Project Éxito: An ESL Family Literacy Model for a Suburban Indiana Elementary School

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As the state of Indiana grows increasingly diverse, young English Language Learners (ELLs) are entering and enriching classrooms that were once considered homogeneous. Yet schools often lack resources needed to address the needs of language learners (particularly disenfranchised language learners) and their families. This paper presents a case study of an English as a second language (ESL) family literacy program designed for Spanish-speaking families at a suburban Indiana elementary school in which Spanish-speaking ELLs constitute nearly 20% of the student body, but there are no ESL teachers or Spanish-speaking teachers. The weekly program, which was unfunded and implemented purely by volunteer professionals, aimed to support local ESL families and the local school system by equipping parents with skills needed to teach their children, communicate with classroom teachers, and develop their own English skills related to their children's education. Additionally, the course aimed to foster an environment in which parents could network and build community with other immigrant parents and gain confidence to advocate for their families. This paper will outline characteristics of a theoretically sound model of ESL family literacy and propose a strengths-based ESL family literacy model which can be adapted by other schools.

Sunny Park[1] Elementary School's 2010 ISTEP results revealed an alarming achievement gap between White and Hispanic students: The school's Hispanic students passed the English/Language Arts portion of the ISTEP exam at a rate of 32.3%, while their White peers passed at a rate of 71% (Indiana DOE Compass, 2011). In addition, only 25.8% of the school's Hispanic children passed both the English/Language Arts and math portions of the exam, compared to 61.1% of White children (Indiana DOE Compass, 2011). Because of overall low test scores, Sunny Park Elementary School, situated in an affluent suburb of Indianapolis, failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress, as defined by the Indiana No Child Left Behind laws, for three subsequent years (Indiana Department of Education, 2011). For each year a school is on academic probation, the consequences become more severe. After five years, the school may lose accreditation, and the state may take it over (Indiana Department of Education, 2011). The probation is further

troubling because the district to which Sunny Park belongs has a history of strong academics. In 2010, the district boasted a 92.4% graduation rate, which ranked above the 84.5% state average (Indiana DOE Compass, 2010), and "Sunny County Schools" is listed as a selling point in the local real estate market. The achievement gap between Hispanic and White students prompted Sunny Park's administration to seek more creative ways to reach out to Spanish-speaking families outside the classroom.

Sunny Park Elementary has not always been a diverse school. In the past decade, an influx of migrant workers and local redistricting have changed the student body to include many more Spanish-speaking students and English language learners (ELLs). In 2005-2006, 7.5% of Sunny Park's student body identified as Hispanic and 6.3% were ELLs. By the 2010-2011 academic year, 66.2% of Sunny Park's students identified as White, and 21.4% identified as Hispanic (Indiana DOE Compass, 2011). Seventy-four percent received free or reduced lunches, and 17.7% were ELLs (Indiana DOE Compass, 2011). However, the school's staff is not nearly as diverse as the student body. All of the school's teachers identify as White (Indiana DOE Compass, 2011), the school does not have a certified ESL teacher, and only one full-time employee (a bilingual aide) speaks Spanish fluently. School staff members report that it is challenging to communicate with parents who do not speak English, and parents report that they do not feel confident helping their children with homework or attending parent-teacher conferences. In sum, the school lacks resources needed to help its growing body of Spanish-speaking ELLs and their families.

In order to address these academic disparities, the author of this paper collaborated with Sunny Park Elementary and a local nonprofit organization which serves Hispanics to develop and teach an English as a second language (ESL) family literacy course during the 2011-2012 school year. The program, called Project Éxito (success) consisted of concurrent children's sessions and parent sessions which addressed literacy and education, physical health, and parent-child relationships. This paper will discuss development and execution of the family literacy portion, proposing a model that other schools may choose to apply to ESL family literacy programs.

Project Éxito aimed not only at teaching parents and children skills they need to succeed on standardized tests but also at teaching them to recognize and capitalize on the wealth of knowledge they already possess. The program aimed to equip parents to teach their children, communicate with classroom teachers, and develop their own English skills related to their children's education. Additionally, it aimed to foster an environment in which parents could network and build community with other immigrant parents and in which they would gain confidence advocating for themselves and their children. This paper will outline theoretical underpinnings of ESL family

literacy, propose an ESL family literacy model to be used by other schools, and discuss implementation of the pilot course at Sunny Park Elementary.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

What is Family Literacy?

