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Leading Meaning-Making: A Multimodal Children's Literature and Recipe-Based Framework for Multilingual and Multicultural Early Childhood Education

Liderando a construção de sentidos: uma estrutura baseada em literatura infantil multimodal e receitas para a educação infantil multilíngue e multicultural

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Abstract

Multilingual and multicultural early childhood classrooms require approaches that recognize children's diverse ways of communicating, participating, and constructing meaning. This chapter proposes the Leading Meaning-Making Framework (LMMF), integrating multimodality, translanguaging, Funds of Knowledge, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and inclusive leadership. It explores multimodal children's literature and recipe-based learning as resources for creating culturally responsive environments. Through food narratives and picture books, cultural identities, family histories, and community knowledge become valued resources for learning. The chapter argues that inclusive education is achieved not only through access but through environments where children actively contribute to shared meaning-making.

Keywords: multilingual education, multimodality, early childhood leadership, picture books, culturally sustaining pedagogy

Resumo

As salas de aula multilíngues e multiculturais na educação infantil exigem abordagens que reconheçam as diversas formas pelas quais as crianças se comunicam, participam e constroem sentidos. Este capítulo propõe o Leading Meaning-Making Framework (LMMF), integrando multimodalidade, translinguagem, Fundos de Conhecimento, pedagogia culturalmente sustentadora e liderança inclusiva. Explora a literatura infantil multimodal e a aprendizagem baseada em receitas como recursos para a criação de ambientes culturalmente responsivos. Por meio de narrativas alimentares e livros ilustrados, identidades culturais, histórias familiares e conhecimentos comunitários tornam-se recursos valorizados para a aprendizagem. O capítulo argumenta que a educação inclusiva é alcançada não apenas por meio do acesso, mas por ambientes nos quais as crianças contribuem ativamente para a construção compartilhada de sentidos.

Palavras-chave: educação multilíngue, multimodalidade, liderança na educação infantil, livros ilustrados, pedagogia culturalmente sustentadora

1. Leading Meaning-Making in Multilingual and Multicultural Early Childhood

Contemporary early childhood education is increasingly shaped by linguistic, cultural, and social diversity. Global migration, mobility, and changing family structures have transformed classrooms into multilingual communities where children bring diverse languages, cultural practices, experiences, and ways of understanding the world (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). These transformations require educational approaches that move beyond traditional models of inclusion, which have often focused primarily on supporting children's acquisition of the dominant school language. Although language development remains an essential educational aim, such perspectives may overlook the broader ways through which young children communicate, participate, and construct knowledge through linguistic, cultural, embodied, and semiotic resources (Cummins, 2021; García & Wei, 2014).

Contemporary perspectives in multilingual education challenge deficit-oriented understandings of linguistic diversity by conceptualizing children's languages and cultural practices as resources for learning. Translanguaging theory emphasizes that multilingual learners do not operate through separate linguistic systems but draw upon their complete linguistic, cultural, and communicative repertoires to interpret experiences and construct meaning (García & Wei, 2014). Consequently, inclusive educational environments should not require children to replace their existing linguistic resources with dominant forms of communication. Instead, they should create conditions where multiple languages and modes of expression contribute to participation, interaction, and knowledge construction (Rosa & Flores, 2017).

This broader understanding of communication is closely connected to multimodal theories of literacy. Social semiotic approaches argue that meaning is created through the

interaction of multiple semiotic resources, including language, images, gesture, movement, sound, spatial organization, and material forms (Jewitt, 2014; Kress, 2010). Literacy, therefore, extends beyond reading and writing to include interpreting visual representations, negotiating symbols, communicating through embodied practices, and engaging with diverse forms of meaning-making (Serafini, 2014). Such perspectives are particularly significant in early childhood education because young children's communication is inherently multimodal. Before acquiring conventional literacy skills, children express ideas through drawing, play, movement, gesture, storytelling, and interactions with objects and environments (Flewitt, 2020; Mavers, 2011). Recognizing these forms of communication allows educators to understand children as capable meaning-makers whose knowledge is expressed through multiple pathways.

