

**Challenges and Promising Practices
in Early Childhood
and Family Literacy Education
for Language Minority Students**

by

The National Association for Bilingual Education

The history of the United States has been shaped by constant waves of migration. From the early settlements on the eastern seaboard to the more recent immigration flows into our nation's urban centers and subsequent spread to suburban and rural areas, the rapidly changing American demographic landscape demands dynamic policies and programs that can adapt to the changing needs of the U.S. population.

Nowhere is this more the case than in the area of education. At the beginning of the 21st century, for no community in America is the crafting of adequate policies and programs more important than for language minorities.

In 1994, the U.S. General Accounting Office issued a report which found that immigrant children make up about five percent of the country's school-age population and that the provision of adequate services to these students — many of whom are limited English proficient (LEP) — poses a considerable challenge to most state and local education agencies. Not surprisingly, the report also found that many of these immigrants speak languages other than English. In fact, from 1995 to 1996, of the top ten countries of origin for students served through the Emergency Immigrant Education Program (Mexico, Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Philippines, Russia, El Salvador, Haiti, China, Poland, and Jamaica), not one has English as its predominant language.

Serving Language Minorities

While linguistic diversity is generally considered an asset, this massive migration leaves schools with a major challenge — providing adequate services while ensuring the academic success of a growing number of children who don't speak English.

The 1990 U.S. Census estimates that there are two million language minority individuals residing in the state of Illinois. According to the Illinois State Board of Education more than 143,000 LEP students were enrolled in the state's schools during FY 2000. Most of these students (63%) were in grades four and below, and over 110,000 of them speak Spanish as their home language.

Illinois' language minority student population figures represent a growth of nearly 100 percent in less than fifteen years and mirror an important trend that is present throughout the nation. In light of this, early childhood education and family literacy programs hold great promise for immigrant language minority families. Much remains to be done, however, to ensure that the programs are accessible to these communities and that they adequately address their needs.

A first important step involves stepped-up data collection, as there is a great scarcity of specific information on the level of language minorities' participation in several key programs. Where data is available, it is evident that access by language minorities and appropriateness of services remains a central concern. For instance, according to the Census Bureau's March 2001 release of pre-primary school enrollment numbers, only 56% of Asian three to four-year olds are enrolled in some type of preschool program. The number is even lower for Hispanics — 37% of whose three to four-year old children are enrolled. And, while 20 percent of students enrolled in programs like Head Start speak a language other than English (in Chicago 43% of preschool participants are Hispanic), the majority of America's language minority children have never participated in a Head Start program.

Economic and cultural factors common to most language minority families shed considerable light on these trends. They represent just some of the many challenges faced by service providers in the design and implementation of programs that serve language minority families. They are

indicative of a growing need for focused efforts that examine factors specific to language minorities and determine coherent plans of actions in such areas as early childhood and family literacy.

Identifying Challenges and Charting Solutions

The following report will identify and expand on some of the more common obstacles to adequate services for language minority communities in early childhood education and family literacy efforts. In an effort to facilitate the adoption of relevant programmatic elements, it will also provide descriptions of effective models within these two areas of instruction.

Particular attention will be given to the linguistic and cultural needs of the target community, and recommendations in the areas of access, program design, personnel recruitment, and policy formulation will be furnished.

ACCESS TO PROGRAMS

An extensive body of research indicates that preschool experiences are central to students' development of contextual knowledge as well as to their development of language, social, and cognitive abilities.

For children living in poverty, preschool helps offset the social, emotional, cognitive and physical challenges that — if left unattended — place them at risk for school failure in later years.

For language minorities, preschools can provide highly effective bilingual programs that build on children's existing language strengths and cultural ties. Nevertheless, for most language minority families the promise of such early intervention remains unfulfilled. This is largely due to:

- 👉 Lack of full funding for preschool education at the federal and state levels;
- 👉 Preference of immigrant families for at-home care versus formal in-school early childhood programs; and
- 👉 Insufficient outreach to language minority parents regarding the importance of early childhood education.

