



Explorations on the Benefits of a Holistic Family Language and Literacy Program in a Latino Community: Multiple Perspectives

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Abstract

Latino families face several challenges when they immigrate to the United States. School-based early childhood programs involving families with a holistic approach indicate effectiveness toward integrating both children and families into the school community.

This paper explores, through informal conversations with administrators, teachers, and parents, their beliefs regarding the benefits of a high-quality family program. In this paper, as a consequence of assuming a holistic perspective, the authors describe prospects for academic gains, positive progress regarding social–emotional benefits, and overall improved inclusive community-related benefits for both children and their families. Additionally, recommendations include strategies to support the challenges confronting newly immigrated Latino families.

Keywords: administrators; family literacy program; Latino children

Introduction

Diversity within the U.S. brings rich possibilities along with significant challenges for families, communities, and schools. Many immigrant families in the U.S. experience hardships integrating into the host culture that, when ignored by communities, can affect their children's education and indicate potential for long-lasting effects. However, when these challenges are targeted early in effective ways within communities and family education programs, possible barriers toward undermining children's ultimate success in the U.S. can be diminished.

The changing demographics in the U.S. point to the importance of schools and communities making such connections. Projections from the U.S. Census (2015, 2016) indicate that, by 2020, the aggregation of minority populations will form the majority of the population (i.e., a minority majority) of school-aged children, by 2044, in the U.S. population, a 95% increase in the percentage of minorities is expected, moving from 38% in 2014 to 56% by 2060 (U.S. Census, 2015, 2016). Changing demographics create both challenges and opportunities for communities, agencies, and schools.

For example, Latino families face several challenges when immigrating to the U.S.; this process effects integration into local communities, job acquisition, and involvement in their children's education. Such ongoing challenges and the possible negative repercussions influencing their children's education will continue without targeted investments in early childhood programs (Moinolmolki, Gaviria-Loaiza, & Han, 2017). Part of the challenge lies with understanding the cultural perceptions of the Latino family structure. For example, regarding involvement in children's education, for some Latino families, the level of engagement remains contingent on many varied factors including parents' employment, education level, English language resources, time of immigration to the U.S., family social support (McWayne & Melzi, 2014), poverty, parents' inability/limited ability to communicate in English, acculturation stress, discrimination (Moinolmolki et al, 2017), cultural differences (Carroll, 2017), undocumented status and the resulting distrust of government programs, and a desire to maintain the heritage language and culture (Karloly & Gonzalez, 2011). Supporting children and their families is layered, complex, and holistic. It is critical toward effective educational programs to include involvement of the whole family with an incorporation of families' heritage language as well as the commitment of the teaching staff. Programs that involve the whole family can affect family relationships, child development, sense of belonging, parent and child literacy, and parenting skills (Carroll, 2017).

Family literacy programs can help build stronger relationships to benefit the children's development as well as reducing mothers' sense of social isolation and increasing a parent's sense of belonging to a community (Carroll, 2017). Relatedly, educating the whole family can promote a sense of self-sufficiency, enhance parent literacy and parenting skills, and provide a foundation for young children's academic life. To that end, the early childhood education program also includes family support services, which comprise health, social support, and counseling (Swick, 2009). Programs that involve the whole family may also incorporate the families' heritage language into family literacy programs, which can lead to increased parent involvement as well as children's heritage language maintenance (Wessels, 2014). The commitment of the teaching staff to developing and implementing a long-term, systematic parent involvement plan is crucial to its success and can lead to significant improvements in children's literacy development, particularly in lower-income communities and for struggling readers (Crosby, Rasinski, Padak, & Yildirim, 2015).

Previous research indicates a paucity of studies on the effectiveness and sustainability of parental involvement in school-based literacy programs (Crosby et al, 2015; Wessels, 2014), particularly those programs related to early language and literacy development of Latino children (Jung et al, 2015). Therefore, an exploration of interested stakeholders' perceptions regarding implementation of an early childhood literacy program is warranted. Narrative data generated from informal conversations with administrators, teachers, and parents.