Picture books provide a particularly valuable context for exploring multimodal meaning-making because they construct narratives through the interaction of verbal and visual modes. Unlike texts that rely primarily on written language, picture books generate meaning through relationships among words, images, color, framing, perspective, typography, and page design (Arizpe & Styles, 2016; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006; Serafini, 2014). Within inclusive multilingual classrooms, picture books function as shared spaces of interpretation where children can engage with visual narratives, cultural representations, and diverse forms of expression. For multilingual children, the multimodality of picture books creates opportunities for participation because images and visual structures can support comprehension even when children are developing proficiency in the dominant classroom language. Thus, picture books become spaces where children collaboratively negotiate meaning and contribute through multiple communicative resources.

However, recognizing children's multiple modes of communication also requires recognition of their cultural knowledge and lived experiences. The concept of *Funds of Knowledge* challenges deficit perspectives by demonstrating that families possess valuable intellectual, cultural, and social resources developed through everyday practices (González et al., 2005; Moll et al., 1992). These resources include storytelling traditions, family histories, celebrations, occupations, and culinary practices. When schools acknowledge such knowledge, children are positioned not as passive recipients of information but as contributors whose experiences expand classroom learning.

This perspective aligns with *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, which argues that education should not simply acknowledge diversity but actively maintain and value children's linguistic and cultural practices (Paris & Alim, 2017). In early childhood settings, this principle is particularly important because children's identities develop through relationships, family connections, and everyday experiences. Inclusive education therefore requires more than the

representation of different cultures; it requires learning environments where children's cultural identities actively shape curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom interactions.

Such an approach positions educational leaders as agents who shape the values, relationships, and structures through which learning communities respond to diversity. Culturally responsive leadership involves examining whose knowledge is recognized, whose voices are represented, and whose experiences are included within educational environments (Khalifa et al., 2016; Shields, 2018). In multilingual and multicultural contexts, leadership extends beyond administrative responsibilities and involves creating conditions for collaboration, teacher professional learning, and inclusive pedagogical practices that enable meaningful participation for all learners (Leithwood et al., 2020). Rather than viewing diversity as a challenge requiring adaptation, such perspectives position linguistic and cultural differences as resources that enrich collective knowledge construction.

Within this theoretical context, multimodal children's literature offers important possibilities for educational practice. However, this chapter extends existing discussions by arguing that picture books become particularly powerful when connected with food narratives and recipes. Food represents a meaningful intersection of culture, identity, memory, and belonging. Recipes function as multimodal cultural texts that combine language, images, measurements, sequencing, sensory experiences, and embodied knowledge (Jewitt, 2014; Kress, 2010). They provide opportunities for children to share family experiences while enabling schools to recognize community knowledge as a legitimate component of curriculum development (González et al., 2005; Moll et al., 1992).

Building on these theoretical foundations, this chapter proposes the *Leading Meaning-Making Framework (LMMF)*, which positions multimodal children's literature and recipe-based learning as resources for educational leadership in multilingual and multicultural early childhood contexts. The framework argues that inclusion is achieved not simply by providing access to existing educational structures but by transforming classrooms into spaces where children's languages, cultures, identities, and lived experiences actively contribute to shared knowledge construction.

2. Recipes as Multimodal Cultural Texts and Foundations for Leading Meaning-Making

Food occupies a unique position in human experience because it connects biological needs with cultural meanings. Meals and recipes communicate histories, relationships, traditions, and identities, functioning as cultural practices through which communities preserve memories and transmit values across generations (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013; Sutton,

2001). For young children, food is closely associated with family life, emotional experiences, care, and belonging, contributing to the development of personal and cultural identity (Locher et al., 2010; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). In multilingual classrooms, food can therefore serve as a meaningful bridge between home and school, enabling educators to recognize children's family knowledge and cultural practices as legitimate sources of learning (González et al., 2005; Moll et al., 1992).

