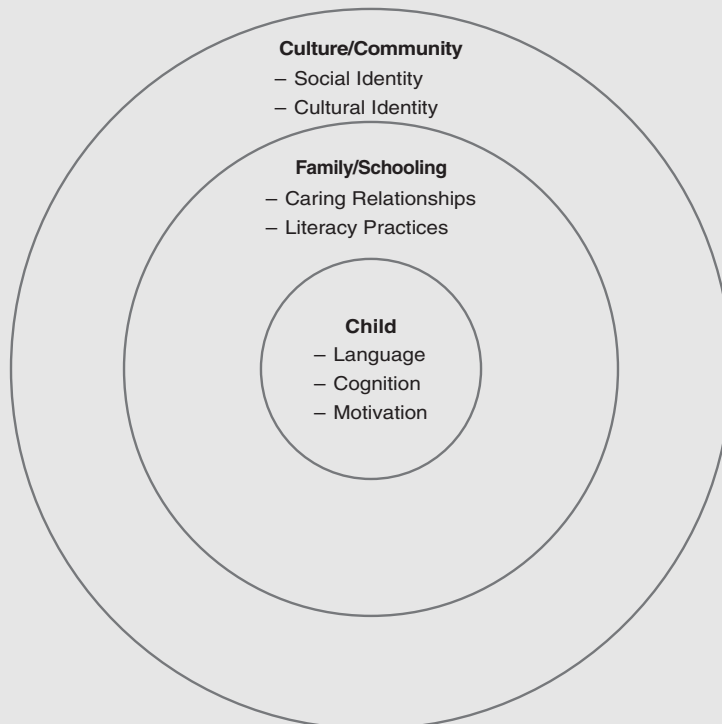




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in. In this chapter a *developmental systems approach* is taken to identify and to organize these multiple sources of resources that English language learners (ELLs) bring with them to preschool settings. *Subsystems* within the child such as language, motivation, and emotion are assumed to interact. This interaction means that each *subsystem* communicates with and influences the others. An example showing the interaction between the emotional and language subsystems is that enjoyable language interactions encourage the use of more expressive language. These subsystems within the child also interact with other subsystems in the external environment. For preschool English learners, these important *external subsystems* include their families, their communities, and their cultural frames of reference. A developmental systems approach to children's resources for literacy learning leads us to consider children's individual resources that are directly related to literacy, such as language and literacy experiences. A developmental systems approach also orients us to look at other subsystems within the child and the external environment that are less directly related to literacy but nevertheless communicate with and influence it. The graph in Figure 1.1 shows the child and external environment subsystems that provide preschool English learners with resources for language and literacy growth in preschool settings.

**Figure 1.1** Child Resource Systems



The strengths-based orientation to children's preparedness for language and literacy learning that emerges from focusing on understanding these resources will support maintaining high expectations, valuing children's competencies, and respecting the richness of their familial and cultural experiences. A strengths-based orientation also leads to instructional practices that establish connections between children's preexisting experiences and new learning in classrooms, as their previous experiences will be seen as a wellspring to draw from rather than a limitation to fix. Yet a strengths-based orientation does not mean to ignore the challenges faced by preschool English learners as they engage in the process of acquiring a second language, meet and become embedded in what for many is a new culture, or face the very real challenges experienced by those families of English learners with limited economic resources. It means recognizing that English learner children have resources, building on and with the resources children have, and providing them with those they need.

Teachers who believe in English learners' capacity for growth reflect this belief by holding high expectations for them, teaching them well, and viewing children's families and cultures as resource-laden contributors to higher school achievement for these children (e.g., Foster, Lewis, & Onafowora, 2003; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Snow, 2008). To inspire this orientation in early education and care professionals is a primary reason for taking the strengths-based perspective represented in this chapter. The term *wellspring* was selected to highlight the varied and plentiful sources of strength that English learners bring to literacy learning. I will begin by examining the individual child's wellsprings of resources and move out—like a ripple—to those resources provided by the external environment.