Prior to entering school, four out of five kindergartners receive care from someone other than their parents on a regular basis. This care is most often provided in a center-based setting (in 69 percent of the cases), followed by care by a relative (24 percent), and care by non-relatives in private homes (15 percent). Where children from homes where English is not the primary language are concerned, however, the likelihood of having received any type of center-based services before entering kindergarten is considerably lower.

The explanation is a simple one. Over twenty-five percent of language minority families live at or below the federal poverty level, and expenses related to preschool care and instruction represent a considerable hardship on most of these households.

Also of great importance is the reluctance of language minority parents to have anyone other than family members take care of their young children. In fact, nearly half of Hispanic mothers opt to stay at home during the early years of their children's lives. Those needing childcare frequently prefer calling on relatives — who may be numerous and available for little or no cost — rather than searching for a preschool.

The state of Illinois funds Early Childhood Education Block Grants that include parental training, pre-kindergarten, and prevention initiatives. Public schools, charter schools, and state-approved public university laboratory schools are eligible for this pre-kindergarten at-risk initiative. Under this program, pre-kindergartens can serve children, ages three to five, who are identified as being at risk of academic failure.

Among the criteria used to determine eligibility for participation is level of proficiency in the English language. And, the Illinois Board of Education has requested \$187 million in FY 2002 funds for all the Block Grant programs. Despite these steps, there is insufficient funding to serve all eligible children in the state. As a result, there are considerable waiting lists. In the state's largest urban center – Chicago, only 312 out of 510 elementary schools offer a preschool program.

This lack of adequate funding, coupled with cultural apprehensions and limited public information in non-English languages, continues to severely curtail access to these important programs for language minorities. This is compounded by the need of language minority children for extra support in extended learning settings.

The same is true for language minority participants in family literacy programs. While there are also notable efforts in place to promote such initiatives within immigrant communities, much remains to be done to improve access for language minorities to these programs.

Illinois has almost \$8 million in federal after-school funds distributed among 20 programs, and Chicago alone funds 23 parent centers with federal Title I dollars. These are extremely important efforts to support family literacy but continue to lack the capacity to reach the state's growing language minority population.

Family Literacy

Where family literacy programs are concerned, research has demonstrated the positive influences that they can have on subsequent literacy achievement in school. This fact is of great importance to language minority parents, many of whom face considerable linguistic and educational challenges – especially in taking part in their own children's day-to-day education.

There is a widely held belief that it is difficult for a classroom or school to make up for lack of literacy activities in the family. Thus, there is an emphasis on pairing family literacy programs with early education programs. Projects that rely solely on the family to provide intervention for their young children do not work as well as those programs that also involve professionals.

There is much variation among family literacy programs, but one important aspect of successful ones is that they are tailored to the needs of the specific populations that they serve — making programs more accessible.

In a review of the literature on the federally funded Evenstart Family Literacy Program — which has had some of its best success with Hispanic families — for example, researchers found four features critical to the success of programs:

- Steps taken to ensure participation, which range from the provision of childcare and transportation, to addressing emotional barriers such as fear of school and low self esteem, to recognizing, respecting, and incorporating cultural and familiar differences;
- Use of a curriculum that is both meaningful and useful — that includes, for example, linguistically appropriate instruction, workplace preparation, and modeling and coaching of parent-child literacy activities;

- Participation of stable and capable staff who bring diverse expertise to their work; and
- The necessary funding to ensure that these programs can be sustained over time.

APPROPRIATE SERVICES

Equally important to increased availability and access to these programs is the need to ensure that they provide adequate services. This is especially true for language minorities, who are capable of achieving to the highest of standards, but for whom programs often fall short of delivering culturally and linguistically appropriate services in such critical areas as classroom instruction and materials.

To ensure equal access, programs must adapt to the needs of language minorities and recognize the cultural, linguistic, and economic characteristics of these communities.

Language and Learning

Of primary importance is a focus on the language needs of program participants. Special language needs are, after all, a defining characteristic of this group, and — for any learning to take place — communication is essential. This underscores the need for teachers and para-professionals who are trained to use the students' native language in instruction, and who have a solid understanding of the cultural context that the student brings to the classroom. Strong bilingual education programs — including several throughout the state of Illinois — are rooted in this concept and have shown considerable success not just in teaching children English but in helping them attain overall academic success.

