

iPreparados, Listos, Ya!:

An Interpretative Case Study Centered on Teaching Hispanic Parents to Support Early Bilingual Literacy Development Prior to Kindergarten

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Abstract/Resumen

A parent training program pilot designed and implemented to develop early literacy skills of bilingual Hispanic pre-kindergarten students is described and analyzed through a case study approach. The program incorporated parent collaboration, bilingual literacy training and accessible literary themes to improve literacy prior to kindergarten. Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning- third edition (DIAL-3) screening scores and qualitative evidence document the program's significant impact.

Se trata de un programa piloto de entrenamiento para padres, diseñado y llevado a cabo para desarrollar la temprana capacidad de leer y escribir de niños hispanicos preescolares, y que ha sido descrito y analizado a través de un estudio monográfico. El programa incluyó la colaboración de los padres, el entrenamiento para una alfabetización bilingüe y temas literarios accesibles para mejorar dicha alfabetización antes de entrar al jardín de infancia. Las puntuaciones mostradas por el *Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning- third edition*

(DIAL-3) y la evidencia cualitativa documentan el significativo impacto del programa.

Keywords/Palabras claves: bilingual parent involvement, kindergarten readiness, community-based literacy, achievement; colaboración de los padres bilingües, preparación de jardín de infancia, alfabetismo basado en la comunidad, rendimiento

Introduction

Many school districts in the United States (US) struggle to address the needs of English language learners (ELLs) upon their arrival at school. However, waiting until they enter school may be too late, especially for ELLs that have other socio-economic and/or psychological factors that conspire against achievement in school and the acquisition of English. For example, some socio-economic factors that would affect school readiness include: economic resources, immigration status, parents' educational level, geographic location (urban, suburban or rural), stability of family unit and mobility. In order to try to address the needs of this population, the Director of ELL Programs and several English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) teachers in the City of Bronx River Falls, a small urban school district in New York State, designed a program to teach parents about the literacy skills needed for success in kindergarten.

The program is called the Kindergarten- Providing Academic Skills and Strategies (K-PASS) Program and it has three steps. First, at kindergarten registration which takes place in the spring prior to entrance to kindergarten the following fall, incoming ELL kindergarteners in need of literacy support and who speak Spanish are identified. Second, the parents of the identified ELL kindergarteners participate in three literacy strategy workshops, given in Spanish. Parents are encouraged to use the literacy strategies taught in the workshops with their children during the summer months. Third, in the fall, upon entrance to kindergarten, the children are reassessed for the pre-requisite literacy skills known to be necessary for literacy development in kindergarten. The project's results demonstrate a successful approach to remediating the achievement gap of ELLs by involving parents in the learning process prior to formal schooling in the US.

Theoretical Perspective

Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) write extensively about language socialization. Schieffelin (1990) theorizes that through "the give and take of everyday life" children experience language socialization. Essentially, the K-PASS Program attempts to train parents to actively socialize children towards early literacy skills, concepts and understandings. Theoretical

frameworks developed by Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) were used to interpret the impact of this school-orientated language socialization. Drawing on foundations in anthropology, sociology, psychology and linguistics, their theory is developed in two dimensions, “socialization through the use of language” and “socialization to the use of language” (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) contend that the task of researchers engaged in the study of language socialization is to look for worldview— language connections as expressed through forms and functions of language use. Through using this theoretical framework, cultural information about schooling (within the content of discourse and in the manner that it is organized) can be elucidated (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Through reviewing the evidence and data, it was possible to theorize about some of the language socialization and academic literacy skill development practices that contributed to a sense of knowledge about schooling in the US and what parents could do to support their kindergartener to improve readiness scores on standardized measures experienced by the participants.

Literature Review

Much has been written about Hispanic students in the US. In order to illuminate the findings of this case study, three topics are synthesized. They are: 1) Hispanic and bilingual students in the US, 2) achievement gaps and early literacy, and 3) parents as literacy educators.

Hispanic and Bilingual Students in the US

The US has a long history of integrating immigrants and languages into the greater society. Currently, the rate of immigration is at a historical highpoint. Further, the number of Hispanic immigrants has increased and the total percentage of Hispanic people in the US has dramatically increased over the last decades. Illustrating this, Garcia and Cuéllar (2006) reported, “the number of Hispanics increased from almost 3 million in 1976 to more than 4.5 million in 2000, an increase of 52%” (p. 2220). The percentage of Hispanic people in the US is expected to continue to grow. Hispanic students in the US tend to be at greater risk than other groups for school-based problems and dropping-out of school. Hispanic students in the US tend to lag in academic achievement relative to other groups. Many of these children suffer the consequences of poverty, lack of a print-rich environment prior to formal schooling and low levels of parental literacy (Garcia & Miller, 2007; Krashen, 1999). Schools in the US must consider and develop new practices and pedagogies that address the needs of bilingual students, especially Hispanic students in need. This is a particularly daunting task as state and national educational standards have been raised in the US (Meyer, 2007).