Auerbach (1989) notes that "the way family literacy is defined has critical implications" for learners (p. 166). The most commonly reported goals include teaching parents and children to read and write together, intervening in the academic development of young children, and teaching parenting skills. The National Center for Family Literacy (2004), for example, lists "interactive literacy activities between parents and their children, training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children, and parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency" as key components of family literacy (p. III-1). The Harvard Family Research Project reports that the term family literacy can also include "the study of literacy in the family, a set of interventions related to literacy development of young children, and a set of programs designed to enhance the literacy skills of more than one family member (Caspe, 2003, p. 1). Freirean scholars argue that "literacy means that participants learn to read and write the word and the world, starting from their own reality" (Reyes & Torres, 2007, p. 79). Freirean models encourage parents to recognize injustices (such as lack of access to interpreters, or unfair wages) and confront them. From this perspective, "the overarching goal of family literacy programs should be to create an environment for the growth of critical consciousness of participants by devising opportunities for them to confront and overcome those institutions, ideologies, and situations that keep them from naming and shaping their worlds" (Reyes & Torres, 2007, p. 80).

Regardless of how it is defined, family literacy is germane because in immigrant families, children often assume responsibility for negotiating with social institutions and therefore "[assume] control and power usually reserved for adults" (Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986, p. 210). In under-resourced communities, interpreters often work *pro bono*, and children are often faced with the burden of interpreting for their non-English-speaking parents everywhere from grocery stores to hospitals. As a result, "just by developing their own literacy parents contribute to family literacy; as parents become less dependent on children, the burden shifts and children are freer to develop in their own ways" (Auerbach, 1989, p. 178).

Funds of Knowledge

Immigrant families bring a wealth of knowledge into the classroom. Recognizing the importance of students' home experiences, Moll,

Amanti, Neff, and González (1992) define funds of knowledge as "the essential bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive" (p. 133). For Mexican families in their study, these bodies of knowledge may include (but are not limited to) farming, construction and building, trade, business, repair, midwivery, folk medicine, and childcare. Furthermore, families in this study value "enduring social relationships based on *confianza* (mutual trust)" (p. 134). González and Moll (2002) likewise document how children are initiated from a young age into a network of knowledge and experience from grandparents, aunts, uncles, and extended family. Both Moll et al. and González and Moll emphasize that immigrant families' funds of knowledge include various forms of literacy. Ethnographic studies concur that "learners' homes are not linguistically impoverished—parents and children interact and collaborate, they use many forms of literacy, they educate one another. The interactions and literacy practices used in homes may be different, but no less valid, from those used in institutions" (Parrish, 2004, p. 44). Families' support for each other's literary growth extends beyond "helping with skills" and includes emotional and physical support as well (Auerbach, 1989, p. 171). These socio-ecological factors (home climate, amount of time spent interacting with adults, etc.) have been found to influence student literacy development more than parental literacy level (Auerbach, 1989, p. 172). In sum, family literacy curriculum development requires understanding the experiences and literacy skills students use at home.

Despite a growing theoretical awareness of who learners are and what they bring into the classroom, much of family literacy curriculum still adopts a skills-based approach which ignores the background knowledge and articulated needs of adult learners (Christoph, 2009, p. 77). In a review of family contributions to literacy development in different cultures and of existing models of family literacy programs, Auerbach (1990) found that "existing programs are often not informed by research findings: the evidence about literacy acquisition and implications for practice pointed in one direction while the predominant approach to program design pointed in another" (p. 13). Such a trend is detrimental to students because "in order for learning to occur, new information must be integrated with what students have previously learned" (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2008, p. 58). Recent family literacy practitioners have recommended ways to capitalize on immigrant learners' funds of knowledge. Teachers in Project FLAME (Shanahan, Mulhern, & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995, p. 591) recommend building trust in the classroom by using culturally relevant literature and capitalizing families' wealth of experience by choosing books with meaningful themes, such as migrant working, discrimination, and

identity. Teachers in the Intergenerational Literacy Project (Paratore, 2005) build classroom trust by involving parents and children together and discussing books in their native language. Other teachers have recommended carefully selecting resources for their specific group of students based on categories such as complexity, pace of plot, physical features, type of book and student reactions" (Rodrigo et al., 2007, p. 110).

