

Developing Inclusive Multilingual Family Literacy Projects

Lisa M. Dorner, Edwin Bonney, Lina Trigos-Carrillo, Kim Song, and Sujin Kim

University of Missouri-Columbia

• Cambio Center

• October 2018

Families and teachers play important roles in children's literacy development (Orellana, 1996), but often times, immigrant, refugee, and multilingual families' cultural and linguistic resources are not recognized or valued by schools (Kinloch, Larson, Orellana & Lewis, 2016). In turn, some educators are using community literacy programs to both acknowledge and support culturally and linguistically diverse families (Vera, 2012). However, schools continue to face difficulties designing multilingual events that fully integrate



parents, their children, and educators (Clymer, Toso, Grinder & Sauder, 2017). Too many schools design programs thinking that they will address and solve families' deficits, rather than approaching family literacy projects as opportunities to learn about the assets that culturally and linguistically

diverse families bring to school communities. This e-brief describes one school's attempt to create a unique, asset-based multilingual literacy project. We discuss the challenges that occurred, and conclude with recommendations for multilingual, community-based literacy programs.

“ Upon seeing the invitation on university letterhead, some parents felt the event would be too professional and technical because the co-organizers were professors at the local university. One parent said, “This is the first time I attend something like this and I was thinking, we are making something like this! (Holds up a published storybook.) And I felt intimidated when I saw that [the letter of invitation] was from the university.”

”

Suggested citation: Dorner, L., Bonney, E., Trigos-Carrillo, L., Song, K., and Kim, S. (2018). Developing inclusive multilingual family literacy projects. Cambio Center eBrief. University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.



Cambio Center
University of Missouri

The Multilingual Family Literacy Project

Our *Multilingual Family Literacy Project* was designed in collaboration with a language immersion school in the Midwest that we call the Spanish Immersion Elementary School (SIES). At the time of our partnership, SIES was a one-way or foreign-language immersion school serving kindergarten to fifth grades. Providing the majority of instruction in Spanish through second grade (at which point students attended an English Language Arts class each day), SIES was designed primarily for native English speakers to learn and study their content material in Spanish. However, with a diverse population that included many native Spanish speakers as well as African American youth, there was not one dominant home language across the student body (see Figure 1). The school was rich in language varieties and cultural diversity. Ultimately, SIES aimed to graduate biliterate students with academic proficiency in Spanish and English, and they wanted to develop a family literacy project that honored and built upon families' backgrounds and languages.

In turn, we worked with SIES to develop a Multilingual Family Literacy Project, which included one major introductory event for the entire school and a series of workshops for a small number of families. In contrast to traditional family literacy programs, our project was designed with the following ethos.

First, rather than provide a training for parents in "how to read" or job skills, we wanted to bring parents into a multilingual space where they had an opportunity to demonstrate the knowledges and capacities that they already had. This is what Vaughn W. M. Watson (2018) calls "Already-Present" multi-literacy practices. In fact, we viewed this as an opportunity for the parents to "train" the educators and other families in the room on their rich backgrounds, literacies, and languages. Second, we did not develop a project geared only toward parents. Instead, in a series of workshops that occurred after the school-wide storytelling event, parents and children would work together to create storybooks. With this design, we hoped that parents and children could exchange their own diverse languages and literacies, learning from each other by using various modes of communication. This was important, because in this environment, many of the children were learning various ways of speaking and being that differed from their home literacies and languages. For example, children from monolingual English-speaking families were learning Spanish and being immersed in a variety of cultural practices from Latin America. Meanwhile, the students who were from immigrant, Spanish-speaking homes were being immersed in U.S. cultural norms and English while at school. Thus, not only did teachers and families have a lot to learn from each other, but so did parents and children.

The following sections describe the development and aims of this project by explaining our key steps and considerations in: (1) planning the project; (2) recruiting parents; (3) offering an initial schoolwide bilingual storytelling event; and (4) leading subsequent parent-child storybook workshops.

Figure 1: SIES Student Population

15% native Spanish speakers
55% African American
30% non-Hispanic White
50% free and reduced lunch (a marker of lower-income families)

Key Considerations

What we did: We brainstormed with school leaders and a range of stakeholders to learn more about the context, expertise available, and local perspectives. This helped us recognize which questions we should not ask families. It also led to including the school's own published author serving as a core workshop facilitator. In addition, the team leading the event came from various cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds.

What we recommend: We should have included a family member or child in the planning stages to accommodate a wider range of perspectives and to further consider parents' availability and interest in this kind of project.