Children of immigrant parents face unique challenges when in school. They must negotiate and transition to a school culture that may be different than their home culture, norms and expectations. Bilingual children are assimilating and learning in two (or more) linguistic and cultural milieus. Parents' notions of kindergarten readiness are developed through experience and conversations with other community members. Okagaki and Sternberg (1993) as well as Diamond, Reagan and Bandyk (2000) documented that immigrant parents' conceptualizations and expectations about kindergarten readiness seemed different than that of parents born and educated in the US. As parents' views of schooling reflect their culture, experience and education, this view may be in sharp contrast to the views and expectations of school staff in the US (Valdés, 1996).

In general, Hispanic culture cedes control of formal schooling to schools and teachers. Teachers are revered. Interfering with schooling or teaching would be seen as audacious. Many Hispanic parents feel that they are responsible for teaching manners while school teachers should teach academic content and skills. *Bien educado* is a term that can be easily misinterpreted by a native English speaker who imagines that the translation of the term must be "well educated." This term has little to do with academic skills but, instead, with behavior and manners.

In addition to the obvious potential challenges of a language barrier, "many parents of ELLs lack some information and understanding necessary to support parent-school collaboration" (Waterman & Harry, 2008, p. 6). There is often a misunderstanding of the expected roles of parent involvement and parental support of their child's education. Therefore, inviting parents to join in the process of preparing their children for school involves making the program welcoming and supportive in their first language while at the same time providing strong models of home-based teaching strategies, academic content and materials that schools in the US typically expect that in-coming kindergarteners would have experienced. Further, Manyak (2007) reported that bringing ELLs' community experience into school activities can promote engaging literary activities.

Achievement Gaps and Early Literacy Readiness

The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) reported "... there is strong evidence for the importance of AK [alphabet knowledge], PA [phonemic awareness], rapid naming tasks, 'writing or writing name,' and phonological STM [short term memory] as predictors of later reading and writing skills" (2009, p. 79). Additionally, the NELP's (2009) report concluded, "meta-analysis of the impacts of home and parent programs on the literacy skills of young children indicate that these interventions yield a moderate to large effect on oral language outcomes and general

cognitive abilities” (p. 179). Likewise, Mercier Smith, Baker and Santoro (2009) reported that phonological awareness instruction in the child’s native language should be provided at different times during the school day and that this can be accomplished through the use of parent volunteers (p. 12).

Early literacy is developed at home and taught through ordinary daily experiences by parents, grandparents and other caregivers. Genessee (2008) emphasized that the oral language developed at home is crucial for critical thinking. Cummins (1981) observed that if children are from homes where family members and caregivers are not literate in their native language (L1) the children have difficulty becoming literate in the L1 and subsequently experience challenges becoming literate in the second language (L2). Krashen (1999) wrote that children typically acquire their native language in a natural environment and school is the place where children learn the formalities of language. He further argued that without a well-developed L1, children cannot transfer language skills to their L2. First language literacy is a critical foundation for literacy in English (Cummins, 2009; Krashen, 1999).

Cummins (1999, 2009) describes language proficiency as two skill sets. They are basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Children who have well developed BICS can use this foundation to learn and hone CALP, which is required for successful engagement and achievement in school. Immigrant children may or may not have well developed BICS upon entering kindergarten. If a child has poorly developed BICS in their L1, the challenge of learning CALP in L2 can be an overwhelming challenge.

Parents as Literacy Educators

Parents are crucial as literacy educators. Studies in California (US) have documented improved early literacy when Spanish-speaking parents become aware of home and community based routines and activities that promote literacy and school success (Dail & McGee, 2008; Gilliam, Gerla, & Wright, 2004; Roberts, 2008). Research suggests that “young children develop literacy in the context of their homes and communities” (Gilliam et al., 2004, p. 226). The development of emergent literacy skills and knowledge is essential for success in school. Parents as children’s first teachers can foster emergent literacy skills, knowledge and orientations.

