# Climate for Learning

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## Big Idea

Multilingual learners thrive when the classroom climate supports their needs, including belonging and understanding how the environment operates.

## Questions Educators Ask

- How can I foster a sense of belonging in the classroom?

- What role should peers play in the learning of others?

- How might the classroom be organized to support learning, and what agreements do we need to have as a class?

- How does grouping students contribute to a thriving learning environment?

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Ask any educator about the foundations of learning, and they will inevitably speak about the importance of the classroom learning environment. Not surprisingly, the effect size numbers (www.visiblelearningmetax.com) really back this up:

- Relationships between teacher and students (effect size of 0.47)

- Proactive classroom management (effect size of 0.35)

- Friendships (effect size of 0.29)

- Feeling a sense of belonging (effect size of 0.40)

Not only do these incredible numbers hover right around the average for *all influences on learning,* but they also represent some necessary conditions for learning. In fact, when these conditions are not present, tremendous damage can be done. For example, the effect size of feeling disliked by the teacher and peers is –0.26, being bullied is –0.33, and feeling bored due to a disconnection from the content and instruction is –0.33.
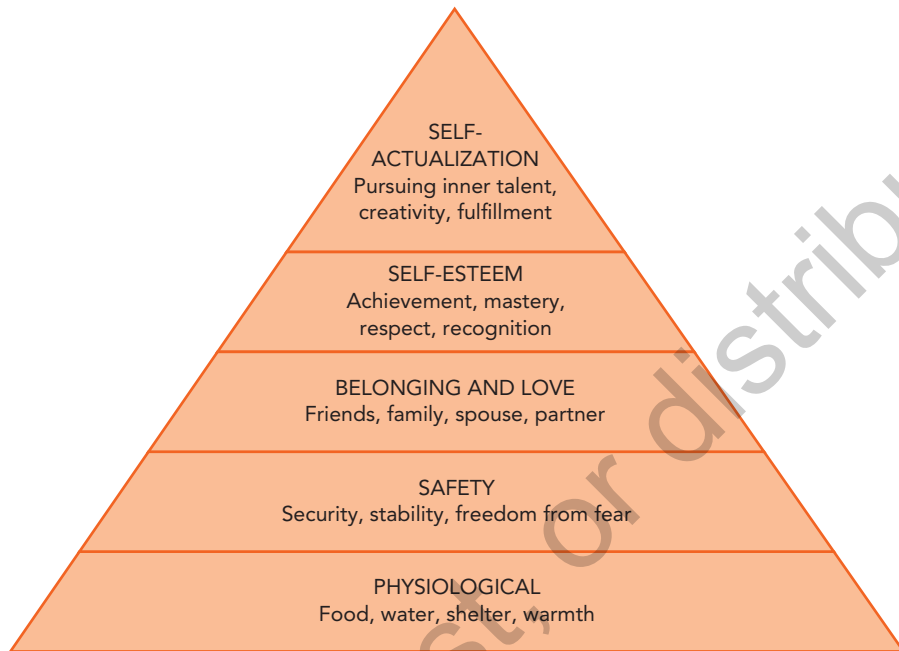
The classroom environment, first and foremost, either cultivates or inhibits the social, emotional, psychological, and motivational dimensions of learning that are essential for all students to thrive. These messages are conveyed through the relational and physical attributes of the room. An important outcome of these influences is the perception that the adult(s) in the room and the students are all on the same page, an element referred to as *classroom cohesion.* Classroom cohesion consists of "positive interpersonal relations between students, a sense of belonging of all students, and group solidarity" (Veerman & Denessen, 2021).

## Belonging

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is well known among educators, but its roots may not be. In 1943, Maslow wrote an article titled "A Theory of Human Motivation." Maslow believed it is necessary to *motivate* humans to develop and grow to achieve their individual potential (see Figure 2.1). Belonging, he posited, is an essential dimension for unlocking motivation.

In the article, Maslow explained that basic physiological and psychological needs are crucial. A child who is underfed or fearful is not likely to be motivated to learn. But as you review Figure 2.1, note that belonging is the next step. Also notice what it precedes: achievement and mastery. When students don't feel like they belong, achievement—learning—is not going to happen. Yet too often classrooms are structured such that achievement is how students gain belonging. The underlying message these classrooms send is this: "Because you achieve, you belong." Think how wrongheaded that is. How do we create a classroom where our multilingual learners have a sense of belonging in place (or the support they need to form one) so they can proceed to the next steps and achieve?

