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# Supporting English and Spanish Literacy Through a Family Literacy Program

*Stephanie Wessels*

## Abstract

Family literacy studies have shown that the role of parental storybook reading has an impact on children's success in school-based literacy instruction. However, many children who are English language learners come from homes or cultures where storybook readings are not common practice. The purpose of this qualitative research study explored the effects of an eight-week bilingual family literacy program for Latino, English learning families. Triangulation was assured through multiple sources of data: semistructured interviews conducted with participating parents; parent evaluation surveys; and researcher field notes. During the implementation of the bilingual family literacy program and the analysis of the data, three themes emerged: maintaining the first language, practicing what I have been taught, and the importance of time. Implications for educators are discussed.

Key Words: family literacy, English language learners, storybook reading, Latino, Spanish, bilingual program, families, parents, home, school, books

## Introduction

Family literacy studies have shown that parental storybook reading has an impact on children's success in school-based literacy instruction (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Researchers widely recommend storybook reading for promoting the early language development and literacy of children. By listening

to stories, children develop phonological processes, vocabulary, concepts of print, and written syntax, all of which are closely linked to learning to read and write (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). To increase children's storybook reading, many educators encourage parents to read to their children at home. However, for many parents who speak a language other than English, this might be a challenge for multiple reasons. English language learning parents may lack confidence in reading to their children due to lack of prior experience with shared book reading, limited literacy skills, or lack of English proficiency, thus supplying fewer English language experiences to children (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002). Many children who are English language learners (ELLs) come from homes or cultures where storybook readings may not be a common practice (Edwards, Paratore, & Roser, 2009); however, the parents are providing essential cognitive growth through daily interactions, household responsibilities, and family activities (Thomas & Collier, 2012). Latino parents provide their children with a wealth of family traditions, knowledge, and experiences, all of which facilitate the child's cognitive development.

The purpose of this study was to examine an eight-week bilingual (Spanish/English) family literacy program for Latino ELL families. This program was designed for Spanish-speaking parents who wished to use their native language while engaging in read-aloud activities that mirrored literacy techniques that their children were being exposed to in the school classroom. In this article, the term Latino will be used, which categorizes people who self-identify with terms such as Hispanic, Latino/a, Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban, as well as other Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino, according to the 2010 U.S. Census.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guides this study is drawn from several areas of research, including *dialogic reading*, *second language acquisition*, and *sociocultural perspective framework: zone of proximal development*.

Storybook reading, which involves caregivers and children reading a book together, is one way in which children can acquire important prereading skills, including vocabulary knowledge, awareness of print, and story structures (Snow et al., 1998). Shared reading often involves an adult and a child reading together; however, this can also be done with siblings supporting each other (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004). In this bilingual family literacy program, the adult was the person who guided and read the text to their child.

*Dialogic reading* (having a dialogue with the children when reading together) is an approach to storybook reading that has been shown in research studies to be helpful for children's language development (Whitehurst et al., 1988). Dialogic reading is based on the theory that practices using language, feedback

regarding language, and adult–child interactions with a storybook provide a way to facilitate young children’s language development. Some dialogic reading techniques are: to ask *wh*-questions, to follow correct answers with another question, to help the child as needed, to praise and encourage, to shadow the child’s interest, and to ask open-ended questions and expand the child’s comments (Hargrave & Senechal, 2000). The bilingual family literacy project’s curriculum was based on the strategies of dialogic reading that could be used during storybook reading at home as a way to build off what the parents were currently doing with literacy.

The bilingual family literacy program sessions were conducted in the ELL parents’ native language of Spanish to allow the parents to fully participate. This aspect of the program is built on Cummin’s *common underlying proficiency* model (CUP), which asserts that bilingual children’s “experience with either language can promote the development of the proficiency underlying both languages, given adequate motivation and exposure to both” (1981, p. 25). The model posits that children’s first and second languages are interdependent in terms of developing literacy in both languages. Research on the literacy development of ELLs suggests that language knowledge and skills acquired through the native language can be transferred to English, although degrees of language transfer vary depending on individual differences and their proficiency in the native language (Goldenberg, 2008). This is known as transference theory (Garcia & Jensen, 2007), which details how knowledge and language skills in the first language transfer to the second language. Development of the native language provides a basis for learning to read (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999) and contributes to English literacy development (Wong-Fillmore, 2000). The transfer theory is important because it points out how family literacy practices in one language (in this case, Spanish) can transfer to school outcomes in English (Farver, Xu, Eppe, & Lonigan, 2006).