A Holistic Family Literacy Program (HFLP)

This program (HFLP) serves a community in Southwest Florida in which immigrant families experience various challenges. In this diverse community, 96% of elementary school-aged children are designated as economically disadvantaged, the per capita income is \$14,699, one third of the adult population has less than high school education and, in 72% of the homes, families speak a language other than English, predominantly Spanish and Haitian Creole (Personal communication, May 10, 2017). In order to target the educational, linguistic, and social-emotional needs of these families, HFLP was established in 2004 and, since then, an extensive range of programming such as early childhood education, after school for middle and high school students, college access, English-language and parenting classes, and a food pantry are used widely by families. The overall goal for HFLP is to create an educational bridge between the classroom and home, and to increase the confidence, capability, and literacy of parents. In this way, parents are able to more effectively support their children's early development; this family support is critical to prepare children for a successful transition to school. The literacy program includes the following four components: (1) early childhood education, (2) time to teach parents to positively guide children's learning, (3) adult education in English language, literacy, and parenting, and, (4) quality time for parents to interact with their children in literacy activities. These components emphasize the educational partnership between parents and children.

Administrators' views on program effects

Regarding HFLP, three major benefits emerged from conversations with four administrators (identified as A1, A2, A3, and A4). The category-advantages included 1) kindergarten readiness, (2) belonging to community, and (3) whole family dynamics, particularly on the mother-child relationship.

Kindergarten readiness

Administrators report this HFLP directly affected kindergarten readiness including children's ability to speak English, skills for learning, and additional skills associated with social-emotional development. At HFLP, children develop skills for becoming more independent and confident in kindergarten. As administrators explained,

Students that participate in the ... program are more ready (sic) to enter kindergarten. That's been reported from the school district in the form of those readiness assessments they take. Students that participated in [the program] scored higher than students that haven't had any type of program. (...) [They also] have a higher level of self-efficacy, have stronger social skills, and emotional skills, so they know how to navigate kindergarten in that sense (A1).

While A1 emphasized the local school district's recognition of HFLP in the form of achieving high scores on readiness assessments, A4 stressed the challenges the children face due to their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In addition, A4 described how students' success in kindergarten meets the expected behaviors and attitudes depicted by the kindergarten readiness screening:

To see that their social-emotional [skills] developed, how they are happy to be in the classroom, how they will be able to share with friends, how they are able to follow a routine (...) is one of the big goals that we have here. ...They're independent, they can learn the English language, [and] they are able to receive the quality of education that they need (A4).

Moreover, to increase the children's chances of successfully navigating kindergarten, the programs at HFLP aim to increase the children's confidence (A2). The local school district also recognized the effect of the program on kindergarteners' academic and social-emotional skills, reached out to the program, and referred underperforming children to the summer program to prepare them for kindergarten. Thus, the holistic early literacy program indicates the capacity to prepare minority students for the academic and social-emotional challenges of kindergarten.

Belonging to the community

According to the administrators, mothers who once felt isolated due to their lack of English skills and would not leave their homes or interact with the community, developed increased confidence after participating in the program. With the adult language program's emphasis on cooperative learning, the mothers made lifelong bonds with one another, creating a network for support and friendship that go beyond the classroom and the program itself. As one administrator noted,

The majority of the mothers (...) did not leave their apartments, and they didn't feel that they belonged. (...) They now feel that this is a place where they belong. (...) [The program] also helps them bond; they laugh, they play, they make new friends (A2).

Learning and improving the mothers' English skills contributed to their sense of belonging to the community. Their increased confidence in speaking English outside of the classroom has been demonstrated in their socialization with neighbors, reading the newspaper, and scheduling a doctor's appointment, as well as finding employment and receiving job promotions. A3 states, "[There's] a sense of confidence when you see our moms (...) report an increasing amount of situations where they're using English outside of the classroom (A3)."