There are six means for parents to engage in and to influence schooling; these are: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating (Hill & Flynn, 2006). When schools develop programs and curricula that address all types of

involvement, everyone benefits. Efforts to actively engage immigrant parents in the processes, routines, expectations and joys of schooling in the US break down cultural barriers and create opportunity for all.

Methods

An interpretative approach was used to conduct and analyze this case study. Mixed methods were used, though qualitative research methods were drawn upon heavily. A range of artifacts were collected and coded including K-PASS instructional materials, photographs, program grant applications and presentation materials. Interviews with key informants were conducted. Program data including family demographics, program participation and student achievement were analyzed statistically. Additionally, the program was observed in action and field notes were written and analyzed. Interpretative case studies are designed to “to develop conceptual categories or illustrate, support, or to challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to the data gathering” (Merriam, 1988, p. 28). According to Willis (2007) interpretative case studies require a diverse array of data/evidence and are centered on understanding social settings and experience. As such, this was a highly appropriate choice for a study that aimed to look at family language practices, parental engagement in schooling and school-based literacy achievement in the context of an innovative school program for ELLs. Data were collected over a 2-year period and included demographic and achievement data from the year before the data collection processes began.

Research Questions

1. Did teaching parents to be coaches of early literacy skills and concepts in Spanish (L1) improve children’s literacy development as measured on the language subtest on the DIAL-3 and district benchmarks on the DRA?
2. Did parent participation in program components (meetings and home activities) improve the child’s literacy development as measured on the language subtest on the DIAL-3?
3. What other impacts on literacy and school readiness can be observed within the program components?

Participants

Children were identified as being in need based on pre-kindergarten enrollment evaluations and a home language survey. The DIAL-3 is a developmental screening. It was given to all of the children in the district as part of the school enrollment process in order to identify children in need of more specific diagnostic assessment and possible academic intervention. The DIAL-3 was administered in English, except when the

child's English proficiency was limited and the child's L1 was Spanish. Children scoring below the 30th percentile on the language subtest (in English or Spanish) who also had no formal school experiences (nursery school, pre-kindergarten, etc.) prior to kindergarten enrollment were invited to participate in the K-PASS Program. These children demonstrated a lag in their L1 development and it was theorized, drawing on Cummins (1991, 2008) and Krashen (1999), that this underdevelopment would make learning L2 challenging for them. It was further theorized that if parents could be coached to include literacy practices into the "give and take of everyday life" that their children would perform better in kindergarten and beyond (Schieffelin, 1990).

Twelve families enrolled in the program. All were bilingual Spanish-speaking immigrants to the US with various levels of English proficiency. The teachers that conducted the training all were fully certified teachers with master's degrees in teaching English to speakers of other languages and proficient in Spanish and English.

Program Design and Implementation

The program had several components. These included: a parental commitment to participate, a series of three parent workshops taught in Spanish, three workshops for children, pre and post-participation testing protocols, and bilingual academic materials that were given to the families. The parents of these students signed a contract agreeing to attend all the workshops and to allow their children to retake the DIAL-3 in the fall to measure their progress. The parents were required to register for the workshops. Their children were invited and strongly encouraged to attend the workshops with their parents. Lastly, the parents agreed to participate in a post-workshop survey.

K-PASS Interpretative Case Study

K-PASS Program

With a small budget but strong theoretical and practical foundations, a team of educators developed a program that shows promise for the many ELL students that arrive in US kindergartens each year. The interpretative case study that follows documents the program, its impact, and the study's relevance to other educators interested in supporting early literacy development for ELL students.

Early literacy skills are a necessary foundation for students' success in kindergarten and beyond. The Director of ESOL programs and three ESOL teachers in Bronx River Falls, a small urban school district in New York State, created a series of hands-on parent training workshops focusing on early literacy skills and strategies. These workshops were designed to help students acquire the basic literacy skills and

background knowledge necessary to succeed in kindergarten and first grade by teaching their parents to use home-based learning strategies and materials.

In the spring preceding entrance to kindergarten, parents must register their students for kindergarten in the city of Bronx River Falls. As part of the enrollment process, all children in the district are given the DIAL-3 to identify children in need of literacy intervention. The district found that many children for whom English is a second language were lagging behind in literacy skills before entering kindergarten. The demands of kindergarten in the US have increased in recent years. Instead of kindergarten being an educational environment designed to teach pre-literacy skills, kindergarten programs today are typically based in the assumption that students have mastered pre-literacy skills and are ready for literacy instruction. Prior to the K-PASS Program, ELL students who score below the 30 percentile on the DIAL-3 do not receive any extra intervention other than the regular kindergarten program until they reached first grade. Therefore, these children were facing an uphill battle to become proficient readers and successful in school. Their achievement gap tended to persist and deepen.