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> FIGURE 2.1    Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

**SELF-ACTUALIZATION**
Pursuing inner talent, creativity, fulfillment

**SELF-ESTEEM**
Achievement, mastery, respect, recognition

**BELONGING AND LOVE**
Friends, family, spouse, partner

**SAFETY**
Security, stability, freedom from fear

**PHYSIOLOGICAL**
Food, water, shelter, warmth

*Source:* Maslow (1943).

Multilingual learners face various obstacles when they arrive at a new classroom or school. As new members of the community, they may find themselves on the outside looking in. Yet they are seeking to fit in, to find a group to belong to, a tribe they can call their own. A classroom that celebrates students' different values, beliefs, cultures, and languages can foster belonging, which contributes positively to strong classroom cohesion. When students sense that their individual experiences are respected and valued, they also feel like they belong.

Along these lines, Carter (2021) argues that educators need to create a sense of belonging in classrooms and schools. Carter notes that students experience belonging when they are "present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, supported, heard, befriended, needed, and loved" (p. 16). Each of these factors can impact multilingual learners and their belief that

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they belong in the school. Carter offers some questions, which we have adapted to support multilingual learners, for educators to reflect on:

- **Present:** Is our community comprised of individuals whose languages, experiences, and backgrounds vary?

- **Invited:** Are we pursuing multilingual learners' presence and actively extending new invitations?

- **Welcomed:** Are we extending a warm welcome whenever multilingual learners arrive?

- **Known:** Do we know multilingual learners personally and for the strengths they possess?

- **Accepted:** Are we receiving multilingual learners unconditionally and graciously?

- **Heard:** Are we seeking out multilingual learners' preferences and perspectives on issues that matter?

- **Supported:** Are we providing the assistance multilingual learners need to participate fully and meaningfully?

- **Befriended:** Are we creating opportunities for friendships to form and deepen between all our students?

- **Needed:** Are we recognizing and receiving our multilingual learners' talents, gifts, and contributions?

- **Loved:** Are we loving our multilingual learners deeply and unconditionally?

As Carter and Biggs (2021) note, "We all hope that students will feel truly 'at home' in their classrooms. We want them to feel valued and accepted by their peers and teachers. We strive to create connections among students that lead to reciprocal relationships." That's a good place to start when it comes to creating the climate for learning that multilingual learners need. As part of this climate, educators can create an environment that includes an ethical imperative—to teach and support others when we learn something.

## Peers Helping Peers

The cohesion of the class is fostered further by expectations about how students take care of one another. One way of crafting such a message is through the helping curriculum, a term coined by Sapon-Shevin (1998). The helping curriculum consists of four expectations:

- I offer help.

- I accept help.

- I ask for help.

- I politely decline help when I want to continue trying on my own.

Embedded in the helping curriculum are two influences that have the potential to accelerate learning: help seeking and persistence. Help seeking is associated with higher levels of achievement (effect size of 0.85). Persistence, which is a dimension of effort management, has an effect size of 0.51 (www.visiblelearningmetax.com). Both influences reflect a common strength: self-regulation. Help seeking requires self-awareness of the need for assistance, possessing techniques for requesting it, and making strategic decisions about whom to ask. Effort management requires that students know how to manage their mood, engage in self-talk, and attribute their success to effort, which is often called a *growth mindset* (Dweck, 2006).

One technique often used to support emergent multilingual learners is to pair them with another student who speaks the same heritage language but has a higher degree of proficiency in English. Defining the purpose of the "buddy" work based on the desired outcome can make peer relationships far more effective so that the same students are not always tapped to serve in the support role. Figure 2.2 illustrates how educators can match the purpose to the choice of partners.

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## FIGURE 2.2    Pairings in the Helping Curriculum

| IF THE DESIRED OUTCOME IS TO HELP THE MULTILINGUAL STUDENT DO THE FOLLOWING . . . | THEN EDUCATORS SHOULD PAIR THE STUDENT* WITH A "BUDDY" WHO . . . |
| --- | --- |
| Adjust to their new environment | Speaks the same language or has a similar background |
| Use more English | Speaks English and is patient |
| Learn from peers | Enjoys teaching others and is helpful |
| Help peers | Speaks the same language and can benefit from the partnership |
| Develop persistence | Knows how to offer encouragement |
| Become part of the learning community | Is outgoing and connected with other students |

*Educators should change these partners often to encourage relationships.