## THE LANGUAGE AND LITERACY WELLSPRING

Preschool English learners developing typically bring a well-formed basic communication system with them when they enter preschool settings. Of course, this language resource will most likely be in their first language, although some children will come with emerging competence in English as well. When children learn English after they have a basic primary language foundation, they are described as *sequential bilingual* children—one language follows basic acquisition of the other. When children have been learning two languages before preschool entry (typically the language of their family and culture in addition to English), they are described as *simultaneous bilingual* children. *Sequential* rather than *simultaneous* bilingualism is more common among preschool ELL children in the United States, particularly if they come from low-income families. Because of the

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dominance of English in most preschool settings, it is easy for educators to focus more on children's limited English proficiency than on the resource of their first language.

To understand how this occurs, create an image of a preschool child who speaks a language other than English—make the child male or female, detail the face and clothing. Now think of that child as having almost no English. What does the child need? How would you help him or her with English language and literacy? Now focus in on the child as having a primary language that she or he uses quite fluidly at home—imagine the child talking with caregivers, playing with siblings and friends, and reading storybooks with caregivers. What does the child need? How would you help him or her with English language and literacy? Hopefully this pretending has helped you appreciate that focusing on the primary language wellspring draws attention to English learner's language strength. Recognizing that English learners have language resources, albeit in a language other than English, identifies the primary language of children and their families as an important foundation for learning about English and the broader preschool curriculum. It also encourages viewing the child as capable.

The value of speaking more than one language is increasingly recognized in a global society. Because of their primary language competence, preschool English learners are in advance of English-only children in their potential for competence in more than one language. You might think of them as having half of what is needed for knowing two languages and of their families as having provided this gift, although of course their primary language development is far from complete.

Another way that primary language is a wellspring for English language and literacy is that bilingualism confers thinking advantages that are evident in preschool age children (Bialystok, 2001). Bilingual children have advantages in controlling their attention and greater flexibility in thinking than children who speak only one language. They may also have advantages in the ability to attend to the sounds of words, a skill that is a powerful predictor of reading achievement. They may also be particularly adept at acquiring a second language during the preschool years, and thus they are positioned to learn English well when in a high-quality English

### **Educational Principle 1:**

Assume children have language and literacy resources, and draw on these resources in preschool practices.

language development preschool (Campbell & Sais, 1995; Diaz, 1985; Gonz & Kodzopeljic, 1991; Rubin & Turner, 1989; Yelland, Pollard, & Mercuri, 1993). The language wellspring is rich and complex with several tributaries flowing toward language and literacy learning.

## THE EMOTIONAL WELLSPRING

Preschool English learners are raised in caring families by caregivers who love them. The benefit of these caring relationships is reflected in a large study of entering kindergarten children. Parents and teachers similarly reported that about 80% of English learner and English-only children typically demonstrated positive social skills (Llagas & Snyder, 2003). In fact the same data suggested that in spite of having several risk factors, English learners may have some emotional strengths that are greater than those of less at-risk children (Crosnoe, 2004). It has been suggested that the extensive social contacts and family cohesiveness emphasized by some cultures and incorporated by individual families within those cultures may serve to contribute to social-emotional well-being and resilience in the face of familial and individual stressors (e.g., Espinosa, 2006). The greater prevalence of two-parent families within the English learner population has also been suggested as a resource for emotional well-being. When children are very sure that they are cared about, it encourages them to step out into the larger world and to be open to the experiences such as language and literacy learning that it has to offer. It is like having a little security blanket that is tucked deep inside of them. The emotional wellspring encourages English learner children to flow into new settings and experiences with eagerness and focus.

### **Educational Principle 2:**

Assume that English learners have emotional well-being that derives from caring relationships within their families, and view this as a foundation for language and literacy learning.