Another good example of incorporating the cultural and linguistic context of the student relates to continuity in parent and teacher practices. A great deal of the literature available on this topic emphasizes the importance of cultural continuity between practices in the home and school in facilitating children's learning — a concept readily adaptable to early childhood education and family literacy. Parent and teacher practices differ to varying degrees, but research suggests that particularly when parent and teacher income levels or education levels vary, their practices are also likely to vary significantly.

Where parent and teacher practices differ (e.g. in the Hispanic culture parents generally use a directive style of communication, with little collaborative conversation, elaborated conversation, elaborated speech models or early literacy experiences), as long as parent practices are not abusive or harmful, teachers of young children should adapt their own practices to match the home experiences of the student. This should be the case at least when the children first enter programs.

Not factoring these and other important elements in program design and implementation can lead to student maladjustment and compromise the educational benefit to language minority children.

Program design should also consider that not all language minority children will be limited-English proficient at the time of enrollment, and facilitate the transition to elementary education for both parent and child.

Many students enrolled in good preschool programs encounter a challenge upon enrolling in elementary schools. Large numbers of limited English proficient and many bilingual students are placed in programs that assume low levels of achievement and focus on remedial instruction in an attempt to make-up perceived deficiencies. Programs should also acknowledge that even though many language minority families come from the same country and speak the same language, their needs can vary greatly.

Challenges Unfold

Like other states in the Union, Illinois has placed particular emphasis on literacy and accountability — a very positive development. As with all other populations, however, to ensure the success of language minorities these loftier expectations must be accompanied by increased and targeted support.

Literacy

As the basis of all learning, it is unfortunate that so little data exists with respect to literacy and language minorities. What we do know, however, is cause for great concern. Hispanics are about twice as likely as non-Hispanic white students to read well below average. (NAEP) And, while the National Academy of Science (NAS) cites evidence that limited or non-English speaking language learners are more likely to become better readers of English when they receive initial instruction in their native language, the majority of these students receive little — if any — specialized instruction.

Critical intervention points and problematic areas vary by age and language proficiency of individual children; however, some generalizations may be made. For instance, a heavy reliance on phonological approaches to reading instruction can create difficulties for young children who are proficient in a language other than English and have not mastered the English phonemic system. These difficulties arise not only from not having mastered the English phonemic system but also from phonological interference from the native language.

Once children begin formal reading, limited vocabulary in English can interfere with the mechanical and comprehension aspects of reading unless special attention is given to language and vocabulary development. Once children begin to use their reading skills to access content (usually around the third grade), vocabulary and general comprehension skills become key. Language minority children who have not had appropriate reading instruction to this point often fall behind in all subjects.

Accountability

Illinois has a well-developed system of content and performance standards, and the state considers limited English proficient students in the statewide assessment component of the accountability system. For the first 3 years of participation in a state approved Bilingual/ESL program, these students can either take the regular tests (Illinois

State Achievement Test — ISAT) or the Illinois Measure of Annual Growth in English (IMAGE).

These efforts are commendable, and more must be done to build on the practice. As content standards are implemented, districts must acknowledge the special implications of—and provide adjustments for — LEP students of all language backgrounds.

Where schools are concerned, an extra effort must be made to provide LEP students with a robust curriculum that incorporates the standards and is delivered by well-trained teachers.

Finally, as research yields more information about appropriate assessment of LEP students, continued refinements to the assessment system — including measurement of skills in the native language — must also be made.

PERSONNEL QUALIFICATIONS

Because language minority children have such a unique array of characteristics, it is of extreme importance that providers of educational services be well prepared to adequately meet their specific needs. This is true in all aspects of instruction of language minority communities and is especially crucial in early childhood and family literacy.

It was not until the last decade, however, that the majority of states put in place licensure programs for early childhood teachers — and most of these programs begin at the kindergarten level. Thus, many childcare professionals attend associate-degree-granting institutions. The majority of them are far short of being adequately prepared to either understand or help language minorities deal with the challenges they encounter in the American educational system.

The low salaries paid to the teachers of preschool children aggravate the severity of this situation. Often these educators receive less than half the compensation of elementary level public school teachers.