Walters and Gunderson (1985) found that children whose parents read to them in their native language made similar gains in literacy as a native-English speaking group who were read to in English. This promotes additive bilingualism in which both English-language acquisition and the preservation of the native language are supported and valued (Cummins, 2001). Thus, more enriching language and literacy experiences are possible if parents use their most proficient and richest language to communicate (Chitester, 2007). Additionally, children who become fully developed in two languages enjoy cognitive advantages, especially in the areas of problem solving and linguistic competence (Baker, 2001).

Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory on how children develop language skills and gain new understandings through interactions with peers and adults

has changed the way children's interactions are conceptualized (Mooney, 2000). Vygotsky's perspective provides a natural framework within which early parent-child literacy interactions scaffold and support children's movement within their *zone of proximal development*. Vygotsky explained that the zone of proximal development is the distance between the actual developmental level of the children's abilities to solve a problem on their own and the potential development at which children can solve the problem with adult guidance. If the child does not fully understand the story, the parents can guide their child through the story by providing background knowledge and prior experiences. Parents and their children can make connections between themselves and the text which aids in their understanding of the story.

### **Developing a Bilingual Family Literacy Program**

The bilingual family literacy program studied was developed in conjunction with the local university, a community-based organization, and the staff at Harper Elementary (Note: All names in this article have been altered to protect the privacy of the participants). Harper Elementary has over 400 students in grades Pre-K through 5th grade. The school was a "majority minority school" (71% minority) with 38% ELLs (80% of those Spanish-speaking), and 87% of the school population was eligible for free/reduced meals. The results of the state test showed that student achievement in Harper Elementary was not meeting state requirements. The school was identified as "needing improvement" in reading performance in three subgroups: Latino students, low-socioeconomic status students, and refugee and immigrant students. The school's administrators wanted to support these particular subgroups and brought together community-based organizations and university faculty to brainstorm ways to improve the Latino students' performance.

We, the local university faculty members, developed a bilingual family literacy program that provided school reading techniques to Spanish-speaking Latino families through an afterschool program. Educators of Harper Elementary wanted families to support storybook reading at home; however, they had few opportunities to share reading strategies with parents at the school. In addition to the family literacy sessions, home visits by the author and a translator were also conducted with the family participants. The home visits allowed the parents to share what literacy practices were currently being used in the home so we could build on this critical knowledge and bridge it with the families' new literacy learnings. The home visit research will be shared in a future article.

There was great concern over this bilingual family literacy program not being enacted through a deficit model where the families were only told to participate in school reading activities and not valued for the current home

activities which were already nurturing the literacy development of their children. Also, in a 2001 family literacy study, Janes and Kermani reported that they had to abandon their dialogic reading intervention study because the school literacy practices used in the program did not fit the literacy practices of that community. Instead, for our bilingual family literacy program, a reciprocal approach was adopted on the understanding that the school-related literacy practices would be encouraged and modeled while also learning about and integrating the parents' existing knowledge and resources into the program. Some researchers have argued that when schools actively attempt to link children's home and school literacies, students' literacy development is facilitated (e.g., Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Neuman & Roskos, 1992).

The afterschool bilingual family literacy program was intended to avoid placing too much burden on the teachers and administrators who were focusing on improving instruction throughout the school day. It was essential for the program to happen on school grounds as a way to bridge home and school ideas, so the same space in the elementary school library was used for each session to create a sense of continuity and belonging for the parents and children.

Latino families were recruited through recommendations from the preschool and kindergarten teachers and invited to participate in the voluntary afterschool family reading program. We started to inform parents about the program through nonconventional ways such as sending notes home in Spanish, making phone calls, home visits, and visiting community centers and other community locations that were frequented by Latino families within the neighborhood. As time went on, word of the bilingual family literacy program spread throughout the Latino community, and soon relatives and friends of the first participants also came to participate in the weekly sessions.

### **Overview of the Bilingual Family Literacy Sessions**

In the eight-week program, each weekly session was designed to provide Latino parents with the fundamentals of supporting their children's literacy development through the use of bilingual storybooks. Each session focused on building a small subset of read-aloud literacy strategies that allowed home-school continuity for the children. The literacy strategies learned throughout the program were selecting age-appropriate books; read-aloud activities; supportive reading attitude; language rich environment; and how to invite children's comments, predictions, and questions about the story (see Table 1).