From a multimodal perspective, recipes can be understood as complex cultural texts rather than simple procedural instructions. They combine written language, images, symbols, numbers, measurements, sequencing, sensory descriptions, and embodied practices. Engaging with a recipe requires children to interpret and coordinate multiple forms of information: reading words, understanding visual representations, recognizing patterns, following sequences, estimating quantities, and connecting the text with personal experiences. Consequently, recipes provide authentic contexts for multimodal literacy development, where children construct meaning through the interaction of linguistic, visual, mathematical, and embodied modes.

This understanding challenges narrow conceptions of literacy that privilege written language as the primary form of knowledge representation. Instead, recipes demonstrate that literacy practices are socially and culturally situated, emerging from everyday experiences and relationships. A family recipe represents more than a method of food preparation; it carries knowledge about place, migration, traditions, celebrations, and intergenerational connections. When children share recipes from their homes, they are not merely communicating information about food but presenting aspects of their identities and communities.

Such an approach aligns with *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, which argues that education should value and maintain children's linguistic and cultural practices rather than replace them with dominant forms of knowledge (Paris & Alim, 2017). Recipe-based learning creates opportunities for families to participate as contributors of knowledge and enables schools to establish more reciprocal relationships with communities. For educational leaders, this represents a shift from viewing families as supporters of school activities towards recognizing them as partners in curriculum development and knowledge construction.

Children's literature provides an especially powerful context for exploring these connections between food, identity, and belonging. In *Everybody Cooks Rice* (Dooley, 1991), rice becomes a symbol of cultural diversity and connection, illustrating how families may share common food practices while maintaining distinctive traditions. Similarly, *Everybody Bakes Bread* (Dooley, 1995) and *Everybody Serves Soup* (Dooley, 2000) present food as a social practice that connects families and communities. In *Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story*

(Maillard, 2019), food embodies Indigenous identity, ancestry, resilience, and collective memory, highlighting the relationship between culinary traditions and cultural histories. Narratives such as *Salma the Syrian Chef* (Ramadan, 2020) and *What's Cooking at 10 Garden Street?* (Sala, 2019) further demonstrate how cooking practices can support experiences of migration, belonging, and intercultural relationships. Collectively, these picture books position food narratives as spaces where children's languages, cultures, and experiences become visible.

Building on these theoretical perspectives, the *Leading Meaning-Making Framework (LMMF)* proposed in this chapter integrates multimodality, translanguaging, Funds of Knowledge, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and inclusive leadership to provide a conceptual model for early childhood education leaders. The framework is based on the premise that inclusion requires more than providing equal access to existing educational structures. Instead, it involves transforming learning environments so that children's languages, cultural identities, and diverse ways of communicating actively contribute to classroom knowledge.

The activities presented in Table 1 demonstrate how the Leading Meaning-Making Framework (LMMF) translates theoretical principles into inclusive classroom practice. By using picture books and recipes as multimodal cultural resources, children collaboratively construct knowledge while drawing on their languages, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. The framework consists of six interconnected dimensions that guide educational leaders in developing culturally responsive and inclusive learning communities.

2.1. Designing Multimodal Learning Environments

The first dimension focuses on creating learning environments that recognize multiple forms of communication. Traditional literacy practices often privilege written and spoken language, which may restrict participation for children whose knowledge is expressed through visual, embodied, or experiential modes. Educational leaders can support teachers in developing multimodal environments where picture books, drawings, objects, sensory experiences, and visual narratives are recognized as meaningful forms of communication. Food-related picture books and recipes naturally support this approach because they integrate language, images, mathematical concepts, cultural knowledge, and practical experiences. Such environments expand opportunities for participation by allowing children to demonstrate understanding through diverse pathways rather than through a single dominant mode.