## Setting the Physical Environment

Spaces speak to people and send messages about how they should act in the setting. For example, the high ceilings of a place of worship remind congregants how small they are and signal that they should use quiet voices. A crowded and narrow street provokes a heightened sense of awareness for many people, and perhaps some anxiety.

Similarly, classroom design conveys messages about what is valued and who is valued. Often without realizing it, students make several judgments about the teacher and about themselves based on the physical environment. They analyze elements and reach conclusions such as the following:

- Is it organized and neat? So is my teacher.

- Are there interesting items on display for me to use? This is my classroom and I belong here.

- Are there indicators that I am not welcome here? Signs such as "keep out" or "not for student use" can convey an unwelcoming environment and can be rephrased.

Lots of clutter can provoke anxiety in some students. It can also tell a tale of disarray rather than convey the teacher's anticipation of the students' presence. Neon colors, often popular in elementary classrooms, can actually trigger negative physiological responses, such as more rapid breathing and heart rate (Elliott et al., 2015).

Emmer et al. (2002) advise teachers to consider visibility, proximity, and accessibility when arranging a classroom. Because each classroom is unique, the arrangement you decide on will be influenced by your academic needs and by student considerations. Keep in mind that multilingual students may have learning needs that require particular classroom placement to increase visibility or minimize distractions. They may rely heavily on the nonlinguistic signals that your room arrangement conveys.

Students need to be able to hear, see, and move around the classroom in order to engage in the learning opportunities you are offering. If you fail to attend to these issues, the classroom limitations can result in learning difficulties for individual students. In particular, when the room's physical messages are confusing or contradictory,

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multilingual students may misinterpret them. Then you may misinterpret the students' behavior as problematic when it's really the product of confusion.

In addition, your own activity in the classroom must also be factored in as you consider the general setup. You need to be able to easily access materials, work with individual students, engage in small-group discussions, and display information. Use the following set of guiding questions to develop a room arrangement that works well for you and your students.

- **Visibility.** Are there areas of the classroom where students cannot easily view the board or screen? If so, consider using these areas for other purposes, including small-group work or storage.

- **Proximity.** Proximity is the physical distance between you and a student, and it is a useful tool for increasing student engagement. Look at the pathways for teacher movement in your classroom. Can you easily reach each student in the room to provide extra instructional or behavioral support? Can you circulate during whole-group teaching to monitor learning? Keep proximity between students in mind as well. Engaging classrooms use partner arrangements throughout the day. Be certain that students can easily move into partner groups at your direction.

- **Accessibility.** An orderly learning environment allows students to reach materials and areas of the classroom easily. Students need to sharpen pencils, retrieve laptops, throw away trash, enter and exit the room, and choose books from the classroom library. When planning your room arrangement, consider patterns of movement in these high-traffic areas.

The Reggio Emilia Approach is a method used in preschool and primary classrooms worldwide. Its philosophy is built on the idea that three teachers inform the child: the educator, the child's family, and the environment. Even if you don't teach very young children, you can appreciate the notion that the spatial environment signals to your students how learning occurs. Use the questions in Figure 2.3, adapted from the Australia Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, to assess how your classroom conveys an inviting message for learning (Fisher & Frey, 2022).

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## FIGURE 2.3   Learning Environment Survey

| LEARNING ENVIRONMENT CRITERIA | MY EVIDENCE |
|---|---|
| 1. How does this classroom encourage students to make choices and learn decision making? | |
| 2. How does this classroom support students' sense of security? | |
| 3. Is there evidence of displays of student work, and what role do students have in selecting work for display? | |
| 4. How are displays of student work a reflection of works in progress, not just final versions? | |
| 5. How does this classroom encourage collaboration among students? | |
| 6. How do classroom materials reflect the interests, experiences, and cultures of students and the community? | |

*Source:* Adapted from Australia Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (2018).