Barriers to Participation

The literature indicates that "[p]articipants attend [family literacy classes] for a variety of reasons: some express a strong desire to learn English in order to better support their children's learning; some believe they will have better job opportunities if they learn to read and write in English; others appear to attend because they enjoy the fellowship with their classmates" (Buchinger Bodwell, 2004, p. 62). Research has also found that families view literacy programs as helpful because they see English as the "power code" and "want their children to access that and direct their energies and support in helping children learn it" (Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich, & Kim, 2010, p. 48). However, adults are often unable to commit to language education courses even if they prioritize learning. Hayes (1989) identifies the main barriers keeping Hispanic adults out of ESL classes. These barriers—self/school incongruence, low self-confidence, lack of access to classes, and situational constraints—are consistent with Gallo's (1971) research on adult basic education, which suggests that the biggest barriers to adults pursuing education include lack of time, low priority of education in relation to work, cost, and lack of transportation. Frye (1999) adds abuse and violence as particular deterrents to Hispanic women in pursuing an education (p. 503). Brod (1999) recommends that instructors "research the culture of their students and acquire cross-cultural expertise" in order to "structure our classes in a way which will best respond to the needs and expectations of learners" (p. 4).

Research has shown that Hispanic immigrants in small Indiana counties lack access to services offered in larger communities, which may prevent them from seeking ESL instruction. Pawan and Groff Thomalla's (2005) study of Spanish language services in rural Indiana found that immigrants were not well-informed of language services, and organizations like schools and hospitals were relying on volunteers for interpreting needs. Hispanic immigrants instead tended to rely on family members or seek services in other counties, where Spanish services were more accessible. However, research has shown that even when immigrants lack access to resources, they find alternative strategies to navigate the dominant language, such as using family members or friends as interpreters, seeking services in counties that offer translation services (Pawan & Groff Thomalla, 2005, p.

697), observation, guessing, and avoiding difficult situations (Chu, 1999, pp. 348-9). This research suggests that these learners, though disenfranchised in some ways, are strong and capable of making decisions about their learning and for their families.

Use of the First Language (L1)

A method proposed to address barriers to ESL education such as low confidence and lack of literacy in L1 is the incorporation of the L1 in second language (L2 instruction; Fitzgerald, 2000, p. 521-522). In a well-known article, Auerbach (1993) calls instructors to question the English-Only restriction, arguing that an L1 approach is "not only effective but necessary for adult ESL students with limited L1 literacy or schooling" (p. 9). Klassen and Burnaby (1993) similarly discovered that limited L1 literate Spanish speakers found monolingual ESL classes inaccessible, yet these immigrants had managed to be successful in necessary tasks like cashing checks, filling prescriptions, and turning in immigration paperwork (pp. 383-85). From these findings, Auerbach concludes that monolingual instruction in the L2 can deflate self-esteem, but incorporating the L1 can attract unserved students, reduce affective barriers, and alleviate culture and language shock (p. 17).

The literature review revealed that successful ESL Family Literacy Programs share the following characteristics:

- They value home language and literacy practices of participants (Anderson, et al., 2010; Auerbach, 2002; Reyes & Torres, 2007; Shanahan et al., 1995, p. 591; Chu, 1999; Guth, 1993; Menard-Warwick, 2006).
- They involve bilingual volunteers and instructors to help build trust with the community (Keis, 2002, p. 136; Auerbach, 2002; Shanahan et al.,1995).
- They provide families with transportation (Keis, 2002, p. 137; Hayes, 1989), provide childcare and allow mothers to bring babies to class (Shanahan et al., 1995; Menard-Warwick, 2002; Hayes, 1989).
- They use participants' L1 to build L2 skills and confidence (Paratore, 2005; Menard-Warwick, 2002 ; Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Auerbach, 2002), establish a strong sense of community among learners (Fridland & Dalle, 2002; Shanahan et al., 1995; Buchinger Bodwell, 2004).
- They are well-planned and theoretically sound, yet flexible (Buchinger Bodwell, 2004).
- They are evaluated in terms of how well participants' needs are met (Auerbach, 2002; Frye, 1999; Guth, 1993; Mitchell, 1994).