2.2 Valuing Children's Cultural Knowledge

The second dimension highlights the importance of recognizing children's cultural experiences as educational assets. Drawing on *Funds of Knowledge theory* (González et al.,

2005; Moll et al., 1992), the framework positions families as holders of valuable knowledge that can enrich classroom learning. A child sharing a family recipe contributes knowledge about language, traditions, geography, history, and relationships. These contributions challenge deficit perspectives that focus primarily on what multilingual learners have not yet acquired. For educational leaders, this requires supporting pedagogical approaches that connect curriculum content with children's lived experiences and recognize cultural knowledge as a foundation for meaningful learning.

2.3 Facilitating Multilingual Meaning-Making

The third dimension concerns the recognition of children's complete linguistic repertoires. *Translanguaging theory* demonstrates that multilingual learners draw upon interconnected linguistic resources to communicate and construct meaning (García & Wei, 2014). Within recipe-based activities and picture book discussions, children may use different languages to name ingredients, describe family practices, interpret illustrations, or share cultural knowledge. Such practices create equitable opportunities for participation and demonstrate that multilingualism functions as a resource for learning rather than a barrier. Educational leaders influence whether these practices become embedded within school culture through curriculum decisions, teacher professional development, and inclusive communication policies.

2.4 Strengthening School–Family Partnerships

The fourth dimension emphasizes reciprocal relationships between schools and families. Meaningful inclusion requires moving beyond occasional multicultural celebrations towards sustained collaboration in which families contribute actively to educational experiences. Food narratives provide natural opportunities for such partnerships. Families can share recipes, stories, photographs, and cultural practices, allowing children's backgrounds to become visible within classroom life. Through these practices, educational leaders promote a culture in which family knowledge is valued as an essential component of curriculum development and learning.

2.5 Building Inclusive Communities Through Shared Narratives

The fifth dimension focuses on developing classroom communities based on belonging, dialogue, and mutual recognition. Food narratives provide opportunities for children to explore diversity through shared human experiences while also recognizing cultural complexity. A critical approach avoids presenting cultures as fixed or symbolic categories. Instead, it encourages children to understand traditions as dynamic practices shaped by histories, relationships, and lived experiences. Through this perspective, educational leaders support

classrooms where diversity is not simply represented but actively contributes to collective knowledge construction.

2.6 Fostering Critical Cultural Awareness

The sixth dimension emphasizes the development of children's ability to engage critically with cultural representations, narratives, and perspectives. Rather than viewing cultures as homogeneous or static, children are encouraged to explore the diversity that exists within cultural communities, question stereotypes, and recognize that cultural identities are continuously shaped by historical, social, and personal experiences. Through multimodal children's literature and recipe-based learning, educational leaders create opportunities for children to compare perspectives, reflect on issues of equity, inclusion, and representation, and develop respect for multiple ways of knowing and living. By promoting dialogue, critical questioning, and intercultural understanding, this dimension supports children in becoming reflective participants who appreciate cultural diversity while recognizing the importance of empathy, social justice, and democratic citizenship.

The activities presented in Table 1 demonstrate how the Leading Meaning-Making Framework (LMMF) translates theoretical principles into inclusive classroom practice. By using picture books and recipes as multimodal cultural resources, children collaboratively construct knowledge while drawing on their languages, experiences, and cultural backgrounds.

3. Conclusion

Multilingual and multicultural early childhood classrooms require educational approaches that recognize children as competent meaning-makers whose knowledge extends beyond the boundaries of formal academic language. Children enter classrooms with diverse linguistic repertoires, cultural experiences, family histories, and ways of communicating. The challenge for educational leaders is therefore not how to adapt children to existing educational structures, but how to transform schools into environments where diversity becomes a foundation for learning.

This chapter has argued that multimodal children's literature combined with recipe-based learning provides a powerful pathway for fostering critical cultural awareness in early childhood education. Rather than serving as simple classroom topics, food narratives function as cultural texts through which children explore identity, belonging, memory, and community knowledge. When integrated with picture books, recipes create authentic opportunities for multilingual participation, dialogue, and reflection, enabling children to recognize, appreciate, and critically engage with diverse cultural perspectives while strengthening meaningful connections between home and school.