Moreover, those attending traditional teacher education programs face training that:

- Fails to see the interconnectedness between first and second languages and cultures;
- Fragments and isolates language teaching and learning;
- Has narrow views on the components of language and overlooks the social nature of language;
- Focuses too much on teaching methodology and not enough on integrated, generative processes in which learners play an active role in learning; and
- Is disjointed and treats language and culture as separate entities.

Additionally, while findings suggest that teachers' and para-educators' knowledge of the cultures, communities, primary languages, and familiar interactional styles of students can greatly facilitate effective instruction, most education professionals receive little or no formal preparation in these areas. And, while states like Illinois have a growing LEP population, qualified bilingual preschool educators and family literacy personnel remain in very short supply.

Recognizing these challenges, the National Head Start Latino Leadership Network included the following among recommendations issued at its 1999 Summer Institute:

- Develop a technical assistance program to bring providers in touch with the needs of the Hispanic community. This may involve engaging partnerships with the public/private sector and involving families and communities to develop culturally/developmentally appropriate practices for Latino children;
- Develop a research agenda to examine what is happening in the Latino communities and how best we can serve this growing population. This research will allow the child care community to evaluate and assess the unique supply and demand issues of the communities to influence policy development;
- Form an advisory leadership committee to develop a deliberate, collective, and planned process for meeting the needs of Latino children and families.
- Lead agencies at the state level should tend to the unique and growing needs of the Hispanic community and use technical assistance in Hispanic jurisdictions to address such needs as outreach to informal providers and Latin parents.

These recommendations are closely linked to the recommended attributes and qualifications of family literacy programs and personnel.

Additional personnel qualifications for family literacy programs include:

- Sensitivity to diverse cultures;
- Broad knowledge of child literacy development;
- Adequate proficiency in the language of participants;
- Previous experience working with the community and education setting; and
- Clear understanding of program goals.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Despite the existing challenges to ensuring that language minorities have access to quality services in early childhood and family literacy programs, several initiatives in the state of Illinois and throughout the United States are achieving great success in this task.

PROGRAMS IN ILLINOIS

El Valor – Parents as First Teachers (Chicago, Illinois)

The Parents as First Teachers program was developed in partnership with the Chicago Public Schools and El Valor — an organization dedicated to enriching children and strengthening families by providing early childhood education while helping parents become involved.

The program trains selected parents in El Valor's Head Start Program to work with families that have children between three and five years of age. Through this home visiting model, El Valor parent-tutor mentors provide educational enrichment for children and support parents as their children's first teachers.

This early investment in Hispanic youth by the public school system has resulted in the improved academic preparation of students. The school has seen more active involvement by parents in their children's elementary education and an increase in their willingness to ask questions and to participate in school activities.

Rachel Carson Elementary Transitional Bilingual Education Program (Chicago, Illinois)

A pre-K through 8th grade urban school with 1100 (92%) Spanish speaking background students. It has a transitional bilingual Spanish program and a dual language preschool program. The school as a whole serves the Spanish background students and their community. The principal and a number of staff members are bilingual. The arts are used to enhance academics, build community, and provide a multicultural environment.

Rachel Carson is a bicultural school with a transitional bilingual education (TBE) program and a preschool dual language program. Although only 40% of the students are enrolled in TBE, most of the ancillary staff, music, gym, computers, and language arts teachers are bilingual and are able to effectively teach all Carson students and communicate with their parents. About 80-90% of Carson's parents prefer to interact in Spanish.

School Leadership and Climate

The principal, a bilingual educator herself, serves as a leader and facilitator of the various staff and parents' committees in charge of curriculum planning and instructional innovation. The School Improvement Plan, designed by teachers, the principal, and parents, steered the school into its path of success. The principal established links with the local library, museums, and other educational and civic organizations to secure support for school programs.

The Multilingual Committee meetings are well attended by parents and community members. Outside professionals provide information to the committee in relation to such matters as health, child rearing, discipline, and improving learning for students.

Respect is an important element of students, staff, and community relations. Staff, parents, and students share responsibility in resolving conflicts and problems. Parents have organized a patrol to ensure students' safe passage to the school.

