique challenges but offer many positive opportunities for learning. Students, families, and professionals have much to gain from participating in mixed-age programs. There are many potential benefits as former TK students move into a combined TK/K or traditional kindergarten classroom. With a greater understanding of classroom routines, former TK students may exhibit more confidence as they approach new learning experiences and serve as leaders and role models to their peers. To meet the different learning needs of students, teachers

who are assigned to TK/K classrooms should create environments, routines, and curriculum that are structured but also flexible. Observation will play an integral role in designing appropriate activities and experiences to match emergent learning needs. Parents have an important role to play and contribute to the success of a combination classroom. Their understanding of program design and their active investment can do much to encourage students and teaching staff.

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## Students with Disabilities

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All TK students are considered as valued members of their classroom community. Students with disabilities are at greater risk for exclusion by their peers and often require more intensive support than some teachers may initially be equipped to offer (Guralnick 1999; Odom 2000; Odom, Buysse, and Soukakou 2011). Participating in IEP meetings, building close partnerships with families, seeking resources from specialists, and engaging in regular, reflective practice will build professional competencies in serving students with disabilities. Furthermore, teachers who understand that all students benefit from differentiated instruction will find that the tools, curriculum, and routines they use to support typically developing children are easily adapted or modified to accommodate students with disabilities. Strategies for inclusive practices are described and resources to better support all diverse learners are offered in this section.

### **Inclusive Practices**

Inclusion is a classroom model and a philosophical approach that embraces the notion that all children, regardless of differences, belong in classrooms with their same age peers. Inclusive practices are techniques that ensure successful integration of each student into the classroom culture and provide access to core curriculum. For all students to have a beneficial and rewarding educational experience, teachers need to make

### **Vignette**

*After attending the IEP meeting for Jack, Mr. Arimoto takes a moment to reflect on what he has learned about Jack's strengths, areas in need of support, and his family's goals for the upcoming academic year. Mr. Arimoto has worked with students with similar sensory needs before, but he wants to make sure his efforts are tailored to Jack's personal style. From what his preschool teacher shared, Jack responds well to visual cues and occasionally needs sensory breaks to regulate his behavior and attention. Mr. Arimoto makes a mental note to create several small picture schedules and to gather a collection of squeeze balls for Jack as well as for other students. He begins to craft a plan to introduce squeeze balls to the students so that they understand their use in the classroom and so they can choose to use them as needed. Mr. Arimoto also writes down a list of questions to ask the district occupational therapist and resource specialist about additional ideas for program support.*

sure that the environment, instructional practices, materials, and routines are appropriately matched to individual and group needs. Beginning with a UDL model, TK teachers consider a variety of ways to present information so that all learners are engaged in and attentive to the subject matter. Examples of representation include graphic images of concepts and information, real pictures attached to words, three-dimensional object displays of lessons, and large-group demonstration followed by small-group work on the concept. Different methods of instruction may be used to spark and sustain interest in the learning activity. For instance, exposure to letters may take the form of puppetry, a song, picture book, movement activities, sandpaper letters, picture cards, and small-group

instruction. Furthermore, TK teachers measure performance by providing multiple avenues for the student to demonstrate progress. Students with disabilities may need assistive technology devices (such as an electronic tablet app) to demonstrate understanding of an academic concept. For example, students may use an electronic tablet app to identify the letter of the day among other letters or use a computer game with a touch screen to select letter options. Once the TK teacher has implemented a UDL strategic plan for the classroom environment and instructional techniques for all children, individual adaptations may then be considered based on the needs of individual students as demonstrated in the vignette.

After the classroom and teaching instruction has been modified according to a UDL framework, TK teachers may explore additional changes to the environment and the method of instruction that need to take place for individual children with special needs. For example, learning areas and individual cubbies that are labeled with pictures of activities and materials promote access for all children by providing visual cues. A student with autism, for instance, may need a “first/then” visual schedule to help with transitions from one activity to the next. A picture of the current activity is presented along with the preferred activity that will follow, offering a sequence of events from one learning area to the next. The process of creating an inclusive classroom begins with incorporating items such as photos, literature, and play props that reflect children’s different abilities (Derman-Sparks and Edwards 2010). Just as representing all cultures and linguistic backgrounds in program design influences a student’s sense of self, so too does integrating the real experiences of people with special needs. These inclusive images match an anti-bias curriculum approach and should be in place in all programs, regardless of whether students with disabilities are enrolled in the class.

