

A STUDY OF HOW TO EFFECTIVELY PREPARE LATINO PARENTS FOR
SUPPORTING THEIR CHILDREN'S LITERACY

By

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A Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in English as a Second Language

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

December 2010

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

From the time I began teaching ESL at the elementary school level, I have found that schools and teachers have high expectations for how parents participate in their children's education. However, I have also learned that many parents do not participate in activities such as reading at home with their children in Spanish or English. This was not a huge surprise to me because many of the parents of English language learners do not feel comfortable reading in English, so it only seems logical that reading with their children in English would be a challenge.

This made me begin recommending that parents read with their children in their first language when possible. Since the largest language group of ESL students at my school is Spanish and many Spanish books are available in the school and public libraries, reading resources should be readily available for these families. It has already been established that reading in a child's first language positively affects his or her reading abilities in the second language; the literacy skills learned in a first language transfer to a child's second language (Bialystok, et al., 2005). Children are able to learn two writing systems simultaneously, and this actually is to their benefit. When two languages use the same writing system, such as Spanish and English, the literacy skills from one language transfer well to the other (Bialystok, et al., 2005).

Actually, research not only shows that literacy skills from a child's first language transfer to the child's second language, but it also demonstrates that children need to know their first language well and have strong interactions in that language in order to later learn their second language well (Arnold & Colburn, 2007). It is important for all educators who work with English language learners to understand how to best prepare families to participate in first language literacy activities at home. While resources are available in many communities, families might not be fully utilizing these resources. Depending on the language that families feel most comfortable using, they should be encouraged to participate in extensive literacy activities at home; Hammer, Miccio and Wagstaff conducted a study on Puerto Rican mothers and their children in 2003 and found that simply increasing literacy activities would improve children academically. If parents felt more comfortable participating in these activities in Spanish, it was equally beneficial to English literacy activities.

Previous research has also found that many families are very receptive to literacy resources and activities that are provided for the families. In fact, some families that speak a language other than English at home have literacy activities taking place in their homes already (Kenner, 2005). Schools are often important facilitators for encouraging Latino parents to participate in literacy activities with their children at home if they do not already participate in home literacy activities (Reese, et al., 2008). Delgado-Gaitan's (1990) study on literacy of Mexican families explains that many of the literacy activities taking place in homes were encouraged through a preschool teacher.

Background of Researcher

The topic of parent involvement supporting literacy in the first and second languages of my Latino students has become very important to me during the four years that I have taught ESL at my school. The parents that participated in the research are the parents of my ESL students. I have met most of the parents at conferences and have had the opportunity to converse more with some of the families about education and personal topics. I have found that many of my Latino students are unable to speak Spanish well, and many more students have never learned to read in Spanish. The literature that I have read supports my belief that bilingualism and biliteracy would be a great advantage to my students both in their personal lives and in their future professional lives. Because many Latino parents show interest in helping their children academically yet are limited by their English levels, I would like to help make it possible for these parents at my school to contribute to their children's education using their first language.

Guiding Questions

This research will focus on this guiding question: What support do Spanish-speaking families need from schools to help their children develop literacy? The research will also attempt to answer the following supporting questions: What kind of family literacy activities take place in the homes of Spanish-speaking elementary school children in Spanish and English? How do Latino parents' perceptions and experiences with schools in their countries influence their experiences with their children's school in the United States? How can educators support the educational needs of Spanish-speaking families? What do Latino parents find helpful at family events presented in Spanish?

Role of Researcher

I answered these questions through facilitating focus groups in which Latino parents from my school discussed home literacy practices and education. To follow up, I organized a Spanish reading event to meet some of the needs that the parents expressed in the focus groups. There was a questionnaire following the family night to evaluate what they liked and found useful and to ask for any suggestions for future improvement. I also invited the parents who attended the Spanish reading event to a follow-up focus group that I led in Spanish. At the focus group they were invited to share opinions, what had helped them about the event, what they had been able to do in response to the event at home, and what would be beneficial in the future. Through the focus groups and the survey following the family night, I found several ways to effectively support the educational needs of the Latino families in my school.