## Classroom Agreements

In addition to the physical dimension of the classroom, the social dynamics are crucial and deserve attention. Most teachers have classroom rules or classroom agreements that are meant to shape the norms of how everyone works, resolves problems, and engages with others. Classroom rules, which should be co-constructed by the teacher and the students, are "statements that teachers present to describe acceptable and unacceptable behavior" (Alter & Haydon, 2017, p. 115). The authors systematically reviewed the literature on these practices. Using the findings from fifteen studies, they identified the following themes:

- Keep the number between three and six statements.

- Create them collaboratively with students.

- State them positively.

- Word them specifically so that students understand them.

- Publicly post them.

- Teach them and refer to them often.

- Link them to positive and negative consequences.

The dialogic nature of classroom shared agreements that are co-developed offers an opportunity for you to highlight the social and emotional learning that is needed for multilingual students to succeed. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) publishes a tool for generating classroom shared agreements that can be downloaded (CASEL, 2019; https://schoolguide.casel .org/resource/sample-lesson-plan-generating-classroom-shared-agreements). We have highlighted the sequence of discussions here (CASEL, 2019):

1. Introduce shared classroom agreements and discuss their purpose (e.g., What does it mean to have a safe classroom? Why is it important to create a classroom where everyone feels physically and emotionally safe?).

2. Discuss how the students want to be treated by others and how they might treat others this year.

3. Brainstorm ideas for classroom shared agreements. Record students' ideas for how they will treat others this year, using their own words. Group ideas that capture what they have identified.

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4. After the lesson, make a large poster of the shared agreements, leaving room for each student to sign.

5. Review the classroom shared agreements on a regular basis and integrate them into your daily routines.

We also recommend using these as a platform for backward planning. Once the shared agreements have been established, discuss how these agreements are manifested. In other words, how do they look and sound in action?

Let's look at one example of a common problem that may arise for multilingual learners: teasing, name calling, and bullying. Teasing, name calling, and exclusion are the most common forms of verbal and relational aggression for multilingual students, and they include attacks on identity, ethnicity, race, and language (Pratt-Johnson, 2015). In addition, some multilingual learners may lack the language skills in English to prevent or stop a bullying incident (Ostrander et al., 2018). Despite the acknowledgment that bias about language skills is a form of bullying, many adults consider it a normal—even necessary—part of childhood. However, bullying can undermine the classroom community and is perceived as acceptable when the teacher does little to respond to it. Here's how teachers can work with students to proactively head off conflicts and help resolve them when they occur.

## Establish a Classroom Rule Aligned to the Shared Agreement

The playground is the harshest environment for some children, especially those seen as outsiders by others. Left unchecked, some children may exclude one another from play, often hurling uncharitable words in the process. A shared agreement with the class might be something like, "We will take care of each other." But how is that expressed in daily classroom interactions? Fine-tuning the rule authored in partnership with the class can eliminate such interactions.

For example, this revised or added rule may be worded as "Everyone here can play" (Paley, 1992). The intent of this rule is to eliminate exclusion by requiring students to create a way for a classmate to join a group at play. This should help prevent them from simply telling the child, "You can't play with us." Once a rule is established, children will need many opportunities to practice using it. You should model this behavior as the teacher and praise the students when you witness it.

### Create a Forum for Students to Resolve Disputes With Your Assistance

Even with a proactive approach, bullying issues can still arise. Again, the eyes of your students are on you. View this as an opportunity to teach, not just as a problem to solve. All students should be taught how to resolve disputes when they arise. These steps can serve children well when an argument flares up. The establishment of a peace table can provide children with both the space and the structure to resolve problems in a constructive manner. Here's what this might look like in practice.

- **Meet with both parties separately.** There are issues to address on both sides. Each student needs to hear directly from you about the problem and the solution. Help prepare each party for the facilitated discussion that will follow:

  1. Help students to develop an "I" statement to explain how they are feeling. ("When you _____ I felt _____. I would like for you to _____.")

  2. Teach them to listen to what the other child has to say.

  3. Remind them to discuss the problem calmly until they arrive at a solution both of them can agree upon.

- **Mediate the discussion at the peace table**. The peace table should be situated in a quiet spot in the room or elsewhere in the school for students to discuss their dispute with some privacy. Ask the students to take ownership of their behavior and broker apologies, solutions, and future promises as needed.

- **Notify the families so they can collaborate with you.** Don't hesitate to consult with the families to solve the problem. They often source the best ideas for working effectively with their child.