Step 1: Planning the Project

To plan our project, two leaders from the university (authors Lisa and Kim) met multiple times with the school principal, literacy specialist, and a teacher who had recently self-published a bilingual children's book. Together, we decided to: (1) privilege the Spanish language in our activities (using Spanish first and translating to English second); (2) include at least one-third of family participants from multilingual and/or immigrant backgrounds; and (3) document family stories, but not explicitly ask, "How did you migrate here?" We wanted to capture families' experiences and histories, but given the current political context, educators at SIES advised us against explicitly asking about family migration, as that could be threatening to some of their immigrant parents.

Ultimately, we decided the Multilingual Family Literacy Project would include the following: (1) a professional, Spanish-English bilingual storyteller who would present to the entire student population on the school's annual day celebrating literacy, reading, and writing; (2) an initial workshop and luncheon following the storyteller for a subset of parents, children, and teachers; and (3) a series of subsequent workshops for parents and children interested in developing and publishing their own multilingual storybook. Multiple bilingual educators from both SIES and the university supported the event; they came from diverse backgrounds in the U.S., Ghana, Korea, Mexico, and China.

Step 2: Recruiting Parents

We wanted to recruit about 20 parents with their children to attend the bilingual storytelling event and initial storybook writing workshop. We sent home flyers printed on university letterhead to parents, via their children's backpacks, in Spanish and English, about these activities. The English-as-a-Second-Language teacher called each immigrant family whose child she served in pull-out English classes. In addition, we offered transportation, childcare for younger siblings, and a luncheon for the families who could attend.

The overall response from parents was positive, with many expressing their interest. Eventually, we had nearly 20 participants confirmed for the first workshop and luncheon, including one German and one Taiwanese family, as well as three children whose fathers spoke Spanish as their native language.

Key Considerations

What we did: We offered childcare, transportation, and lunch. We also provided invitations in multiple languages (Spanish, English) and in many forms, including letters, emails, phone calls, and direct invitations from teachers.

What we recommend: Our invitation did not come from a trusted educator or cultural broker at the school; instead, it came from an outside/university "official." Although we informed families through many formats, we should have also worked with bilingual liaisons, cultural brokers, and/or children – people who are closer to families. Many parents later told us that they attended the event mainly because their child wanted them to! In addition, we offered a special, one-time family literacy project, but we would recommend making family literacy events a typical part of the annual school schedule.

Step 3: Schoolwide Bilingual Storytelling Event and Luncheon

SIES's special literacy day started with an informal luncheon that included university educators, supporting teachers, and 13 parents and their children. Then, along with the entire student population, we listened to a professional storyteller, who animated a fairy tale in Spanish. The story was very expressive, with multiple props and gestures, so even parents who did not understand Spanish could grasp the main ideas.

After the storyteller finished, we ran our first storybook workshop with 13 mothers and their children. About half of the mothers were African-American, one was Taiwanese, and the remaining identified as White. Although we did not meet our goal to include at least one-third of multilingual or Spanish-speaking participants, three mothers who attended had spouses of Hispanic/Latino origin.

At this first workshop, we talked about why we tell stories, especially family stories, and how these relate to our identities. Then, an SIES teacher who had recently published a bilingual children's storybook discussed the process of creating it. After that, parents and their children worked in small groups with one of the professors or graduate students from the university. All support staff were bilingual. Using example books, markers, colorful papers, and other materials, children and parents together brainstormed ideas for their storybooks.

Key Considerations

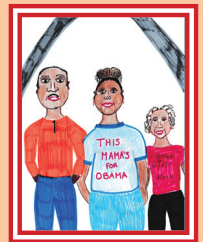
What we did: We designed a storytelling event that privileged Spanish, even though most of the family participants (mothers) who attended primarily spoke English.

What we recommend: Offer future bilingual events where children and families present their books in multiple languages, and connect bilingual storytelling events like these to the curriculum. Such activities could happen within classrooms, rather than for the entire school.

Step 4: Parent-Child Storybook Workshops

At the end of the initial workshop, we invited families to come back if they wanted to continue developing and ultimately publish their storybooks. We arranged four follow-up workshops with five mothers and their children. Ultimately, four of these mother-child pairs completed bilingual storybooks that we published. All books addressed family stories or histories in some way.

(1) *The Women's March* was written as a series of alternating diary entries, discussing the mother's and the child's different experiences going to women's marches.

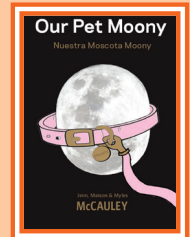


(2) *What Do You Know About the Outside World?* was written from the child's perspective, where she reported the languages and cultural backgrounds of some of her classmates and her mother.