Table 1. Bilingual Family Literacy Curriculum

Session	Topic and Description of the Session
Sessions 1 & 2	Raising a bilingual child & creating a language rich home environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We examined the importance of parents encouraging and supporting their children’s effort to learn English while maintaining their native language.</li> <li>• We discussed ways that parents can create a rich language environment at home in the family’s native language.</li> </ul>
Session 3	Reading with your child: where, when, and how <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents were given the rationale to help them understand the importance of reading to their children in their native language.</li> <li>• Parents learned a variety of techniques to help them enhance their children’s attention to text in the story.                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Promoting and maintaining physical proximity</li> <li>○ Sustaining child’s interest and attention through the use of positive affect and reinforcement</li> <li>○ Giving child opportunities to hold the book and turn pages</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Session 4	Asking questions about the text in the storybook <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents learned how to expand their children’s experiences through a variety of questioning techniques (e.g., who, what, when, where, why, how; additional details; what could happen next?).</li> </ul>
Session 5	Inviting children’s comments and predictions in the story <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents learned how to elicit predictions from their children and how to extend and elaborate on children’s ideas.</li> </ul>
Session 6	Selecting and reading bilingual or other storybooks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents discussed where they found storybooks for their children.</li> <li>• We discussed ways of using wordless books and other printed material to read to the children in their native language.</li> </ul>
Session 7	Creating meaningful writing experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents discussed ways that they promote writing in the home environment.</li> <li>• Parents learned how to encourage writing/drawing skills from their children after reading a story.</li> </ul>
Session 8	SKIES: Sharing Knowledge in English and Spanish <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebration of the program</li> </ul>

The first two sessions created a context for biliteracy and the importance of maintaining the native language in the home environment, which laid the foundation for the rest of the sessions. Sessions 3 and 4 continued to build parents’ literacy knowledge and skills to incorporate into their parent–child routines. Sessions 5 and 6 focused on finding bilingual materials and other



materials to support literacy; the use of community resources such as the public library was highly encouraged. In session 7, the importance of writing was discussed and how writing/drawing can be used to enhance a child's understanding of the book. The last session was a celebration of the program.

Each of the 80–90 minute sessions followed the same instructional sequence (see Table 2) that was based on active learning and modeling followed by practice among family members. Although the content of sessions changed, parents and children knew what to expect each time they attended the program. We tried to intentionally create a learning atmosphere where the parents, who were becoming instructional leaders, focused with their children on a particular reading strategy that could be easily extended to their home environment. Also, it was critical that the parents had an opportunity to reflect on and discuss among themselves the ways in which literacy affected their lives. Educators such as Freire and Macedo (1987) have written on the critical links between literacy, self-development, and empowerment.

While the parents were sharing and learning literacy development activities led by the bilingual instructor and myself, their children were engaged in other creative literacy activities with preservice teachers. After spending time learning and discussing the literacy strategies, the parents had the opportunity to work one-on-one with their child and rehearse the reading strategies previously learned and discussed in the session. This time was used to start creating a parent and child “bonding experience” over the chosen bilingual books to help the literacy experience carry over into the home environment. This applied practice of the reading strategies allowed scaffolding to assist the parents in becoming comfortable with this process and to be extended to the home setting.

At the end of every session, refreshments were provided to help everyone feel welcome and less in a hurry to rush and feed the family. By providing refreshments, the parents were able to continue to build a connection with one another. While not in any way original, the instructors and the volunteers found that the inclusion of some food was instrumental in recruiting families and creating a sense of community and celebration.

Since the parent participants were Spanish-dominant speakers and had varying levels of education, literacy, and English proficiency, the program was conducted in Spanish. The bilingual staff would communicate, interpret, translate, and scribe words in both languages for the parents and children. This enabled parents to fully participate in each session while sending the message that Spanish was valued. By valuing the parents' native language and appreciating the role of literacy in cultural practices, parents could expand their own literacy skills and promote a positive attitude towards literacy.