In addition, administrators highlighted the effects of improving English skills on mothers' employment opportunities which ultimately impacts the whole family's life. A1 stated that, "[The mothers] have been able to gain employment, have promotions within their employment" (A1). Hence, this holistic literacy program has helped mothers become more integrated in the community.

Whole family dynamics

The administrators emphasized program impacts on whole family dynamics with husbands becoming more supportive of their wives taking part in the program. A3 noted, "There is literally a program for every single member of the family when they come here ... It's nice that we're not looking at students necessarily just as individual units, but as the entire family as well (A3)."

In addition, administrators discussed how, gradually, all family members grew to appreciate the program benefits. "With the husband seeing the growth in [their wives] and in the children, the husbands now are very supportive. In the beginning, we did have some [mothers] who'd say, 'my husband doesn't know I come here (A2).'"

Considering the population served at HFLP, a key contributor to the effectiveness of the program seems to be the availability to the whole family. The program offers opportunities to engage the mothers to participate in their children's learning activities, helping them to interact as their child's first teacher. As A3 pointed out, the mother-child bond is increased through the activities proposed in the parent-and-child-together component. Administrators' recognition of the far-reaching benefits of the program included children's academic and social kindergarten readiness, mothers' social and economic connections to the community, and the entire families' appreciation of the program. Responses indicated a perception that the program meets families' needs in significant ways in this diverse community.

Teachers' views on program effects

Conversations with five teachers (identified as T1 to T5) revealed their primary beliefs regarding the effects of HFLP: (1) children's increased confidence and English skills, (2) togetherness, (3) holistic continuing effects, and (4) striving relationship with the community at large. These benefits progress for the children, mother-child relationships, the entire family, and the community.

Children's increased confidence and English skills.

The teachers described how HFLP is crucial to increasing children's confidence regarding their social development as well as their English language skills. The teachers seemed to associate children's increased interpersonal interaction and participation in the classroom activities with improved English language skills. For example, T2 emphasized: "[The children's] attention span is growing... and increasingly they're more available to focus in on the story and participate, and they're interacting with each other longer. [Also, the children's] motor skills... and their manual dexterity is improving (T2)."

Another teacher noted, "The kids are happier and more confident. We've seen huge growth in several kids who came in very shy; now they're able to open up, and they're speaking English" (T5). Teachers' perceptions attribute children's academic and social development to participation in the HFLP.

Togetherness: Meaningful interactions between mother and child

Teachers noted that the program provided opportunities for meaningful interactions between the children and their mothers and associated this connection to mothers' learning more about their importance as their child's first teacher. Thus, through storybook and read aloud activities, games, interactive music and movement activities, and mother-child homework projects, the mothers engage in interaction with their children in ways that promote children's learning.

The mothers are more comfortable reading the children's books, so I think the children feel proud of their mothers for trying to learn English... and I think that our program has helped the mothers figure out skills, games, and activities that they can do with their child that is a new relationship in the way of playing together (T1).

By including mothers in classroom learning, as well as asking them to incorporate school content into home activities, the teachers promote opportunities for meaningful, educational, mother-child interactions. The teachers' narratives described the new quality of learning in the school environment by using words such as "skills," "games," "activities," "relationship," and "play together." The teachers' narratives clearly described how meaningful mother-child interactions developed as a consequence of the program.

The teachers also described how the program invites families to explore how to support children throughout their school life; yet, the families themselves become the children's apprentice by learning the essential and relevant skills pertaining to life in the American community and society. Thus, the mothers bring the remainder of the family to the program, as explained by T4. "[The mothers are] feeling better about their role [as a parent]..., gaining these new skills and sharing them with their partner... so that together [they] can have an impact on their child's growth and development (T4)."

In addition, according to most teachers, the program importantly benefits those mothers who are non-native English speakers, because they can learn and improve their English skills together with their children. Therefore, learning is extended beyond the formal content and clearly integrated play and family time.