COURSE IMPLEMENTATION

Project Éxito program directors used this literature review to inform development of a theoretically-sound, culturally sensitive ESL family literacy program to address participants' needs holistically. It attended to participants as whole people by providing childcare, transportation, bilingual educational materials, and a voice in the curriculum. The two-hour program began in the school cafeteria with 30 minutes of families reading and working on homework together. This time also provided a 'safety window' for families to arrive late without becoming embarrassed about interrupting an activity. Then, children went to the gym for their own enrichment program, which included reading, math, music, and physical activity. Parents remained in the cafeteria and attended a 45-minute English class. After the ESL class, they received a 20-minute lesson on nutrition and physical activity from a registered nurse, who also provided information about low-cost medical clinics and answered basic health questions. Finally, a Hispanic chaplain and mother led a 15-minute discussion on parenting issues, including discipline, culture, and self-esteem, in Spanish. At the end of each class, parents and children reconvened to share what they had learned and fill out course evaluations.

Because Project Éxito was a pilot program, there was no funding for its implementation, and all services (instruction, childcare, children's enrichment, healthcare education, etc.) were provided by qualified volunteers. All volunteers were given comprehensive background checks and a two-hour cultural competence training from the non-profit organization. Furthermore, a local church donated a bus and bus driver to transport families from local apartment complexes, and the staff of Sunny Park distributed fliers advertising the program to ESL families and allowed program participants use of the school cafeteria and gym one evening per week.

Curriculum Design and Participants

Appendix A outlines a list of course goals and objectives for the parent portion of family literacy which address the needs of the parents, their children, and the administration of Sunny Park. Goals and objectives are divided into four categories: school and community, student academics, parent language development, and personal growth. School and community goals and objectives describe how the parents will use language to navigate and communicate with the school system. Student academic goals and objectives describe how the parents will use language to understand and reinforce what the child is doing academically. Parent language development goals and objectives describe how parents will develop their own language,

literacy, and critical thinking skills. Personal growth goals and objectives describe how parents will build community and recognize and capitalize on their own strengths. All four goals strive to help parents not just assist their children in school, but also become more involved and confident teachers, decision makers, and advocates for their families. These goals and objectives informed course content and curriculum and provided a source of accountability towards the school administration, yet they are designed to be flexible and evolve according to students' needs. The first lesson, for instance, engaged students in a discussion on the value of reading in Spanish. The lesson, which targeted families' beliefs that reading in Spanish with their children was not useful in their academic success, presented students with theoretically sound examples of the value of home literacy—such as vocabulary acquisition—and challenged parents to discuss these examples in small groups. Appendix B outlines this lesson plan.

Parents registered for the course by filling out a needs assessment questionnaire in Spanish with the assistance of volunteers. Thirty-eight parents and ninety kids participated in this ESL family literacy program. All parents were native Spanish-speakers who reported no formal English instruction in the United States. Some reported attending only a few years of school in their home countries. All participants' children receive free or reduced lunches. Fifty-two elementary-school-aged children registered with their parents; the other children were infants, toddlers, and children in grades 6-12. Fifteen registered children were in kindergarten or pre-K, eight were in first grade, eleven in second, six in third, four in fourth, and eight in fifth.