Conclusion

Research already shows that strong language and literacy skills in a child's first language are beneficial to that child's growth in the area of reading. While many communities have Spanish books available for Latino parents to read with their children, not all Latino families participate in these activities. Some of the literacy activities that Latino families participate in, such as oral literacy activities or literacy related to life skills, are different from the literacy activities that take place in many middle class families whose first language is English. Often, schools are the facilitators that encourage and train parents to participate in literacy activities with their children. This study describes what I found out to be the support Spanish-speaking families need from

schools to help their children to succeed academically. The literature review in Chapter Two will discuss former research in the areas of bilingualism and biliteracy, home literacy practices, and parent education. Chapter Three will describe the methodology of the study, including the justification for the qualitative research paradigm, the data collection techniques, and the procedures. Chapter Four will include the results of the focus groups and the questionnaire following the Spanish reading event. Chapter Five will contain the major findings of the study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

What support do Spanish-speaking families need from schools to help their children develop literacy? The purpose of this research is to find the answer to this question. This chapter reviews literature in the following areas: parent involvement, the importance of literacy in school success, bilingualism and biliteracy, and programs that have promoted literacy in Latino families. All of these areas provide important background information related to answering this research question.

Parental Involvement

The Necessity of Parental Involvement

The participation of Latino parents in their children's education is necessary for the success of the children (Olivos, 2004; Marschall, 2006; Ladky & Stagg Peterson, 2008). The role of educators that wish to support Latino parents is to aid them in becoming independent representatives to advocate for their children's success in school (Olivos, 2004). Increased representation of Latinos in school leadership positions also encourages the involvement of Latino parents in schools and the increases the success of Latino children (Marschall, 2006). The involvement of immigrant parents in schools can take many different forms; in some schools participation may be formal, and in others, it may be informal. At times, the schools need to look to informal or non-traditional ideas of parent involvement to facilitate true involvement of immigrant parents. This

involvement increases the success of Latino children in school (Ladky & Stagg Peterson, 2008).

Non-traditional Forms of Involvement

Many immigrant parents show the desire to support their children's education at home and at school. Ladky and Stagg Peterson (2008) studied 21 immigrant parents of varying educational levels, 61 teachers, and 32 principals; this Canadian study reports on successful ways of involving immigrant parents in their children's education. The study reports that many parents showed the desire to be involved in their children's education, but they often felt limited by language. Many parents preferred informal volunteering on field trips and at cultural events over formal volunteering. Other suggestions for parent involvement activities that had been successful in their schools were ESL classes for parents, cultural nights, barbeques, newcomer orientation groups, and making bilingual books as families. Many of these activities represent informal activities that increased involvement of immigrant parents in schools.

The Role of Educators in Parental Involvement

Educators should assist Latino parents in becoming more active and independent so that they may promote change in the issues that affect their children in school. Olivos (2004) came to this conclusion after studying the involvement of Latino parents in a California school. While many Latino parents may appear to be uninterested in their children's education, they actually may not have had the opportunity to learn about the educational system and may have experienced resistance to sharing their needs. Olivos found that as Latino parents have become more knowledgeable about the educational

system in the United States, they become more assertive in dealing with the school; however, schools may not be accustomed to the high expectations of Latino parents, which could cause conflict. Olivos (2004) claims that educators should be open to helping Latino parents to find contradictions in the school system and help them to become more independent in promoting positive change in schools. Another example of the positive effects of the participation of Latino parents in schools is in Chicago; the involvement of Latino parents in this case was more formal (Marschall, 2006). Marschall found that including Latino parents and community members in leadership roles at schools had a positive impact on Latino parent involvement in the schools. In Chicago schools, having a local school council (LSC) at each school allowed for involving Latinos in roles of leadership. With higher Latino representation on LSCs, teachers became more culturally aware, and as teachers became more culturally adept, parent involvement increased in schools. Not only did including Latinos on LSCs increase the level of parent involvement in school activities, but it also contributed to increased achievement of Latino students in these schools.

Bilingualism and Biliteracy

Studies suggest that bilingualism is beneficial to children's intellectual and academic functioning (Bialystok, et al., 2005). They also show that literacy activities in Spanish benefit a child's education and reading skills (Hammer, et al., 2003).