Table 2. Typical Session Sequence and Key Program Features

Time Period	Activity and Key Program Features
5–10 minutes	<p>Welcome/introduction/overview of the day</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents were able to gather and share experiences as they built a community of learners. Also, parents felt comfortable sharing concerns and questions about educational issues.</li> </ul>
25–35 minutes	<p>Model and discussion of research-based reading strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents were given a variety of techniques to help them read to their children, such as making predictions, asking questions, and understanding the importance of reading to their children.</li> <li>• The instructional reading strategies incorporated in the curriculum included modeling, discussion, videos, and interactive activities.</li> <li>• During this time, children were working with volunteers on other literacy activities such as phonics games, reading orally or silently, writing projects, etc.</li> </ul>
5–10 minutes	<p>Transition to parent and children time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bilingual books were given to parents to practice with their children and take home.</li> <li>• While the parents were selecting books, their children transitioned from the childcare room to the library to read with their parents.</li> </ul>
20 minutes	<p>Practice time (parents practice the targeted reading skill with their children) and Question &amp; Answer time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This time allowed for the parents to interact with their child and apply the reading strategies learned.</li> <li>• Parents were able to ask questions about the strategies or other educational issues.</li> <li>• Practice time helped to develop a sense of confidence among the participants.</li> </ul>
10–20 minutes	<p>Refreshment time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Healthy snacks were provided for the families participating in the program (e.g., crackers, cheese, juice, pretzels, carrot sticks, and granola bars).</li> <li>• This allowed for more community building among the program participants.</li> </ul>

The use of bilingual books (Spanish/English) was key to enabling parents to participate in the reading program and act as literacy models for their children while at home. Throughout the program, there was a wide range of fiction and nonfiction bilingual books for the parents to select from for their children. The

parents were able to read to their child in Spanish, and the children were able to move easily between Spanish and English in the books. Researchers Rueda, MacGillivray, Monzo, and Arzubiaga (2001) found that Latino children whose parents actively pursued literacy in Spanish and English tended to value reading more than those whose families did not.

At the end of each session, parents were given three bilingual books to support the use of newly acquired literacy strategies at home and to start building their personal library. The bilingual books were used during the parent–child time together, which allowed them to get familiar with the text, thus helping to assure success. Also, the bilingual books were supplied to the classroom teachers so the children would have familiarity with some of the books in the classroom. The books were secured through an internally funded university grant and purchased through a book order program.

### **My Role as a Researcher**

Before turning to the study, I want to acknowledge my role as a researcher on the project. Because I am European American and from the Midwestern United States, I positioned myself as a curriculum developer, participant observer, and as a learner in relation to the Latino family participants. I have worked with ELLs as a teacher, educator, and researcher with a working knowledge of Spanish. For this project, I also assumed the role of a learner. I assumed the family members had more knowledge about their lives and literacy experiences, and I recognized how my racial and cultural positioning impact how information can be represented and interpreted. During the sessions, I was able to observe the interactions and record information.

### **The Study**

This article highlights the results of the bilingual family literacy program. The participants included 17 mothers and 31 children who were enrolled at Harper Elementary school in grades Preschool–Kindergarten whose first language was Spanish. All family members were invited to participate; however, all of the participants who attended the sessions were mothers or other female family members. Harper Elementary is located in a high-poverty community and has a high ethnic/racial minority and ELL student enrollment. All of the families spoke Spanish as the primary language at home. The children were acquiring Spanish as their first language primarily at home while simultaneously being introduced to English in the school setting.

Some of the students were born in Mexico and others in the United States. Many of the parents had several years of education in their home countries,

while others had only a few years of formal education. Several of the participating families came from various parts of Mexico (both rural and urban settings), while most of the families had lived for extended periods in various parts of the United States. All of the families were intact with all immediate family members living in the United States, and all were two-parent families.

### **Data Sources and Analysis**

The current study used a qualitative, constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), using open coding techniques and a systematic process of analyzing textual data to identify themes within the results of the bilingual family literacy program. Triangulation was assured through multiple sources of data: individual semistructured interviews were conducted with participating parents; parent evaluation surveys of each bilingual family literacy session; and researcher field notes that provided contextual information (Agar, 1996).

#### *Semistructured Interviews*

After the first session of the bilingual family literacy program, each parent participant in the project was interviewed in their home setting. The semistructured interviews supplied information about specific family situations as well as parental perceptions and exceptions on the uses and functions for literacy in their daily lives. The questions were used to gain an understanding of how parents used literacy with their children, how they perceived literacy, and the support they offered their children. The semistructured interviews, conducted in Spanish, were transcribed and translated. Each semistructured interview was 20–30 minutes in length and took place within the participant's home. The areas of interest in the semistructured interviews were parents' beliefs in literacy learning, attitudes towards bilingualism, and literacy practices.