Parents were given a voice in all aspects of curriculum design and evaluation. At the end of each class, they filled out a form indicating what they enjoyed about the class, what they did not understand, and what they wished to learn in following weeks. Choice in curriculum is important because parents need to feel that the materials they use will be immediately useful to their busy, demanding lives in order to see the benefit of attending classes. Parents were also encouraged to communicate with teachers by filling out weekly communication logs (see Appendix C). Logs included space for them to write questions or concerns. Parents filled out the logs in Spanish, and volunteers translated them into English for the teachers. Teachers read these logs and responded to parent questions throughout the week, and volunteers discussed the responses with parents in Spanish at the beginning of the following class. Parents and teachers alike reported that they found these logs enlightening, and they used them to dialogue about more than just academics. Parents, for example, used the logs to report concerns about the bus or ask about their children's social development and behavior. One parent wrote a thank-you note to each of her child's teachers in the log, thanking the teachers for spending extra time assisting her children. Teachers reported learning more about the families through the logs.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has outlined the rationale and course design for an ESL family literacy program at a suburban elementary school with a large Spanish-speaking ELL population. Although it is too soon to assess the program's influence on ISTEP scores, the school administration deemed the pilot program successful, offering to extend it into the summer through a collaboration with the public library. Parents, too, have voiced their satisfaction by attending regularly, evaluating the course positively, and signing up to attend the next year. In addition, program developers and teachers alike have observed increased parental involvement. At the program's genesis, parents waited for volunteers to help their children; by the last day, volunteers were sitting quietly while parents read to their children or wrote out sample math problems. Teachers, too, observed that children involved in the program turned in their homework more regularly. In the future, a thorough program evaluation should be administered through a variety of methods, including home and group interviews about how parents perceive the program, what other content they would like it to address, goals for their children's education, and their perceptions of how the school is addressing their children's needs.

The course presented a number of challenges. First, it demanded a significant time investment on the part of volunteers, who developed materials, distributed, collected, and translated parent-teacher communication journals, made copies, transported participants, and communicated with participants and the school. Any school wishing to undertake a similar project must not underestimate this time investment. Without carefully planned collaboration, a program will fail. In addition, transportation provided a logistical challenge. The school originally agreed to transport families, but because of liability laws, they could only transport school-aged children. Because several of the program participants had toddlers or babies, developers opted to seek transportation from a local church, instead. Cooperation between the school, family literacy volunteers, and participants proved critical to addressing these challenges. Parents and teachers encouraged each other by their reciprocal involvement in the program and communication, which, in many cases, had previously been limited to parent-teacher conferences. The content of teacher-parent communication journals also provided key themes for the course, and we were able to target exactly what parents needed at the moment. For example, several parents requested lessons about fractions because their children struggled in this area. As a result, we developed a lesson on fractions using tortillas.

Though this model may be adopted by other programs, there is not a one-size-fits-all model for family literacy, and successful programs will adapt according to the needs of participants and stakeholders. Project

Éxito has begun to address the needs of Sunny Park Elementary School's Spanish-speaking ELL students and their parents by drawing upon qualified volunteers to provide families a safe environment that affirms and builds upon their individual and cultural strengths and acknowledges their needs holistically. The result is instruction that is "based on theory and carefully planned," but also "responsive to students' needs and concerns" (Shanahan et al., 1995, p. 588).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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APPENDIX A: GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

School and Community
Goal: Parents will discuss basic information about their child and their child's school.
- Objective: State their child's name, age, grade, classroom teacher, interests, special needs, strengths and weaknesses.
- Objective: State the child's classroom teacher and room number and the contact information for the school.
- Objective: Fill out a variety of forms (permission slips, etc) for their child.

Goal: Parents will understand how the school system works.
- Objective: Read and interpret a report card and other classroom evaluations.
- Objective: Look up or inquire about important school dates and examination dates.
- Objective: Understand how to access community resources (library cards, low-cost health clinics, public transportation, etc.)
- Objective: Sign child up for extracurricular activities or services of interest.

Goal: Parents will initiate and respond to communication with classroom teacher.
- Objective: Ask classroom teacher questions about child's progress. Objective: Request a phone or face-to-face conference with the classroom teacher.
- Objective: Write short letters about absences or appointments. Objective: Recognize and restate key important information from school correspondence.

Student Academics
Goal: Parents will read with their children.
- Objective: Develop a repertoire of grade-appropriate books in the L1 and L2 to read with their children.
- Objective: Read using strategies such as predicting, guessing the meaning of words through context, discussing pictures, and reading for specific information.
- Objective: Identify language features of texts their child studies in various academic genres.

