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Bringing Literacy Home: Latino Families Supporting Children's Literacy Learning

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Dual Language Learners (DLLs) are part of the educational landscape across the United States. Public school enrollment of dual language learners increased by 51 percent from 1997 to 2008 (NCELA 2011). At the same time, students who are DLLs meet the same academic standards as English-only students after an adjustment period (Goldenberg 2008). The challenge for our schools and communities is educating all students while helping DLLs close the gap in language and cultural understanding so they can succeed in the American educational system.

Research suggests that working to close the achievement gap during regular school hours only is not enough (NCES 2011). Families have a major impact on young children's literacy achievements, and their participation in extending learning, setting expectations, and building cultural capital outside of school is vital. Cultural capital is the knowledge that has value in a given society. Helping families develop literacy strategies and an understanding of the US school system enables them to better support and extend their children's literacy development.

**Linguistic and cultural differences**

Home literacy practices, especially parent-child reading, are linked to children's development of language, literacy, and positive emotions associated with reading (Gest et al. 2004). Literacy
practices differ by culture and family background variables. For example, some researchers state that Latino families are less likely to read books and share stories with their children than families of other ethnic backgrounds (Flores, Tomany-Korman, & Olson 2005). However, Latino parents support children's cognitive development through daily interactions, household responsibilities, and family activities (Thomas & Collier 2012). They engage their children in a wealth of family traditions, knowledge, and experiences that foster their children's cognitive development.

Our experiences with immigrant families, supported by nationwide research, show that Latino parents have the motivation and desire to support their children's learning. However, families may lack the knowledge, expectations, and strategies necessary to help their children attain academic success in US schools (Páez, Paratore Bock, & Pizzo 2011). In our home visit conversations with families, the authors found that parents educated outside the United States have family literacy practices that differ from US practices. For example, Guy's (the second author) parents—both professionals who were educated outside the United States—did not teach Guy the alphabet or practice reading with him when he was a child. This, of course, happens with parents who were educated in the United States, as well. Immigrant families may lack confidence when reading in English with their children due to limited literacy skills, low English proficiency, lack of shared book-reading experience, or simply because these activities are viewed as solely the role of teachers. As a result, they may engage their school-age children in fewer language and literacy experiences (Tabors 2008).

When educators recommend that families read at home with their children, they may overlook the fact that not all families share the same linguistic, social, and cultural practices of book reading that many middle-class US families have (Gadsden 1996; Páez, Paratore Bock, & Pizzo 2001). To bridge linguistic and cultural differences the authors created a family literacy project.

The Family Literacy Project illustrates what schools, community organizations, and universities can achieve when they collaborate with families in using research-based practices to support DLLs' literacy development. During the program, the authors facilitated the family literacy sessions with the parents. This approach can have a positive impact on other children in the family and on multiple generations. Most importantly, the family unit is the most consistent educational variable for children whose families may move frequently.

The goal of the Family Literacy Project is to empower Latino parents to take an active role in their children's English language and literacy development. The project achieved this by working with the local university, two community-based organizations, and primary school staff.

**Starting up the program**

Mountainside Elementary, located in eastern Nebraska, has more than 400 students in pre-K through grade 5. The majority of students are from minority groups (71 percent), with 38 percent dual language learners (80 percent of those are Spanish speaking), and 87 percent of the children eligible for free or reduced-price meals. When the statewide test results were reported in the fall of 2008 they showed that student achievement at Mountainside did not meet state requirements. Members of the community, with the principal's support, realized the need for wider community involvement in the school system.

**Latino parents support children's cognitive development through daily interactions, household responsibilities, and family activities.**

We authors, as literacy professors at the local university with an interest in dual language learners and in elementary education, responded. We were keenly aware at the time that reading performance at the school was identified as needing improvement in certain student subgroups: Latino students from refugee and immigrant families, and students from families with low incomes. We decided to work with community organizations (Lincoln Literacy Council and El Centro de Las Americas) to develop the after-school program. Our collaboration would avoid placing additional burdens on teachers and administrators during the school day.

Through recommendations from kindergarten and first grade teachers of possible family participants, the authors invited a number of Latino families to participate in a voluntary after-school family reading program. Recruitment relied on Latino parents who are informal leaders and brought in the first wave of families. As word of the program spread, relatives and friends of the initial participants joined the weekly sessions.

The program relied on input from the families to choose the time and location. We held the meetings each Wednesday at 4:00 p.m. in the school library, which created a sense of continuity and belonging for the parents and children.
Implementing the program
During the six-week program, the authors used bilingual storybooks to guide Latino families through the fundamentals of supporting their children's English language and literacy development. The program consisted of six 90-minute sessions, with a flexible design that accommodated participants' previous literacy experiences.