Holistic continuing effects: From the program to the community

Teachers identified holistic continuing effects that comprise the benefits that the program had for the whole family, mostly for the mothers, including friendships that they make, the effects of their increased confidence speaking English associated with their life skills, and finally with issues related to their families' improved nutrition. The teachers noted how the program has helped the mothers make friends with others in the program, creating a critical support system for them in and outside of the classroom. "The students [mothers] themselves become friends here... a group of friends that [is] also interested in bettering their lives and the lives of their children and I think it gives them a lot of support between themselves (T1)."

Teachers recognized the significance of these connections for immigrant mothers. Another teacher added:

One of the mothers told me that she and her husband had each lost 20 pounds since last year [because they] had the nutrition sections and she learned that [they] should be eating more vegetables and fruits and less tortillas (T1).

The teachers also explained that English skills helped mothers gain confidence that affected other parts of their lives. As one teacher expressed, "[The most benefit is giving] the mothers confidence in trying to speak English and in navigating English for their life skills, [such as practicing] reading the newspaper for apartments ads... or going to the doctor and making an appointment... on the telephone (T1)."

Frequently, teachers expressed the families' program experiences can be expanded beyond its initial purpose, from the individual benefits to the family to the community-at-large. Concerning the community effects, the teachers explained that, by the end of the program, it is common that mothers offer to work as volunteers at HFLP to help others. "A lot of moms who started in the program... become volunteers. Some of them are actually getting ready to possibly work here next year, so that's huge that they've been able to start out not knowing any English to wanting to be here (T5)." In other words, the teachers recognized that the effects of the program reach a holistic level, affecting social and academic connections, family nutrition, and enhanced ability to engage with the wider community in support of the family.

Parents' views on program effects

When the six mothers, (coded as M1- M6), shared their thoughts about the program and the effects, the following three issues emerged: (1) nurturing children's academic and social skills, (2) opportunities for quality of life, and (3) enriched parenting experiences.

Nurturing children's academic and social skills

Most mothers noticed significant changes in their children's learning and personal growth including emerging language and social-emotional development. As M6 noted, her daughter's communication skills strengthened and she transformed into a more self-assured individual who was no longer timid to share her views and ideas. Also pleased with her child's personal development, M2 commented on how the opportunities to socialize with other children in the

early childhood program was helpful for her timid son in minimizing the pressure he felt when engaging with others. M5 described how the sense of community helped her daughter grow into an organized and ambitious student who entered kindergarten, academically prepared due to her experiences at HFLP. Another mother (M3) commented on her child's academic preparedness as a result of the programs stimulating environment. In addition to their children's academic growth, the mothers emphasized the ways they became a part of a community and could teach and learn important lifelong skills from one another. For example, M3 stated, "they [teachers and other parents at HFLP] help you become a better parent." They also mentioned an improved relationship between mother and child and the extended knowledge about childcare.

Opportunities for Quality of Life

Mothers noticed the growth within themselves ultimately improving their quality of life. The mothers discussed the benefits of the classes in which they are enrolled at HFLP. For example, the adult English courses are a significant component in the mothers' learning experiences. Though these English classes are set up to provide a formal learning experience, M2 added that the interactive environment allows the mothers to practice their conversational English skills with one another. These mother-to-mother relationships helped to establish a support system between the mothers and contributed a sense of belongingness within the group. In addition, with the increase in English proficiency, mothers felt they gained an overall sense of confidence.

Mothers seemed to be enthusiastic about applying these newly developed skills to their home life. M3 shared how she has applied the knowledge she gained from the nutritional course offered at HFLP into her everyday life to implement a healthier lifestyle. In addition, technology courses offered at HFLP further provided mothers with an opportunity to apply their abilities to their daily lives. For example, these technology skills aided M5 in completing a 45-hour early childhood training course on her own. HFLP also provided M5 the chance to grow with the program as a volunteer, eventually becoming a program employee and a member of the team. Overall, the mothers felt that the additional courses offered at HFLP further benefitted them through the development of important skills and opportunities.