Goal: Parents will gain access to the language of math.
- Objective: Describe steps of basic math problems using English math vocabulary such as "add, subtract, multiply, divide," and other grade-level appropriate terms.
- Objective: Pose grade-level appropriate math questions to their children in everyday contexts (i.e. at home, the grocery store).

Parent Language Development
Goal: Parents will focus on key features of the English language found in their children's homework.
- Objective: Complete language activities and exercises to practice language used in their children's schoolwork.

Personal Growth
Goal: Parents will network with other immigrant parents about issues relevant to their lives.
- Objective: Work in groups with parents of children in the same grade level to complete a grade-level appropriate assignment
- Objective: Collaborate in groups to create informational sheets for the school about the perceived needs of their children.
- Objective: Make contact with one other classmate throughout the week to check how they are doing and keep them accountable for coming to class.

Goal: Parents will recognize their own strengths and how they can capitalize on them at home.
- Objective: Choose books to read with their children in their L1.
- Objective: Relate content of texts they are reading to their personal lives.
- Objective: Regularly ask their children what they learned at school and quiz their children on subjects they will be tested on.

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE LESSON PLAN ON THE IMPORTANCE OF L1 LITERACY

Begin by asking parents to discuss the following question in small groups:
True or False? / ¿Verdadero o falso?
> Reading a book with your child in Spanish will **not** help your child become a better reader in English.
> Leer con su hijo en español **no** le ayudará a su hijo leer mejor en inglés.

Ask parents to share their answers, and then "tell" them the answer:
> FALSE! / FALSO!

Reading books with your child in any language (Spanish, English, Chinese, Russian) will help them become better readers in English! Cuando lee con su hijo en cualquier idioma (español, inglés, chino, ruso), le ayudará a su hijo leer mejor en inglés.

Explain to parents the reasons that reading with their children in any language will facilitate growth in their reading skills in English:

Vocabulary development/ Desarrollo de vocabulario
- o *Present a series of English-Spanish cognates on the projector: animal, content, multiplication. Next to each word, there are three "multiple choice" pictures. For example, next to animal, there may be a dog, a train, and a book. Ask parents to identify which picture corresponds with each word.*
- o *Ask parents how they knew the answers, since they all report speaking no English. They will most likely respond that they knew because the words are similar in Spanish.*
- o *Explain that reading in Spanish helps children develop their vocabulary, even their English vocabulary*

Reading teaches your child new concepts. / El hecho de leer en su propio idioma le enseña conceptors nuevos a su hijo.
- o *Ask parents to discuss the meaning of "justicia"(justice) in small groups. Then, ask a few parents to report back to the class. Ask them whether the task was challenging or difficult.*
- o *Then, display the word "justice" on the board and ask who knows what it means.*
- o *Explain that when a child learns the meanings in their native language, all he/she has to do is learn the word in English. Learning the word is easier than learning the word AND the concept.*

The skills your child has in Spanish can transfer to English./ Las habilidades que tiene su hijo en español transfieren al inglés.
- o *Display the equation "1+1=___" on the projector*
- o *Ask who can read this equation in English. Then, ask who can read it in French. Then, ask who knows the answer to the problem.*
- o *Explain that even if you do math in Spanish, it is still math!*

Present the following on the PowerPoint

Three Tips for Helping your Child Succeed in School

Tres consejos para que ayude a su hijo tener éxito en la escuela

1) Read with your child every day in whatever language you choose.

Leer con su hijo cada día en el idioma que quieren.

2) Talk about school and homework (even math) in your own language.

Habla de la escuela y las tareas (incluso la matemática) en su propio idioma.

3) Connect with other parents and teachers.

Comunicarse con otros padres y los maestros.

Finally, present the question below to parents, and ask them to discuss answers with other parents.

How can I do these things with my child?

¿Cómo puedo yo alcanzar el tiempo a leer y platicar con mis hijos en español cada día?

Then, ask them to find another parent with a child in the same grade. Write their name and contact information (phone number, apartment number, etc.) on a sheet of paper.