In a TK classroom, students with special needs may require adjustments to the teaching instruction



and the classroom setting for greater access, participation, and belonging to occur. The physical layout and selection of materials may need to be modified to invite all learners into the discovery process. For instance, students who use adaptive equipment for development of gross-motor skills need ample space to enter into learning areas and freedom of movement throughout the classroom. To support students with sensory and/or behavioral management needs, educators should also assess the amount of visual and auditory stimulation (Bakley 2001). Cluttered visual fields, excessively noisy play, and crowded furnishings can contribute to off-task behavior and poor quality of work. Adaptive writing tools, play equipment, and manipulatives can be made readily available to allow students to work from a place of comfort and competence. A toolbox of materials may help TK teachers to make quick adjustments to the environment or materials. The following basic items are recommended for the toolbox (Sadao and Robinson 2010):

- 3-inch binders
- Small (½-inch), self-sticking fabric dots and strips
- Battery interrupter for battery-operated toys
- Binder clips for page turners
- Double-sided carpet tape
- Furniture bumpers for page fluffers
- Highlighter tape

- Hot-glue gun with glue sticks
- Laminating paper
- Microfiber mitt
- Nonglare page savers
- Nonslip shelf liner
- Simple and adaptive switches for devices
- Small photograph album
- Sponge rollers
- Sticky-back foam
- Voice-recording modules

TK teachers may also consider downloading a free guide, *Adaptations in Action: Adaptation Bin for Children* (Nielsen 2009), to support students with disabilities in the classroom.

Inclusive routines are flexible and utilize multi-sensory strategies for learning and behavior management. Visual cues, such as picture schedules or hand signs, may be used by teachers to remind students of program expectations and to offer choices for engagement. For example, a symbol card with a listening ear and another one with a red stoplight can be used to cue students when it is time to listen and when a behavior is undesirable during a large-group activity. Auditory prompts (e.g., transition music or chimes) also help students focus and meet the expectations of classroom rules. Educators who assign peer partners for collaborative work/play encourage the development of friendship skills for all students. Motivational strategies such as “good choice” charts reinforce self-regulation skills and highlight developmental progress over time. Additional methods for

supporting a student’s individual needs can be created in collaboration with families, school specialists, and community resource partners. Additional ideas for assistive technology strategies focused on play and learning, communication, and literacy can be found in Sadao and Robinson (2010).

### **Resources and Collaborative Partnerships**

Communication and collaboration are essential for ensuring that students with disabilities receive appropriate and high-quality education. In addition to establishing important relationships with families and stakeholders, IEP meetings inform teachers of current student needs, goals for learning, suggested practices for inclusion, and curriculum modifications. Depending on the type of disability, a follow-up conversation with the school’s resource specialist may offer additional ideas for accommodating a student’s individual needs. Ongoing open communication among all involved parties is essential to tracking development, updating goals, and planning for the next steps. Regular meetings between the TK teacher, special education teacher, and other specialists allow teaching teams to share effective



strategies both in and out of the classroom setting. Informal conversation, e-mail, phone calls, and an interactive journal are just a few of the many ways teachers can maintain two-way communication with families. Administrators must also stay informed of the progress of students with disabilities. The continual support of administrators for general and special education staff promotes collaboration among staff serving students with disabilities.

### **Summary**

Creating inclusive TK classrooms means that teachers thoughtfully prepare an environment that reflects students of all abilities and permits access to curriculum in a way that is both appropriate and functional for all. Flexible routines, intentional prompts and cues, and collaborative work encourage all learners as they seek to be active participants in the classroom setting. At the root of inclusive work is communication and collaboration with families, specialists, school administrators, and other community stakeholders.

## **Students Who Are English Learners**

California has a diverse population of young learners from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Teachers of TK students recognize the value of diversity and show respect for each child's home culture and language by incorporating familiar words, objects, and images into program and curricular design. At the same time, they continually encourage the development of English language and literacy skills. Creating family and community partnerships for children who are learning English is also an important goal for educators. Teachers make use of dynamic instructional strategies that engage different modalities to bridge linguistic backgrounds. They provide concrete tools for making sense of and acquiring skills in the English language. Strategies for encouraging home-school connections, as well as inclusive practices for English learners, are discussed in this section.

### **Vignette**

*Ms. Wilson gathers her TK students for shared-book reading time. She positions herself at the front of the group, slightly raised in her chair so that all students have access to the illustrations in the big book and her visual props. Approximately half of the students in the class speak a language other than English at home. Before Ms. Wilson begins reading, she brings out puppets and real objects to introduce new English vocabulary from the story. "Today we are going to read a story about a hermit crab (holding up a puppet of a hermit crab). Let's all say 'hermit crab,' okay?" After prompting the students' choral response, Ms. Wilson continues, "What do you see on our hermit crab?" A young boy says "pincher" in Spanish and then moves his fingers together in a claw-like movement. The teacher responds, "Yes, Vicente! The hermit crab has claws (pointing to the puppet's claw) that pinch. Let's all make our hands into claws (mimicking Vicente's movement). We are pinching our claws like a hermit crab." Ms. Wilson introduces a few more words with props: She introduces 'shell' by using a real hermit-crab shell, and she introduces 'ocean' by showing pictures of the beach and underwater scenes. She then proceeds to read the story, using dynamic tones and gestures.*