#### *Parent Evaluation Survey*

Participating parents completed an evaluation survey after each session. The parents had time to reflect on the information shared during that particular session and how literacy affects their lives. Every week on the survey they were asked to complete or respond to the following: (1) what I liked best was...; (2) the most important thing I learned was...; (3) I will try at home...; and (4) questions I still have about reading with my child. In addition, parents were able to record their thoughts on and frequencies of reading with their children at home. Each evaluation was written in Spanish and then translated into English after each session.

#### *Field Notes*

Finally, the last data source was the researcher field notes, reflections, and observations. After each session, observational notes were made about comments

and situations that the parents discussed during the sessions, semistructured interviews, and other home visits. This process helped the researcher to recall important conversations and issues that happened during interactions with the participating parents.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of the data was guided by general strategies including reading the data for a sense of the whole, documenting reflections, coding, and developing themes and patterns from the data and codes (Creswell, 2008). I began by transcribing the interviews. After all of the interviews were transcribed, I started a preliminary exploratory analysis of the transcripts, program evaluations, and field notes. Starting with open coding (Creswell, 2007) and following Tesch's (1990) systematic process of analyzing textual data, I started by taking notes in the margins of the text to identify patterns and categories. This helped to start making sense of the data and establish connections. Next, I used color-coding techniques to develop a list of 10 tentative codes. After this step, I continued constantly reviewing the data to reduce and combine categories into three themes.

Also, I did a member check (Patton, 2002) by asking the bilingual interpreter and several parent participants for their feedback on the findings. I was able to member check with three of the parent participants (Dora, Saida, Christina); while these participants concurred with my interpretations, they also reflected on and encouraged me to consider future bilingual family literacy programs and sessions to extend their learning.

### **Findings and Discussion**

During the implementation of the bilingual family literacy program and the analysis of the data, three themes emerged: *maintaining the first language, practicing what I have been taught*, and *the importance of time*.

#### **Maintaining the First Language**

*Maintaining the first language* was a theme that emerged from the data suggesting that when it came to learning another language, the balance between the two languages was constantly shifting. Many of the parents mentioned that they did not realize that reading to their children in Spanish would benefit their children's educational foundation. For example, Alicia wrote: "I learned how I must read to my children and to know that it is OK that I read to them in Spanish." Similarly, Bethany commented, "That I'm doing the right thing teaching my daughter the language I know and speak, which is Spanish."

Finally, Dora said, “I need to keep on helping my children read and write with the school work and read to them in Spanish to make sure they don’t forget.” Throughout the bilingual family literacy program, parents discussed the fact that they observed their children losing hold on their first language and were starting to find ways through storybook reading to maintain Spanish in the home environment.

In the early sessions of the family literacy program, we discussed the importance of the children developing a strong foundation in their native language and how the language, knowledge, and skills would transfer into the second language, English. Native language proficiency is a strong predictor of overall language development, and research has repeatedly shown that literacy experiences in native languages will transfer to English as the child develops English literacy competency (Goldenberg, 2008). The participating parents were reassured that Spanish was an asset rather than an obstacle to helping their children acquire the second language.

Also, it was a critical part of the bilingual family literacy program to use and give the parents bilingual books to read to their children in the home environment. The children in the program were being raised in a Spanish-speaking home environment; however, they were being schooled in an environment dominated by English print with limited access to Spanish materials. One of the questions asked of parents during the semistructured interviews was how many storybooks they had in their homes. All of the participants indicated having 15 or fewer storybooks in the home (in any language), and 15 of the 17 mothers were not accustomed to sharing books in any language with their children. The parents understood school expectations such as storybook reading and reinforcing classroom learning; however, many of them did not have the resources to meet these expectations. Instead, the parents were naturally stimulating and developing their children’s cognitive growth through daily interactions (e.g., discussing daily activities and giving moral support), household duties (e.g., shopping and cooking), and family activities (e.g., telling stories, going places, and celebrating together; Thomas & Collier, 2012). This cognitive development is critical to continue building the child’s thought processes through interacting in the native language, which provides a foundational knowledge base for the children.

Throughout the bilingual family literacy program, each family was given 15–20 bilingual books. It was important for the parents to continue to use the discussed strategies and establish a daily reading routine in the home environment. By providing bilingual books for the parents, we tried to increase their home literacy library while maintaining the children’s first language as they developed their second language.