Curriculum and Instruction

The Carson bilingual classrooms are well-stocked with English and Spanish books. Class time is devoted to reading daily in the form of independent reading and teacher read-alouds. The reading series contains a transition component and allows bilingual and English-only classes at the same level to study similar literature, themes and skills.

The Carson School strongly promotes cultural awareness throughout the school year. Examples of some programs all Carson students participate in are: *Cinco de Mayo* Cultural Awareness Programs (developed by staff, students, and parents), Urban Gateways Program and Artist in Residence Program (enables students to experience different cultures), Pen Pal Programs (with Lithuania and Japan), and cultural arts programs presented by parent volunteers. The school has hosted teachers from Japan and Spain who have shared their culture with students.

Connections with Parents and Community

All communications, newsletters, reports, and Local School Council meetings and minutes are conducted in English and Spanish. Staff members make an effort to communicate students' progress and expectations to parents and students. Carson School offers a variety of workshops and classes for parents including English as a Second Language and preparing for citizenship. City resources, such as job counseling, community policing, and the local park district programs, are regularly introduced to the families. Each group of grade level teachers offers a mini-course to assist parents with homework and child development issues.

Professional Development

A grant made it possible for the bilingual lead teacher to study Spanish children's literature in Madrid, Spain. Teachers school-wide attend reading seminars to discuss books (both adult and children's literature) with teachers from across the city.

Project FLAME Family Literacy for Latinos (Chicago, Illinois)

Project FLAME (Family Literacy: *Aprendiendo, Mejorando, Educando*/Learning, Bettering, Educating) is a program that provides literacy training and support for limited English proficient Latino parents so that they can influence their children's literacy and academic achievement in a positive manner.

The project is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA), the University of Illinois at Chicago, and private foundations. Based in six elementary schools serving largely Latino populations (Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Central American groups), the project serves approximately 15-20 families in each school. Each of these families has at least one child who is between three and nine years of age.

The design of Project FLAME includes two integrated components -- Parents as Teachers sessions and Parents as Learners sessions. The bimonthly Parents as Teachers sessions are conducted in Spanish and focus on four areas of home literacy influence: literacy modeling (encouraging parents to model literacy uses for their

children); literacy opportunities (increasing the range of literacy materials available in the home); literacy interactions (demonstrating ways to engage in literacy activities with children); and home-school relationships (providing opportunities for teacher-parent discussions and classroom observation). The Parents as Learners sessions meet twice weekly and focus on English as a second language (ESL) or Basic Skills classes. These sessions are designed to meet the specific education needs of the parents in the program and are connected to the Parents as Teachers sessions. In addition, parents are invited to the university for summer institutes where speakers address related community issues and education themes.

Because Project FLAME is a university-based project, graduate students in bilingual/ESL education programs originally taught both the Parents as Learners and Parents as Teachers sessions. As the program expanded, a training component was developed that employs previous participants as the teachers for the Parents as Teachers sessions. In this way, family literacy became a means for developing the capabilities of parents as literacy leaders in their schools and communities.

Several key features distinguish Project FLAME from other literacy programs for language minority families, the most notable being its comprehensiveness. Some programs, for example, only emphasize parent-child book-sharing activities. Project FLAME, on the other hand, embeds this valuable activity within a rich network of other parent-child literacy interactions. FLAME neither relies entirely on a skills-based orientation to reading instruction, nor neglects the value of skills learning for children. Unlike many other programs, Project FLAME trusts that parents will have a major, positive impact on their children's learning. The dramatic learning gains apparent for FLAME children can be unambiguously attributed to parent action. Finally, FLAME attempts to build capacity within the community to sustain the program once university and federal support are no longer available.

Now completing its fifth year, FLAME has achieved great success. It is the largest family literacy program in Chicago and has provided education services to over 300 families. Program evaluations have consistently documented that children whose families have participated in Project FLAME score 30 points higher than their peers on standardized tests and require fewer special school services, such as tutoring. Besides contributing to their children's literacy development and academic success, the project's parents have also begun to use their newly acquired skills to affect change in their own lives and within their communities. Three parents, for example, now hold seats on the local school council; others have engaged in a letter-writing campaign for better health care services in the neighborhood, enrolled in community colleges, or secured employment since joining the program.