### ***The Role of Families and Communities***

A child's identity and sense of self is closely tied to his or her cultural and linguistic heritage. How children view themselves and their perception of how others view them can have a lasting influence on the value they place on their home culture. Research has highlighted the benefits of being fluent in two or more languages. Students who speak more than one language demonstrate advanced cognitive skills, sophisticated linguistic abilities, and show lasting ties to their family culture (CDE 2007; Nemeth 2012). TK teachers can communicate deep respect and appreciation for diversity by forming authentic partnerships with families and neighboring communities. Personal conversations are essential to the establishment of quality connections, but language barriers and/or lack of understanding of cultural norms can work against this important goal. Educators utilize a variety of strategies to overcome these potential obstacles to collaboration.

Welcoming families with diverse backgrounds is important (Espinosa 2010). Calling family members by name and learning key words in each family's home language shows a commitment to families and respect for linguistic diversity. As parents feel comfortable, they can be invited to assist in the construction of the language and literacy environment. They can label material, take dictation, and read books or retell stories in the home language. Some families may elect to assist the TK classroom through more active, less language-focused tasks such as assisting with the preparation of classrooms materials or by sending donations for classroom use, such as recyclables or books in their home language. Educators strengthen home learning experiences by reinforcing the value of speaking, reading, writing, and simply playing together as a family in the home language.

Community volunteers can also support program efforts to enhance language learning. Children who have a strong foundation in their primary language

more easily learn to use a second language (CDE 2009b; Tabors and Snow 2001). Volunteers who speak the children's home language(s) can participate in classroom activities, using both English and the primary language to help English learners feel more at ease. While doing so, they promote shared understanding and expansion of vocabulary. It is also important for families to have access to program resources, including written documents and take-home learning experiences. To maximize family engagement, written communications should be translated into the family's home language.

### ***Strategies to Support English Language Development***

Although some of the vocabulary and oral language development strategies presented in this section are similar to those discussed earlier in this chapter, they are discussed here as well, with the addition of English learner examples to emphasize their importance. "Achieving academic success in school includes developing a knowledge and mastery of formal schooling practices in addition to building on one's home or community language practices. All children can have high levels of achievement if provided with a rich challenging curriculum and appropriate forms of assistance" (CDE 2007). Language is learned through conversation and by engaging in real contexts. "The child is an active party in the language-learning process . . . His experience and interaction with others give him the background to relate language to the sound/meaning relationship and to the purpose it represents" (Clark 2000, 181). Student-initiated, purposeful play is an informal framework for building English vocabulary. When teachers use running commentary as students work with manipulatives, label real objects, and elaborate on students' efforts to communicate in English or a home language, they help to support students' understanding of the structure of English. Affect, tone, and gestures offer additional information for processing new words and making sense of

experiences—for example, when a teacher says, “Yes, that is an alligator. It is a very BIG alligator. I see it has sharp teeth, too [pointing to the alligator’s teeth]!”

English learners may need extra assistance as they seek to participate in peer play. The presence of a teacher or another supportive adult can help students as they work across different languages. “Christopher is pointing to the truck. I think he would like it. Christopher, say, ‘I like the truck. May I have a turn?’” Peers can also scaffold language development. Pairing English learners with a socially skilled peer provides them with a model for action (e.g., I see, I do). Visual aids may be used to assist students as they work to meet classroom rules and resolve social conflicts. A teacher observes the student holding the solution kit and responds, “Maya, what is your idea for solving this problem? Oh, you are showing us the picture of children playing together. You want to share the cash register.”

Formal instruction, such as shared-book reading and large-group learning, also requires the use of clear, descriptive language. Students are better able to attend to shared-book reading when they are first introduced to important vocabulary using pictures or real objects. Time can be set aside in advance for teachers to pre-teach new words and pre-read book content. Inflection, pointing to illustrations, and dramatizing text are additional ways to engage English learners during the large-

group reading experience. Visual cues remind students of expectations for action during teacher-initiated instruction. A picture of an ear indicates that it is time to listen, and a picture of a raised hand models how to ask for a turn to speak. Incorporating repetition and opportunities to practice helps all children build knowledge and fluency, but is especially effective with English learners. Rereading stories and singing familiar songs and chants will increase participation and enthusiasm for group learning experiences. TK teachers can further include students in the language learning process by prompting them to demonstrate understanding with gestures and movement (e.g., “Show me what ‘cruising’ looks like. Yes, we are moving our bodies slowly, just floating around”).