- **Get the school administration involved.** Incidents of bullying can rapidly spiral into serious situations. Make sure an administrator and counselor are involved in solving bullying problems that do not respond to classroom interventions.

## Grouping Students

Classrooms that provide maximum opportunities for students to talk are organized around a variety of grouping configurations. Students frequently work collaboratively with others, in pairs or small groups, to develop skills, complete a task, and construct meaning.

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The ways you group students for teacher-directed instruction and peer-to-peer collaborative learning actually influence what they learn (or do not learn). In part, this is because your grouping decisions reflect your expectations for students.

Researchers followed the mathematics progress of nearly more than three thousand kindergarten multilingual learners and compared them to their teachers' expectations and grouping practices (Garrett & Hong, 2016). Their results linked the relative achievement of students to two factors: grouping and teacher expectations. Teachers with lower expectations for students relied more on whole-group instruction and homogeneous small groups that were based on language proficiency. Teachers with higher expectations used a combination of heterogeneous and homogeneous small-group instruction and less whole-group instruction. In addition, these teachers formatively assessed more often than those with lower expectations for students.

Students who are not yet making expected progress are vulnerable to the grouping practices of teachers. Those who are in classrooms that use whole-group instruction are less likely to be assessed formatively, and therefore they are less likely to have instruction adjusted to meet their needs. In addition, low-achieving students in peer-led homogeneous groups are more likely to languish because they lack the collective academic, language, and social resources necessary to progress. When it comes to students of concern, grouping can make a difference in students' learning.

> Student grouping should be intentional, assessment driven, and flexible.

Effective small-group heterogeneous grouping (groups that do not remain permanent, change a lot, and capitalize on the variance in the group) involves more than randomly assigning students to groups and hoping for the best. Student grouping should be intentional, assessment driven, and flexible. This is crucial for students who are not yet making expected progress, as the ratio of higher- and lower-achieving students within the small group can play a factor. For example, the needs of a single lower-achieving student in the presence of too many high-achieving peers can mean that student's voice is drowned out as others dominate.

Another consideration is the relative range within a group. A wide academic or linguistic gap between students can pose a communication challenge that learners may not know how to bridge. In both cases, there is an increased likelihood that some students will dominate the task while others are left to (or choose to) passively observe.

One method for constructing sound heterogeneous small groups is to use an alternate ranking system. Here's how that works:

1. Use a recent assessment formatively to rank students in order from highest to lowest achieving on a recent assessment.

2. Split the list in half to form two sub-lists. In a class of 32, Sublist A lists students 1–16, while Sublist B lists students 17–32.

3. Use the top two names from Sublist A and the top two names from Sublist B to form a group of four students. Thus, students 1, 2, 17, and 18 are a heterogeneous group.

4. Repeat this to form a group composed of students 3, 4, 19, and 20.

5. Continue this process until all students are grouped. In this case, the final group would consist of students 15, 16, 31, and 32 (see Figure 2.4).

**FIGURE 2.4   Alternate Ranking Example**

| 1. Yolanda | 17. Hana | Group 1 |
| 2. Dalaisha | 18. Meghan | |
| 3. Isaiah | 19. Jesse | Group 2 |
| 4. Lisbeth | 20. Rosa | |

| 13. Hamsa | 29. Ivory | Group 7 |
| 14. Audrey | 30. Elena | |
| 15. Robert | 31. Eileen | Group 8 |
| 16. Mikhail | 32. Tamar | |

Alternate ranking simultaneously accomplishes two purposes. It maintains heterogeneity across groups, while it also brackets the relative range of cognitive, social, and language resources within. Of course, this approach isn't foolproof. Be sure to use your own knowledge of your students to make any necessary adjustments.

The way that students are grouped sends powerful messages about who is, and who is not, valued in the classroom. Students notice if they are always placed in the same groups, and their peers notice who is allowed to work with whom. Ineffective grouping impacts learning opportunities as well as changes the social dynamics of the classroom.

## Conclusion

There is always a climate in the classroom. Students are much more likely to learn when it is nurtured and supported. When it is ignored or neglected, the climate can become toxic for some—or even all—of the students, and it can compromise their learning. Of course, there is more to learning for multilingual learners than a supportive climate, but creating a sense of belonging, peer supports, and agreement about how things happen sets the stage for learning to occur.