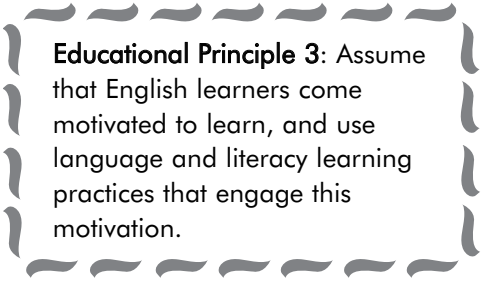
## THE MOTIVATIONAL WELLSPRING

All humans have an inborn need to be competent (White, 1959). This need for competence is directed toward mastering and adapting to one's environment. Preschool English learners come to preschool settings with that need already humming and flowing—they are ready to master and adapt. This biologically based need for competence is directed toward mastering challenges perceived by the organism (child in our case) to result in greater adaptation, which is needed for survival. In addition to the need for competence, needs for autonomy and relatedness also motivate behavior (Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). Autonomy is not the same as independence—autonomy implies that one endorses one's own behavior. It is aligned with self-regulation. For example, if group participation is valued, a child could

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have a sense of autonomy when working in a group. Children could have a sense of autonomy when they strive to accomplish things that will please their family, if they agree that pleasing their family and accomplishing these things are meaningful and appropriate.

Children's own individual beliefs and values, those of their families and cultural groups, and the larger society interact and shape how this motivation for competence will be directed. Preschool settings for early education and care are social settings that can influence whether or not preschool English learners' inherent motivation for competence is tapped into and engaged by language and literacy learning. To the degree that language and literacy learning in preschool settings is seen by the child as a potential and important opportunity for increasing competence, autonomy, and relatedness, the inborn motivation that children bring to preschool settings will be activated—and they will be eager and motivated language and literacy learners. When experiences with language and literacy in preschool settings are not seen as an opportunity for increasing competence,



**Educational Principle 3:** Assume that English learners come motivated to learn, and use language and literacy learning practices that engage this motivation.

autonomy, and relatedness, children's inherent motivation will be thwarted and suppressed. English learners' motivation is flowing—increase its velocity by ensuring that children experience competence, autonomy, and relationships with others in their preschool language and literacy learning.

### THE FAMILY WELLSPRING

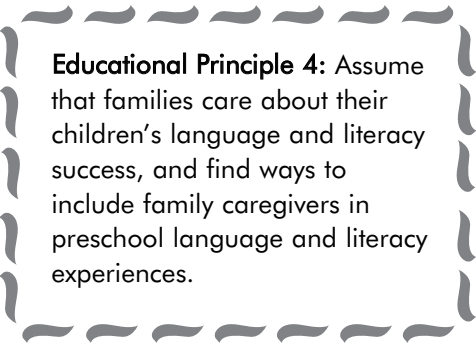
Families provide both language and social-emotional resources to their children that then accompany the children as they enter preschool settings. Families provide children their first exposures to language. All families also provide children experiences with literacy, although the extent of these experiences, and particularly experiences that are most supportive of school literacy achievement, may vary (e.g., Purcell-Gates, 2004). Practices such as oral storytelling, paying bills, reading fliers, managing coupons and banking, filling out forms with an interpreter, assembling household tools, reading a newspaper, navigating the TV guide, cooking with recipes, and using written instructions are all practices that involve literacy. Experience with written language—whether in, for example, storybook reading, or some other form—has been suggested as providing the type of expanded and vocabulary-laden language that is most supportive

of school achievement. The degree to which children are actively involved in or attend to these practices contributes to how much literacy learning they garner from them.

Similarly families have *funds of knowledge* (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992). Work experiences, hobbies, and traditional cultural practices are some of the funds of knowledge that exist in families. When these funds of knowledge are recognized and drawn in to the preschool setting, these family resources come alive to support children's literacy learning and create positive emotional conditions that also contribute to learning in preschool settings. These family literacy experiences have not been sufficiently recognized or capitalized on in schools, but when they are, children's language and literacy learning can benefit (e.g., Bernhard et al., 2006).