Enriched parenting experiences

Most mothers reflected on enriched experiences and the mutual teaching and learning experience between parent and child. The mothers felt they gained an improved knowledge of childcare, a vested interest in being involved with their child's education, and an improved relationship between parent and child. The mothers described how throughout the program, they were encouraged to interact academically with their children, and to play an active role in their children's development. Engaging their child in academic activities such as "reading as drawing" were one of the ways M3 was able to contribute to her child's learning as well as further building her relationship with her daughter. Additionally, M5 noted she gained patience as a result of the program, mentioning that she has learned to be an understanding parent who effectively communicates with her child. This parental engagement is perceived to have led to quality time and bonding between parent and child, strengthening their relationship. As these mothers were spending more quality time with their children and playing an active role in their education and seeing their child progress, they felt closer to their child.

Discussion and Recommendations

The informal conversations with administrators, teachers, and parents provide data describing the numerous benefits of a holistic family literacy program. Findings describe young children participating in quality early childhood experiences, mothers interacting with their children to foster growth and development, and parents enrolling in classes in English language, nutrition, child development, and even swimming and water safety. Overall, these narrative data describe how stakeholders believe in the effectiveness of parental involvement in literacy programs; they perceive this programming crucial to the children's success in their academic life. Similarly to other community programs that build connections within families and relationships to the community (Crosby et al, 2015), this HFLP indicates the capacity to build bridges to successful educational experiences for children and career opportunities for parents in Southwest Florida. The administrators', teachers,' and parents' views describing the gains in children's cognitive, language, and social-emotional growth and development align with findings describing the effect of parental engagement on children's learning outcomes (Crosby et al, 2015). These gains are important for this immigrant Latino community because research suggests that there is an existing, direct, and observable relationship between poverty and the academic progress of students. Rooney, Palaich, Silverstein, and Piscatelli (2017) noted that students from lower socioeconomic status might have a significant language gap compared to their more affluent counterparts, which ultimately hinders their academic success. HFLP serves families which struggle with major social and financial challenges. Thus, the children in this community would risk being at an academic disadvantage prior to even beginning their formal education. Consequently, a holistic program, which focuses on early intervention, and targets the whole family, while promoting healthy development, is essential to enable a successful transition into formal schooling (Bekman & Kocak, 2013).

Overall, the described benefits that emerged in these conversations are aligned with Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bio-ecological model of development which highlights the influence of the family and community on children's development. Data clearly described the positive impact of a dynamic, two-way interaction between the children and the immediate and extended community. In particular, findings described how children showed an increase in academic and social growth, and, at the same time, the mothers' improved language and technology skills. In turn, mothers' self-confidence improved, which assisted their capacity to integrate into the community through work and engagement. This increased community participation, on the part of the mothers, builds a more proactive and inclusive community. The community, in large, and the immigrating families, in particular, grow in their physical and mental well-being.

Grounded in the belief in the importance of holistic learning and development, the following recommendations are made for programs targeting an immigrant community:

1. The development of a holistic family program is driven by a clear understanding of the needs of the family and the local community. In a low socio-economic immigrant community in which Spanish is the dominant language, the program is built upon the recognition of the importance of the native language and culture along with the purpose of acquiring English language skills. The holistic program includes components that

target additional specific needs (e.g., developing kindergarten readiness, learning a new language and culture, developing skills to find a job, and providing a food pantry for families in need).

2. Equal emphasis on academic and language skills and social-emotional competencies provide for both young children and parents. These skills and competencies foster one another.
3. Reaching out to the family, including mothers and fathers, and engaging them in experiences with their children is an essential component of early childhood programs. These activities build strong family dynamics.
4. Consider listening to other stakeholders' perspectives regarding goals and program implementation for continuous improvement in quality early childhood learning and development.

This list is not intended to be exhaustive. Generating from project data, these recommendations describe ways in which to support newly immigrated children and their families as they interact in the school and community.

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