Teaching in Spanish
We conducted the program in Spanish, enabling parents to participate fully and sending the message that we value the use of Spanish. Language experiences are more likely to be enriching when families communicate in their home language (Chitester 2007). Children's home language proficiency is a strong predictor of overall language development, and research repeatedly shows that literacy experiences in home languages transfer to English as children develop English literacy competency (Bialystok 2001; Goldenberg 2008; Cheatham & Ro 2010).

Tips for Teachers of Young Children
Following are features of the Family Literacy Project that early childhood teachers can incorporate in the classroom to help support children's English language and literacy development.

Maintain home language skills
- Reassure families that they can use their home language to support their children's literacy development.

Build a collection of bilingual books and resources to use in the classroom and at home
- Browse Scholastic's Club LEO (https://clubs2stg.scholastic.com/clubs/clubeo), a book club that offers many Spanish and bilingual materials, including classics and popular authors.
- Shop Bilingual Books for Kids, Inc. (www.bilingualbooks.com) for bilingual books with text appearing side by side.

Provide bilingual print materials to families
- Write communications to families in English and Spanish to show parents that their home language is valued and honored.

Model and discuss reading skills with families
- Include questions about comprehension and shared reading activities that families can do with storybooks when sending information home.

Provide tools to help families incorporate reading into their nightly routines
- Use reading logs to help parents record interactions with their children and books; parents can record the information in either Spanish or English.

Parents who are not confident in their English language usage often find it difficult to feel comfortable with and capable of helping their children with English-language experiences. Because the program valued the families' home language and showed appreciation for the role of literacy in their cultural practices, parents expanded their literacy skills and modeled these skills for their children.

Using bilingual children's books
Concern about literacy in the home language was accentuated by the limited availability of bilingual print materials in the school and local libraries. These materials allow Latino parents to rely on their own literacy skills while supporting their children's academic development, without ignoring the need to learn English themselves. Bilingual children's books enabled families to participate actively in the reading program and become literacy models for their children at home.

Research repeatedly shows that literacy experiences in home languages transfer to English as children develop English literacy competency.

The program provided a wide range of bilingual fiction and nonfiction books for parents to take and add to their home libraries (see "Bilingual Books Used in the Program," p. 44). Teachers can collect resources and promote their use by reading bilingual books in English and showing children the words written in other languages, reading bilingual books that highlight different cultures, and encouraging parents to write their own bilingual books.

Content
The program was not construed as remedial. The curriculum centered on dialogic reading—an interactive shared picture book reading practice designed to enhance vocabulary and oral language skills (Whitehurst & Lonigan 2001)—and was supported by research on English learners and shared reading. We focused on building a small and manageable set of powerful strategies to increase parents' confidence in supporting their children academically.

The first two program sessions emphasized the importance of maintaining the home language and discussed how to establish a reading routine in the home. We encouraged parents to discuss their current literacy practices and how those practices support the children's home language development with learning English. The parents also learned techniques to help them focus their children's attention on the text in the story (physical proximity, holding the book, and positive reinforcement).

Sessions 3 and 4 continued to foster parents' literacy knowledge and skills, which they could incorporate into
These sessions focused on asking questions (e.g., who, what, when, why, where, how; additional details; what could happen next) and methods for inviting children to make predictions throughout the story. The parents also learned how to extend and elaborate on their children's ideas about the story.

Session 5 focused on ways for families to find bilingual and other materials to support literacy, including using community resources such as the public library and other organizations. We encouraged parents to share where they find literacy resources in their community. Also, we discussed how parents can use wordless books and other printed materials to read to their children in their home language.

In the final session, we discussed the importance of writing and how writing and drawing can enhance children's understanding of storybooks. We asked parents to share ways they promote literacy in their home. We gave them blank notebooks and writing utensils to take home to encourage their children to write or draw their favorite parts of shared stories.

**Structure**

Each session followed the same sequence, which included active learning and modeling of a particular learning strategy, followed by practice with family members. We intentionally created a learning atmosphere where parents felt comfortable sharing their home literacy practices and experiences. By using the same instructional sequence each week and working closely with parents, we created a sense of community and inclusion for families.

**Children's program**

While families were learning critical reading strategies, preservice teacher volunteers engaged the
children in creative literacy activities, such as playing educational board games, writing stories with stickers and stamps, and creating and reading felt-board stories.

While parents were learning how to discuss books with their children, they were also promoting and maintaining their children's use of their home language.

The key to making the new family literacy strategies stick was practice and parent reflection time. The parents selected bilingual books and discussed strategies for sharing them with their children. Next came time to rehearse reading the books aloud, with suggestions and support from us. The children joined their families later in each session, and parents practiced the reading strategies they were learning with their children. We followed up by conducting a question-and-answer period after the parent-child time.

At the end of every session, we provided refreshments that participants could enjoy together. This helped everyone feel welcome and encouraged families to interact.