Children become fluent in a second language at different rates. Motivation, personality, age, and exposure to practice influence the process (Tabors and Snow 2001). For example, students who are temperamentally “slow to warm” may take more time to express themselves in the new language than extroverted peers; however, slow progress should not be considered a delay in learning, but instead a reflection of the students’ unique personalities. Effective educators use their observations of preferred learning style, interests, and readiness to inform their instruction. Allowing English learners wait time to process verbal and written prompts is important in creating a comfortable learning climate.



### Summary

Supporting English learners involves communicating value and respect for the home language while simultaneously nurturing fluency in English. Establishing authentic partnerships with families and community volunteers adds depth to program curriculum and encourages the continued use and development of the student's primary language. Oral language is at the heart of instruction, using real contexts and objects to promote vocabulary development and increase shared meaning. Students learning a new language benefit from the use of visual tools and repetition in instruction. Teachers maximize student learning when they maintain an awareness of individual development and attend to individual cues for additional prompts and verbal coaching.

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### Teacher–Family–Community Engagement: A Key to Effective Transitional Kindergarten Instruction

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The relationships that educators establish with students, their families, and their communities have a lasting impact on long-term development and educational success (Henderson and Mapp 2002). The relationships that are fostered in this introductory school experience will facilitate the comfort and trust of students and families in school systems and will communicate important messages about the value of family input and involvement in education (Pianta and Kraft-Sayre 2003). The specific relationship between strong parent and family engagement and highly effective TK instruction will be discussed in this section. Additional strategies for building warm, personal relationships with families and communities will be provided in chapter 7.

#### **Nurturing Family Connections to Enrich Instruction**

The comfort a family feels in an educational setting contributes to a student's sense of trust

### Vignette

*Mrs. Coady anxiously stands at her classroom window and awaits the arrival of her “summer play date” group. She has invited four students and their families to school to spend some time in the TK play yard prior to the start of the academic year. She intends to use this time to watch the students at play, attend to their interests in play and friendship skills, and engage the families in casual conversations about their home culture, family pastimes, and goals for education. The important information she gathers and meaningful relationships she creates with the students and families will help her prepare an effective curriculum and classroom environment for the upcoming school year.*

and security. The teacher's knowledge of family relationships, the rich traditions they share, and the goals that parents and families hold for their child's future all need to be considered when teachers create the TK learning environment and align the curriculum with appropriate instructional strategies. Parents have valuable information about their child's personality, interests, and skills. Teachers who partner with families can use this information to better inform their work in the classroom (Bennett 2007).

Teachers can create genuine opportunities to learn this information from families. Informal conversations before the school year begins—during home visits, school play dates, or at a classroom open house—are ways to initiate home–school connections (Jacobs and Crowley 2010). A formal questionnaire may also be used to supplement information gained from these conversations. As teachers learn additional information about a child's skills and traits from parents and ask about their goals and expectations

for the child, they gain valuable insights that can help to guide their teaching practice. This ongoing flow of information between parents and TK teachers facilitates a rich and responsive learning environment.

When teachers make decisions about the most appropriate instructional strategies to deliver TK curriculum and about the most effective experiences to prepare children for a traditional kindergarten program, information from parents should be taken into consideration. TK teachers continually refine and enhance the learning environment and build their repertoire of teaching strategies to ensure that their instruction is culturally relevant and builds a strong foundation for student success.

### ***Building Community Connections to Enrich Instruction***

Community connections can further teacher awareness of group values, strengths, and needs. A school's surrounding community also has a direct influence on the school, the student, and the family. Studies on community engagement show that when "communities mobilize around school improvement efforts many positive outcomes can be achieved, including improved student achievement" (Iowa School Boards Foundation 2007). In addition to local businesses' financial support of school programs, educators can take community involvement one step further by utilizing local talents, knowledge, and expertise to enhance school curriculum. Inviting guest speakers, planning field trips to neighboring areas of interest, and coordinating community projects, such as a cooperative garden, are just a few of the many ways to highlight the school as a community entity. TK teachers, particularly those who do not live in the community where they are employed, can attend local events to understand the context for child development, family life, and community needs and values. This information can be used in program design and curriculum planning.

### **Reflecting on Culturally Relevant Education**

The learning environments that teachers create and the curriculum they implement have an important impact on student learning. In particular, research indicates differences between home experiences and school culture negatively influence minority children's academic achievement (York 2003). Teachers can design learning spaces and lesson plans with regard to individual learning style, family diversity, and community values. As TK teachers prepare their programs, the following questions warrant thoughtful consideration and deep reflection (York 2003):

- Does the classroom reflect students' daily lives?
- Do activities incorporate students' home language(s), culture, and community?
- Does the curriculum inspire students to learn about their family and home culture?

### **Summary**

Highly effective TK teachers seek and continually engage families as partners in fostering the development of children. They value the information shared by parents and use it to strengthen their teaching. When TK teachers incorporate culturally responsive practices into their daily instruction and interactions with children, the program is enriched and student learning is enhanced.