PROGRAMS OUTSIDE ILLINOIS

AVANCE (San Antonio, Texas and various sites throughout the U.S.)

AVANCE has 80 comprehensive family centers located in schools, churches, and housing projects throughout Texas. This parent-child education program provides a comprehensive, community-based nine-month intensive parent education program serving low-income Hispanic families with children younger than three years of age.

Parents attend weekly parenting classes in child growth and development, toy making, field trips, and holiday celebrations and are made aware of community services such as health, nutrition, mental health, literacy, and job training. Childcare and transportation are provided, as are additional services, including monthly home visits to observe or videotape parent-child interactions.

Compared with a control group, mothers in AVANCE's program:

- Provided a more organized, stimulating, and responsive home environment;
- Provided more developmentally appropriate toys;
- Interacted more positively and initiated more social interactions with their children;
- Used more consistent praise;
- Spent more time teaching their children;
- Used more developmentally appropriate speech with their children; and
- Were more encouraging of their children's verbalizations.

The results suggest that as they enter school, children of AVANCE participants will be better prepared to succeed. In fact, a follow-up study of AVANCE graduates revealed that 94 percent of their children graduated from high school and 43 percent were attending college. Also worth noting is that 60 percent of the AVANCE parents included in the study had returned to school.

The Kamehameha Early Education Project (Oahu,Hawaii)

The Kamehameha Early Education Project (KEEP) is a 20-year research and development effort that substantially improved the early reading achievement of Native Hawaiian children by using the children's native language and by placing emphasis on culturally responsive aspects of social organization, cognition, and motivation. Such techniques as the use of talk story tied the culture to instruction. Its researchers and teachers developed instructional guides and curricula that significantly improved early reading achievement including general principles of effective teaching and classroom organization. The original laboratory site was in Oahu and was also implemented in other sites around the state.

OTHER MODELS

Success for All (various sites throughout the United States)

Success for All is designed around research into effective teaching methods, and the program has an extensive body of research demonstrating its effectiveness. Statistically significant positive effects have been found on every measure from grades 1 to 5, with especially large gains for students most at risk for failure. These effects have also been shown to be cumulative: While first-grade SFA students are about three months ahead of matched control

students in reading, by the fifth grade, they outscore control students by an average of a full grade level. Bilingual students and students in the lowest quartile of their grades average even higher gains, with effect size changes of +1.00 or more.

POLICY RECOMENDATIONS

With the rapid growth of the language minority population in the United States, a dire need for increased funding tops the list of policy implications. Without sufficient funds, programs that provide adequate services to language minority families will remain scarce and/or ill prepared to meet their important mission.

To ensure that the effect of funding from state, local, and federal programs is maximized in services to language minorities, a full examination of eligibility requirements across early childhood and family literacy programs should be conducted.

Furthermore, as in all other programs, to ensure increased access and improved quality of services to language minorities, implementation of early childhood and family literacy programs should be monitored, and program design should be research-based.

Also worth noting is the lack of data that exists with respect to language minorities — particularly where low-incidence populations are concerned. Emphasis should be placed on the collection and disaggregation of this data as it will help to greatly enhance the design and impact of programs.

Innovative use of technology can also play an important role in these efforts. This is evidenced by the work of the Illinois Resource Center which is currently developing E-Kits that focus on curricula and assessments using the ESL standards and companion documents. These electronic kits contain practical and research based information to be used as a resource for parents and educators of English language learners.

In the area of personnel recruitment, policies should facilitate the training, hiring, and retention of persons knowledgeable on all aspects of language minority instruction. These individuals should be part of program design and be hired to work in all areas related to language minority children.

Although students may be categorized by race, national origin and/or a common language, variances will occur within groups. Policies must be based on identified needs and specific criteria, while recognizing that when it comes to instruction — one size rarely fits all. This will allow for program flexibility in the provision of services to a population that is very diverse.

An effective student identification system should be devised to allow language minority students who lack Social Security and/or Public Aid numbers to access early-childhood and family literacy services.

Policies should recognize that all children — regardless of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds — can benefit from exposure to multilingual and multicultural learning environments. Through careful planning and sharing of resources, early childhood and family literacy programs can help address the specific needs of language minorities while supporting the development of bilingualism in the broader community.

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