The proposed Leading Meaning-Making Framework (LMMF) contributes to discussions of early childhood leadership by positioning inclusion as a process of designing environments where multiple forms of knowledge are recognized and valued. Through the development of multimodal learning spaces, recognition of cultural knowledge, support for multilingual meaning-making, strengthening of family partnerships, and cultivation of inclusive communities, educational leaders can create classrooms where every child has opportunities to participate and belong.

Ultimately, culturally responsive leadership requires a fundamental shift in perspective. Linguistic and cultural diversity should not be understood as challenges that schools must overcome; they should be recognized as resources that enrich collective learning. By embracing multimodal children's literature and recipe-based narratives, early childhood leaders can foster communities where children's identities are not simply represented but actively contribute to the creation of shared knowledge.

4. Limitations and Future Research

As a conceptual and theoretical contribution, this chapter does not draw on empirical data or classroom-based case studies to examine the implementation or effectiveness of the proposed Leading Meaning-Making Framework (LMMF). Consequently, the framework should be regarded as a theoretically informed model that requires empirical validation. Future research could investigate its application across diverse early childhood settings, examining its influence on multilingual meaning-making, children's participation, family engagement, and culturally responsive leadership practices. Comparative and longitudinal studies would further contribute to refining the framework and evaluating its adaptability across different educational and cultural contexts.

Table 1
Leading Meaning-Making Framework (LMMF) classroom activities

Picturebook	LMMF Dimension	Classroom Activity	Multimodal Meaning-Making Processes	Educational Purpose
Everybody Cooks Rice (Dooley, 1991)	Valuing Children's Cultural Knowledge	"Rice Around the World" Family Recipe Map: Children bring or discuss rice-based dishes from their families and create a collective classroom map showing different countries, languages, and traditions.	Children use home languages, drawings, photographs, symbols, oral storytelling, and visual mapping to represent cultural knowledge.	Recognizes children's families as knowledge holders and positions cultural diversity as a classroom resource.
Everybody Bakes Bread (Dooley, 1995)	Strengthening School–Family Partnerships	"My Family Bread Story": Children share memories of bread-making practices with family members and create a class recipe collection.	Children combine drawings, dictated texts, family words, sensory descriptions, and images of ingredients.	Builds connections between home and school while validating family traditions and experiences.

Picturebook	LMMF Dimension	Classroom Activity	Multimodal Meaning-Making Processes	Educational Purpose
Everybody Serves Soup (Dooley, 2000)	Building Inclusive Communities Through Shared Narratives	"A Community Soup" Collaborative Project: Children create an imaginary soup by contributing ingredients that represent their identities and classroom community.	Children negotiate meanings through conversation, gesture, symbolic representation, counting, sorting, and collaborative decision-making.	Develops belonging, cooperation, and understanding of diversity as collective strength
Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story (Maillard, 2019)	Fostering Critical Cultural Awareness	"Food, Memory, and Identity" Inquiry: Children explore how foods carry stories about people, places, and histories.	Children analyze illustrations, discuss emotions, interpret symbols, and connect food with personal and cultural narratives.	Encourages respectful engagement with cultural histories and avoids superficial representations of culture.
Salma the Syrian Chef (Ramadan, 2020)	Facilitating Multilingual Meaning-Making	"Cooking Words in Many Languages": Children create a multilingual ingredient dictionary using words from their home languages.	Translanguaging practices emerge through naming ingredients, comparing sounds, writing symbols, and explaining meanings	Recognizes multilingualism as a resource and supports children's linguistic identities.
What's Cooking at 10 Garden Street? (Sala, 2019)	Designing Multimodal Learning Environments	"A Multicultural Classroom Cookbook": Children collaboratively design a cookbook including recipes, drawings, photographs, and stories.	Literacy, mathematics, visual representation, sequencing, and creative design are combined.	Expands literacy beyond written language and promotes multimodal communication.

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