Educators in Bronx River Falls were aware that many ELL students arrived to kindergarten without the prerequisite skills of their English-proficient counterparts. Drawing on their knowledge about readiness skills being a predictor of success in literacy proficiency, facility of native language literacy transferring to second language literacy, and the importance of including Hispanic parents as partners in the American educational process, the Bronx River Falls educators set out to ameliorate the academic achievement gap prior to student entrance to kindergarten. Together, they wrote a grant to develop a program, the K-PASS Program, to address the readiness needs of the incoming Spanish-speaking ELLs and presented it to the district's staff development center. This program included workshops for parents during the spring and summer before their children were to enter kindergarten. The grant was accepted and the program was given \$1,500.00 USD for implementation.

The school year in New York State starts in September and runs until June. In May and June all children entering kindergarten in the following September register for school and are screened to assess development and health. For this particular program, families were invited to participate based on kindergarten enrollment screenings and evaluations. Children who appeared to lack BICS and basic CALP in their native language and their parents participated in a series of June workshops focusing on strategies for the development of specific literacy skills. During the workshops, school district teachers provided parents with teacher-created materials and modeled how to use these materials with their children.

Parents were also expected to practice these literacy activities at home during June, July and August and were provided with opportunities to share their experiences with each other. Children whose families participated in the sessions were reassessed in September to measure the program's impact.

The program involved three 90 minute workshop sessions conducted in Spanish during the month of June prior to the children's September entrance to kindergarten. The curriculum included three thematic units of study with an overarching focus on family literacy activities that could be done every day. The themes were entitled: *What's in a Name*, *All Around Town*, and *Shapes and Colors*. Drawing from the state and local kindergarten curriculum standards and research on early literacy development, academic content and skills were selected and embedded in the thematic curricula. Teachers worked with parents to assure that the children could identify their first and last name, names of family members, letter names, colors and shapes. Additionally, certain readiness skills were taught such as book handling, holding a pencil and cutting paper. Finally, beginning reading foundations such as being able to listen to a picture book and recall details, using the pictures to understand the story, and knowing the direction of the text, were targeted. Specific outcomes were discussed with parents and then strategies for mastering these outcomes with children were modeled. Parents were given books, materials and ideas for using the strategies at home and in the community.

Bronx River Falls, New York is a small, culturally diverse city with 60,000 residents. The district's demographics are: 34 % European American, 42 % Hispanic, 20% African American, 3% Asian American and 1% other groups. There were 6671 students enrolled in the district during the 2007-08 academic year, of which 1117 were students identified as ELLs. The number of bilingual students is actually much higher than this number as this statistic includes only students not yet proficient in English who are still receiving English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. Ninety percent of the ELLs speak Spanish.

The Pilot Program Statistical Analysis (2007-08 School Year)

The program pilot began with parent literacy workshops conducted June of 2007. There were 12 families enrolled. The parents of all 12 students in the pilot signed a contract agreeing to attend all the workshops and to allow their children to retake the DIAL-3 in the fall to measure their progress. When comparing the May and June kindergarten enrollment screening administration of DIAL-3 scores (prior to the program) and the September DIAL-3 scores after the program of the 12 participating children, 67% had improved scores. Of those, 50% of the children improved their scores significantly, while 17% made minimal gains

(see Figure 1). Two children (17%) had no change and two children (17%) scored lower on the second test administration. Student number 8 was referred for special education services and subsequently received special services.

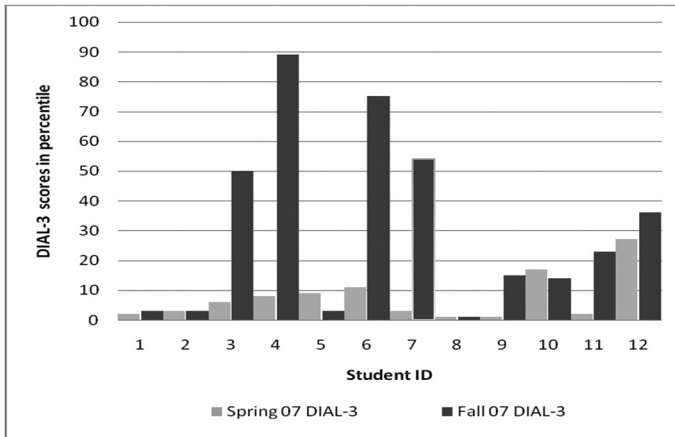


Figure 1. Cohort 1 pre scores spring 2007 and post scores fall 2007 of the DIAL-3 measured in percentiles (n = 12).