Failure to draw on family literacy resources may be particularly significant, as it may lead to (1) underestimation of children's preparedness for literacy learning, (2) lost opportunities for connecting relevant family-provided literacy experiences to preschool settings, and (3) creation of barriers to engaging families in promoting children's literacy learning by not drawing on the families' literacy practices and funds of knowledge. Activities that are more directly related to school experiences, such as storybook reading, vocabulary building, conversation, and print experiences similar to those associated with school settings, are more likely to be focused on by early childhood professionals. While these efforts are appropriate and to be encouraged, there are other resources for language and literacy learning of preschool ELLs to uncover and draw upon.

Families of English learners also value education, want their children to learn English, and hope for their academic success (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Yet the ways in which families demonstrate their valuing of education may differ from what is expected by professionals in preschool settings. For example, some families of English learner children may demonstrate their valuing of education by deferring to the teacher as the authority. Consequently they may not offer to participate or ask questions about their children's participation and achievement. Other families of English learners may be uncomfortable or feel unable to show their valuing in ways expected by the school because of language challenges, their own limited experience with schooling, or a lack of understanding of the English preschool setting. And yet other families may exert a strong



**Educational Principle 4:** Assume that families care about their children's language and literacy success, and find ways to include family caregivers in preschool language and literacy experiences.

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influence on their children's study practices at home, restrict social outings so children have time to study, and instruct children that their school performance reflects on the entire family, even though these efforts may not be visible to school staff (Ngo & Lee, 2007). The family wellspring flows deeply and broadly.

### THE CULTURAL WELLSPRING

Language and culture are intimately related (Gee, 1989). English learner children very often have learned their primary language where its use is



**Educational Principle 5:**

Assume that children have important and positive cultural experiences, and find ways to include these experiences in preschool language and literacy experiences.

embedded in a cultural context that differs from that of the mainstream English language culture. Family beliefs, parenting practices, spirituality, political and historical experience, and practices of daily living may differ markedly from those of the mainstream culture. These cultural frameworks provide children with resources to aid them in constructing their unique sense of self and their

social identity as a member of a particular cultural group. Alignment with and a strong sense of integration within a cultural framework secures children's understanding of who they are. Evidence suggests that English learners who have strong affinity with the cultural group in which their primary language is embedded perform better in school than those who do not have these strong affiliations with the cultural identity of their families and cultural community (Caplan, Chou, & Whitmore, 1991; Thao, 2003; Zhou & Bankston, 2006). In addition, because preschool ELLs participate both in the cultural context associated with their non-English primary language and in the mainstream English language culture, they have an emerging understanding of diversity. They are aware of diversity and live it more intimately than many children who speak only English.

### CONCLUSION

A developmental systems approach for considering the resources that preschool English learners bring to preschool settings reveals that they have language and literacy resources, emotional resources, family



resources, and cultural resources. They are strong. Believe in this strength, and you are well on your way to creating high expectations for language and literacy learning, a positive orientation to children and their families, a belief that English learners are ready to engage in preschool language and literacy learning, and a trust in their desire to partner with you to advance their competence. Embracing these beliefs is the bedrock for language and literacy practices and programs that will lead to preschool English learners acquiring the necessary preschool foundations for successful literacy. Subsequent chapters in this book will build on this strengths-based belief system. There are specific chapters to help you learn how to

- Find out about and build language and literacy competence with preschool children’s existing language and literacy resources.
- Promote further social-emotional well-being while fostering language and literacy development.
- Sustain and further enhance children’s motivation to speak, read, and write in English.
- Engage family caregivers and their familial and cultural resources.

#### **Summary of Educational Principles**

**Educational Principle 1:** Assume children have language and literacy resources, and draw on these resources in preschool language and literacy practices.

**Educational Principle 2:** Assume that English learners have emotional well-being that derives from caring relationships within their families, and view this as a foundation for language and literacy learning.

**Educational Principle 3:** Assume that English learners come motivated to learn, and use language and literacy learning practices that engage this motivation.

**Educational Principle 4:** Assume that families care about their children’s language and literacy success, and find ways to include them in preschool language and literacy experiences.

**Educational Principle 5:** Assume that children have important and positive cultural experiences, and find ways to include these experiences in preschool language and literacy experiences.