### Practicing What I Have Been Taught

The theme of *practicing what I have been taught* was a critical understanding of the parents participating in the program. For many parents in the program, they would notice that their children were reading or looking at a book, but they did not read with their children. Many of the parents also indicated that they were interested and eager to help their children; however, they needed help with particular strategies and access to resources to support their children's literacy development. Throughout all of the bilingual family literacy program sessions, parents learned critical elements on how to keep their children engaged in meaningful conversations about the storybook through asking questions, pointing out special features of the illustrations, and pointing to words as they are read to the children. For example, Marisol commented, "I learned how to have a conversation about the book with my son. I started to find the books interesting." Marisol and other parent participants shared comments about the different reading activities that they had been trying with their children at home since the start of the bilingual family literacy program. Parent-child reading provides opportunities for positive interactions and opens the door to discussion, communication, and enjoyment for everyone.

Another parent, Cristina, wrote, "Now I always ask her different questions about what we have read. The oldest always asks me 'why' throughout the story, and my youngest likes me to imitate the sounds of things." Cristina had indicated that before the program, she would just read the story and be done because the children were not very interested. However, she now incorporates a variety of questions to support their literacy learning and voices to keep them interested in the story.

Dora commented, "I can help my daughter because now I have new ideas and more enthusiasm than before." This suggested that the parents were benefiting from the information on the literacy strategies and activities learned throughout the program and had confidence in their implementation in the home, which will foster the development of literacy skills for their children. The parents indicated that they left the bilingual family literacy program with a better understanding of how to support their children's reading development and were given more ideas on how to naturally incorporate them while reading to their children. Diana commented, "You have helped me to put my children first and to spend more time reading with them." Many of the parents indicated that they increased their appreciation for reading with their children while feeling that they were promoting the cognitive and language development of their children.

### Importance of Time

Many parent participants indicated the *importance of time* as something that they had not considered when reading with their children. “Spend a bit more time, without hurrying, and I will make it pleasant so that they enjoy it,” commented Maria. When Maria was initially interviewed, she talked about how, when reading with her daughter, she would try to get through the book quickly; however, she changed her approach to the storybook reading time through the bilingual family literacy program. She started to take more time and engaged her daughter with the bilingual stories. Throughout the bilingual family literacy program, parents were encouraged to give their children opportunities to share their thinking about the story and spend time talking about the illustrations and text, ask questions, and make predictions about the text. This was something that many parents had indicated that they did not take the time to do previously until they realized the importance of spending quality, focused time reading with children.

The parents in the program started to make the connection that setting aside time in the day to read and share books with their children was an important habit to develop in the home to form a basis toward lifelong learning. As the parents spent more time sharing and reading books, they felt that they were adding more to their children’s classroom learning by engaging in literacy practices that closely related to school activities that their children were experiencing. Throughout program participation, parents would self-report the frequency in which they were reading with their children. By the end of the program, parents consistently self-reported engaging their children in storybook reading at least 4–5 times each week, which was a significant increase from the self-reports during the semi-informal interviews at the beginning of the program.

One mother, Reina, said she would “improve the time that I spend with her [daughter], and read the same book again even if I already read it.” Many of the parents had the same feelings that Reina expressed. They did not realize how beneficial it was to reread a story to their children. Dora commented, “We have read and talked about the story many times. He cannot read, and sometimes he memorizes the text, and he knows what is written on every page.” Through repeated readings, children are able to gain comprehension, interest in language, and vocabulary knowledge. This was a powerful message for the parents to learn about during their time in the bilingual family literacy program.



## Conclusion

Due to ever-changing school demographics, it has become increasingly important for U.S. schools to support Latino families and children. Parents must be made to feel like they have a vital role in the development of their child's literacy. The bilingual family literacy program demonstrated that Latino parents are interested in and capable of supporting their children's literacy development. The program built on the native language strengthened and addressed the reading techniques of school so that Latino parents could model them at home. This helped to create a home-school connection for the students. It was critical to provide Latino parents with an opportunity to preview and discuss the ways to support their children's language and literacy development during the program's sessions. Finally, the bilingual family literacy program provided a place where parents developed strategies for positive literacy modeling for their children while increasing their own self-confidence to participate more fully in their children's education.

The bilingual family literacy program we studied placed the value on literacy, availability and use of bilingual reading materials, and parent-child storybook reading. As teachers and researchers, we cannot assume that all children who are ELLs come from homes that do not have materials and do not share book reading in the home. However, we can assume that families will be culturally and linguistically different, children will have different experiences with literacy, and that their experiences can be strengths and assets to learning in school. This program was best summarized by Saida, a parent participant:

To know that people like you are interested in the problems we parents have related to reading with our children—I realized that all of us have the same problems with our children who speak two languages. I made several new friends and gained new ways to read to my children.

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