**Bilingual Books Used in the Program**

**Fiction**
- Bear in a Square/Oso en un cuadrado (2009), by Stella Blackstone, illus. by Debbie Harter
- Braids/Trencitas (2009), by Kathleen Contreras, illus. by Margaret Lindmark
- The Dog Who Loved Tortillas/La perrita que le encantaban las tortillas (2009), by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, illus. by Gerónimo García
- Goodnight Moon/Buenas noches, luna (2006), by Margaret Wise Brown, illus. by Clement Hurd
- Say It With Skippyjon Jones/Diga con Skippyjon Jones (2008), by Judy Schachner
- Words Are Not for Hurting/Las palabras no son para lastimar (2009), by Elizabeth Verdick, illus. by Marieka Heinlen

**Nonfiction**
- Fifty on the Zebra: Counting With the Animals/Cincuenta en la cebra: Contando con los animales (1994), by Nancy Maria Grande Tabor
- Hello Ocean/Hola mar (2003), by Pam Muñoz Ryan, illus. by Mark Astrella
- My House/Mi casa (2006), by Gladys Rosa-Mendoza, illus. by Hector Borlasca

**Lessons learned from families**

We conducted home visits during and after the program. The visits supported families in transferring learning strategies from the program to the home, and they allowed us to build on individual literacy skills, establish reading routines, and develop a personal rapport with the families. For example, one parent wanted to problem-solve about where the children should keep their growing number of bilingual books. She had stored them by the television set, and we suggested keeping the books in the children's room, in baskets, or combining all family reading materials in a home library. We gained a window to the personal and shared perspectives of individual family members, and the experiences and knowledge they bring to learning situations. The families enriched our understanding of family literacy practices, and we share some of the themes that emerged from home interviews and observations. The quotations in the following sections are from parents who participated in the Family Literacy Project.

**Parents and children teaching each other**

Whenever we have the opportunity we sit together and my son is at my side. I read in English and he says, "That is not the way it is said." I say, "That's okay." Now he is the one that is teaching me. Several parents were eager to better understand their children's language and literacy experiences. Through bilingual books, the families were able to build on their home literacy practices while supporting the learning and development of school-like literacy behaviors.

My son said, "Mom, I'm going to teach English to you while we read bilingual books." Sometimes he brings home something to read in English and Spanish. I read to him in Spanish and he pays attention. Afterward, I tell him to read in English and I ask him, "What does it say here in Spanish?" and he answers. This is the way I teach him, first I read it to him in Spanish and then he reads it to me in English.

Reading together provided opportunities for learning and opened the door to rich communication. While parents were learning how to discuss books with their children, they were also promoting and maintaining their children's use of their home language.

**Maintaining the home language**

My children gradually lost their Spanish after we came to the US. They can speak it but they cannot write it. I want them to know the letters. Parent comments reflected the difficulty some children have with maintaining their home language. Most thought it was extremely important but still wondered how it could be accomplished.
What I've seen is only English materials, but I think reading in both languages is better. They shouldn't forget their Spanish.

When learning a second language, the balance between the two languages constantly shifts. As the children learned English, their parents noticed them losing some of their home language. This was a major concern of the Latino families; they understood the importance of learning English, but they didn't want their children's Spanish to suffer.

Since these parents were learning English as a second language, they were not able to supply rich English-language experiences. They could, however, aid their children's literacy development by discussing books and other experiences in Spanish (Cheatham & Ro 2010).

**Final thoughts**

My children like reading a lot. Since they started the reading program, my son is always telling me that he wants to go to the library to get some books. Many educators recommend that families establish a reading routine to contribute to their children's literacy development. Some parents, however, may not have the resources, language, or knowledge to support their children's English literacy needs. We used Spanish instruction and bilingual books in the Family Literacy Project to answer the needs of the Latino families while reflecting on the value of Spanish in their children's schooling. Through the program, Latino families learned ways to contribute to the education of their children in the context of US schooling.

**References**


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Typical Session Sequence and Key Program Features

Welcome/overview of the family literacy session (5–10 minutes)
- Parents gather, share experiences, and talk about concerns and educational issues as they become a community of learners

Modeling and discussion of research-based reading strategies (25–35 minutes)
- Parents learn techniques, such as making predictions and asking questions, to help them engage with their children in dialogic reading
- Facilitators show parents how to use dialogic reading strategies by modeling, discussing, and sharing videos of the techniques
- Children, working with volunteers in another room, play phonics games, read orally and silently, engage in writing projects, and more

Transition to parent-and-child time (5–10 minutes)
- Parents choose bilingual storybooks to practice reading with their children and to take home
- Children transition to the library to read with their parents

Parents practice the targeted reading skill with their children, followed by question-and-answer time (20 minutes)
- Families interact with their children and apply the reading strategies they learned
- Parents ask facilitators questions about strategies and other educational issues
- Families practice shared reading with their children, helping adults develop confidence

Refreshments (10–20 minutes)
- Staff provide healthy snacks (crackers, cheese, juice, pretzels, carrot sticks, granola bars) for the families, and participants mingle, building a sense of community

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