The ESOL teacher commented, “Most children seemed much more ready to participate in kindergarten after the K-PASS program. Based on classroom observation, even the children that did not show improvement in their age-normed scores on the DIAL-3 in actuality seemed more ready for the curriculum after the program than when we first met them.” In sum, more than half had very significant gains in their scores by fall. Training parents in Spanish to be coaches of early literacy skills and concepts appeared to improve the children’s literacy development as measured on the language subtest of the DIAL-3.

At the end of kindergarten, the school district’s required benchmark for all kindergarteners is a score of at least 2 on the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and a score of 3 for the fall of first grade. Cohort 1 was tested in the spring of kindergarten and again in the fall of first grade, a year after the K-PASS intervention. As Figure 2 shows, 6 of the 12 students (50%) reached or exceeded the district wide benchmark of 2 on the DRA in the spring of kindergarten. At the beginning of first grade, all 12 reached the benchmark of 2, and 50% reached the required benchmark of 3. Since it has been documented that students typically regress in their academic reading abilities over the summer months, these results are significant (Arlington, 2006).

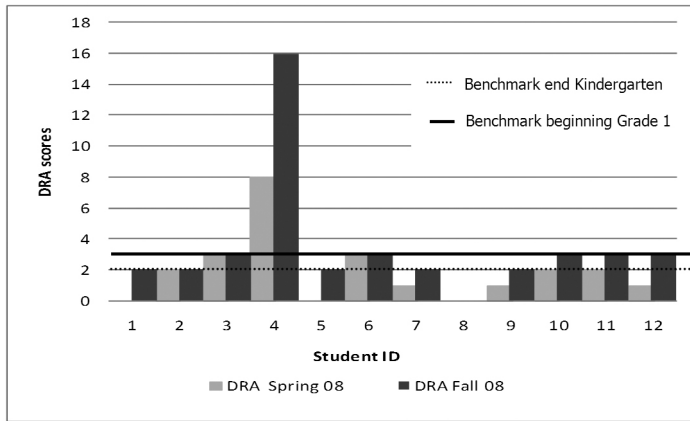


Figure 2. Cohort 1 spring 2008 and fall 2008 DRA scores (n = 12, mortality: student 8 attended special education classes, score unavailable).

To investigate whether parents’ participation in their child’s literacy development improved the child’s development, two forms of data are presented, the participation of the parents in the training workshops and the parent survey given after the children began kindergarten. Three parent workshop sessions were offered. The parent participation in the required workshops represented willingness and “comfortableness” with the school and the workshops. All 12 families participated in at least 1 of the 3 workshops: 100% attended 1 workshop, 75% attended 2 workshops and 25% attended all 3.

Though it is recognized that the small sample size (n = 12) makes generalizations difficult and findings must be viewed with caution, the preliminary academic achievement results are encouraging. A number of analyses were performed on the data from the pilot (Cohort 1) sample data. These analyses included Kendall’s Tau-b, Stuart’s Tau-c and Spearman’s correlation. The dependant variable was the DIAL-3 scores and the independent variable was parental involvement, as measured by participation in the workshops. While short of the preferred .05 level of significance, analyses revealed statistical significance at the .074, .062, and .081 levels for each of these tests respectively. This suggests that the differences in the student’s language subtest scores on the DIAL-3 may in fact be positively influenced by the participation rates of parents.

The parent survey was conducted via telephone with 5 of Cohort 1 K-PASS parents in the fall. The bilingual parent survey contained 10 questions that fell into 3 categories: the activities, the literacy skill level their child had reached, and their participation in their child’s education. The last category, participation in the education of their child, was most

revealing. All of the parents surveyed responded affirmatively to the question, are you interested in learning more about how to help your child at home? One parent responded, “Me gustaría participar en más talleres” (I would like to participate in more workshops). Four of the 5 parents interviewed had visited their child’s school in the fall or attended the fall semester Back-to-School Night (school orientation meeting). The 5 parents also expressed their intention to attend the upcoming parent-teacher conferences.