(3) *Delightful Dinosaur Dreams* was a rhyming, fantastic story also told from the child's perspective, where he explained how his mother and father fell in love and worked in the U.S. army.

(4) *Our Pet Mooney* followed a traditional style for young readers, as it told a recurring family story about the moon and how it always followed them around at night.



After the books were published each mother-child pair presented their stories to SIES classrooms. Classmates were thrilled to see their friends, and sometimes themselves, portrayed in the books. They proclaimed: "I want to write a storybook!"

Concluding Recommendations

It goes without saying: parents play an important role in children's education, educación (growth and development), and literacy practices. Rather than "training" parents to support their children's learning, we believe that creating spaces for parents and children to work together, spell, utter, write, draw, speak, share, invent, and experiment with language and ideas allows parents and children to be animated, learn from each other, and enjoy learning (Kinloch et al., 2016). We review the most important key considerations for family literacy projects here.

Consider the audience, know the context. When designing family literacy events, we must be aware of the community context, the languages used, the meaning of translations, and the families' availability. Educators must choose words carefully in invitations. For example, in Spanish, the word "literacy" is usually translated as "alphabetization," which may suggest an event focused on basic reading and writing skills, rather than a rich sociocultural perspective of literacy. It is easier to recognize subtle translation differences like this when invitations are developed and come from cultural/linguistic brokers of a community. Coordinators of multilingual literacy projects should work within family networks to develop such connections, who can also help schools decide the best timing, locations, and topics for such events.

Develop regularly scheduled literacy activities where parents and children take the lead. Literacy events and other family engagement activities should become a regular part of a child's school life. Activities like these could happen on a monthly or weekly basis, and they should happen in a variety of places and at various times, to allow for wide participation. For example, coordinators might consider (1) having parents read with children during "morning circle" time or an after-school program; (2) gathering at a community center with the principal on Sunday; or (3) inviting parents to observe children's end-of-unit presentations.

Educators can also ask families if they want to lead or support an activity related to their hometown or country. For instance, during the celebration Día de los muertos in Mexico, people compose short

poems dedicated to the dead called calaveras. However, in considering such options, do not make assumptions about families' literacy practices. They may or may not take part in what are considered typical festivities of their countries of origin. Dig deep, gather ideas from families, and be flexible in considering all the ways people work with language and literacies. Think broadly about literacy as including: recording family recipes, making shopping lists, telling family jokes, and so on.

In conclusion, family literacy programs are more successful when they center on family experiences (Scribner & Fernández, 2017) and their situated identities, and when they are part of a sustained long-term program that allows different community members—teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, children and other educators—to work together, share experiences, and create new knowledge. Asking, valuing, and legitimizing children and family strengths is central to this work, for we all can learn when no one has the ultimate word about what counts as knowledge (Booker & Goldman, 2016).

References

- Booker, A., & Goldman, S. (2016). Participatory design research as a practice for systemic repair: Doing hand-in-hand math research with families. *Cognition and Instruction, 34*(3), 222-235.
- Clymer, C., Toso, B. W., Grinder, E., & Sauder, R. P. (2017). Changing the course of family literacy. University Park, PA: Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy. Retrieved from <https://ed.psu.edu/goodling-institute/policy/changing-the-course-of-family-literacy>
- Kinloch, V., Larson, J., Orellana, M. F., & Lewis, C. (2016). Literacy, equity, and imagination: Researching with/In communities. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice, 65*(1), 94-112.
- Orellana, M. F. (1996). Aquí vivimos! Voice of Central American and Mexican participants in a family literacy project. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students, 16*, Online: <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/jeilms/vol16/jeilms1608.htm>.
- Scribner, S. M., & Fernández, E. (2017). Organizational politics of parental engagement: The intersections of school reform, anti-immigration policies, and Latinx parent organizing. *Educational Policy, 31*(6), 895-920.
- Vera, E. M.-L. (2012). Exploring the educational involvement of parents of English learners. *School Community Journal, 22*(2), 183-202.
- Watson, V. W. (2018). Building literate identities on what already exists. *English Journal, 107*, 10-13.

Lisa M. Dorner

University of Missouri-Columbia

Edwin Bonney

University of Missouri-Columbia

Lina Trigos-Carillo

University of Missouri-Columbia

Kim Song

University of Missouri-St. Louis

Sujin Kim

George Mason University

Correspondence to dornerl@missouri.edu