The open-ended comments of the parent survey expressed satisfaction with the program and an awareness of literacy education. One parent commented, “Muy satisfecha. Aprendí cómo la comunidad es importante para la enseñanza” (I’m very satisfied. I learned how community is important for teaching). Another parent stated, “Interesante. Nos ayudó a enseñarles a nuestros hijos” (Interesting. It helped us to teach our children). Yet others replied, “Vi el progreso de mi hijo” (I saw my child’s progress), “Muy informativos” (Very informative) and “Un programa valoroso” (A very valuable program). It appears that the K-PASS program was a stimulus for the crucial positive relationship between home and school.

The Second Cohort (2008-09 School Year) Statistical Analysis

The successes of the pilot K-PASS program were shared with the school district administration and the program was expanded. In the fall of the 2008-09 school year the program served 25 children as a regular part of the school district’s offerings. There are plans to research how the children and families negotiate schooling and achievement as they participate in the elementary schools in the district. The preliminary data for the second cohort are compelling: 92% of the students improved their raw scores on the post administration of the DIAL-3, while 2 of the 25 participants (8%) scored lower on the post screening than on the pre-intervention screening. Additionally, the frequency of parent participation increased: 100% of the parents participated in 1 of the 3 training sessions, 96% attended two sessions and 4% (one parent) attended one session.

K-PASS Program Case Summary

Two cohorts have experienced the K-PASS program in the summer prior to entering kindergarten. Data and observations of the program paint a vivid portrait of a program dedicated to improving the ways literacy practices can be embedded into the fabric of daily family life and yield school-based results.

Discussion and Implications for Educators

This interpretative case study of a pilot program targeted to help immigrant bilingual parents understand what is expected of an incoming kindergartener in schools in the US by actively teaching parents how to be teachers of early literacy skills in the home provides a glimpse of the tremendous potential of the K-PASS Program and other such programs designed to incorporate parents in literacy readiness processes. With a very small investment of money and time, the program was able to document significant gains in school-readiness in the area of literacy.

Training parents to be teachers of early literacy skills and concepts in Spanish (L1) seemed to improve children's literacy and kindergarten readiness as measured on the language subtest of the DIAL-3. Although the pilot program and study were small, with 12 families participating, the improved literacy readiness as measured by the DIAL-3 was impressive. Furthermore, the second K-PASS cohort yielded improved literacy readiness with 25 families participating. This success does seem to echo the results of studies done in California where this type of support yielded very positive results (Gilliam, Gerla, & Wright, 2004). Additionally, it may help avoid having children misdiagnosed as having learning disabilities rather than identified as having gaps in foundational knowledge (Bernard, Cummins, Campoy, Ada, Winsler, & Bleiker, 2006).

Following participation in the K-PASS parent workshops, some worldviews and language connections changed for parents. During and after the workshops parents were visibly different in their approaches to literacy and language development. During the workshops parents shared the ways that they played literacy games with their children and used the literacy materials distributed. Parents appeared willing to discuss questions and ideas about their children's learning and participation in the upcoming schooling with the ESOL teacher and instructional specialist. As well, they began to dialogue with each other as a community of literacy supporters. The parents started to see literacy as something they could teach their children. Weaving literacy practice into each day was achievable. Also, they connected with school staff in a meaningful way that would facilitate future learning. Parents experienced an evolution in their view of schooling and their potential role as educational supporters or coaches to their children. This represents a significant shift in their worldview and language connections.

The program directly seeks to expand parents' enactment of language socialization processes at home and in community. The teachers' active modeling of strategies for looking at and reading picture books was notable. The practice of teaching a literacy activity, structuring a home-based practice, and then following up in the subsequent workshop to

debrief and discuss the activity seemed effective and contributed to parental knowledge. ESOL teachers and instructional specialist wove discussions of the importance of using Spanish with children, notions of bilingualism, and information about how schools in the US work into every activity. This allowed parents to hear similar information in different forums. This cyclical discussion provided parents with multiple opportunities to synthesize information and ask questions. The teachers' supportive and positive tone helped to transform the parents' cultural vision of *maestra* to the more familiar American style of a teacher, and addressing the teacher by her first name. Such familiarity with the school staff who will be teaching their children created a social space for addressing the challenges ahead as the children enter kindergarten and further develop their BICS and CALP in Spanish and English.

In terms of inspiring children of immigrants to participate in schooling in the US, it is critical to support parents in their growing knowledge of the expectations of the school systems. Additionally, by providing native language support to parents and helping them to understand the prevailing public vision for the education of their bilingual youngsters, greater academic success for all bilingual children is assured.

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