Benefits of Bilingualism and Biliteracy

According to Carlson and Meltzoff (2008), bilingual students who have learned Spanish at home perform better intellectually than monolingual students. What they

found out when they studied bilingual Spanish-English speaking kindergartners who learned Spanish at home, monolingual students, and Spanish-English bilingual students from an immersion program was that the bilingual students who spoke Spanish at home outperformed the other students in many executive functioning tasks when accounting for socio-economic status. According to a study by Bialystok, Luk and Kwan (2005), bilingual children also outperformed monolinguals on academic tests of decoding, phoneme segmentation, and short-term verbal memory. Their study based this on the performance of first grade children who fit into one of the following groups: monolingual, Spanish-English bilingual, Hebrew-English bilingual, or Chinese English-bilingual. It was found that the Spanish-English bilingual children and the Hebrew-English bilingual children performed highest, while the Chinese-English bilingual children performed in the middle, and monolingual English speaking students performed the lowest on the tasks. This study suggests that literacy skills transfer among languages, especially those with similar writing systems; Spanish, Hebrew, and English are similar in that they all have alphabets as a part of their writing systems. Spanish and English have alphabetic systems in which the letters represent the sounds of the language, and both consonants and vowels are written (Fasold & Connor-Linton, 2006). Hebrew has a consonantal alphabetic system in which only the consonants are represented by letters (Fasold & Connor-Linton, 2006). It has not shown as much benefit for children who are literate in Chinese and English, attributing this to the different writing systems of the two languages (Bialystok, et al., 2005). Chinese has a logographic writing system in which

each written sign represents a morpheme in the spoken language, rather than a sound in the alphabetic languages (Fasold & Connor-Linton, 2006).

The Necessity of Strong Oral Language and Literacy Activities

As a part of bilingualism, children need a strong foundation of oral language and literacy from their parents. Strong oral skills aid children in becoming successful readers (Miller, et al., 2006) and literacy activities are beneficial to Latino children in both Spanish and English (Hammer, et al., 2003).

Strong oral skills in either Spanish or English for ELLs in kindergarten through third grade are a predictor of reading success in either of the two languages (Miller, et al., 2006). Bilingualism is complex, it is not easy to maintain, and children will not initially have both languages completely developed (Macroy, 2006). However, because of the benefits of bilingualism, educators should support it in any way possible and provide opportunities for the child to use the lesser-used language.

The frequency of literacy activities at home is a strong indicator of the academic success of Latino children. In order to increase academic performance of Latino preschool children, it is recommended that the children have increased exposure to literacy activities in their homes. Information on literacy experiences and academic performance of Puerto Rican children attending Head Start has been researched by Hammer, Miccio, and Wagstaff (2003). Some of the children spoke primarily Spanish at home and then learned English at Head Start, and some of them spoke both Spanish and English at home. The study did not show that activities in either language were more

beneficial to early academic success; instead, the frequency of literacy activities was a primary indicator of success.

Research already suggests that strong bilingualism and biliteracy is beneficial to children and that they should be supported by both parents and educators. However, these articles do not specifically address how to promote bilingualism and Spanish literacy activities to Latino parents. This research intends to address the best ways to support Latino parents in addressing the academic needs of their children, which may include bilingual or Spanish language activities.

Importance of Literacy for School Success

Several factors are important to consider in regards to home literacy activities for Latino families that prepare children for success at school. First, extensive exposure to literacy in the home will aid a child's success (Hammer, et al., 2003). Second, non-traditional literacy activities should be considered (Mercado, 2005). Third, teachers play an important role in encouraging families to participate in literacy activities at home (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Mercado, 2005).

Frequency of Literacy Activities

The frequency that Latino children participate in home literacy activities is a strong predictor of reading success for school; this is even more important than the language used at home for speaking and reading (Hammer, et al., 2003). A study on Puerto Rican mothers and children, who were attending Head Start, revealed this finding (Hammer, et al., 2003). Whether the students spoke only Spanish at home or both Spanish and English did not have a large impact on the children's reading success. The

main suggestion from this study was for children to receive increased exposure to literacy activities in whichever language was used at home (Hammer, et al., 2003).

Non-Traditional Literacy Activities

Many Latino families may be comfortable participating in non-traditional literacy activities with their children, and these activities are beneficial to children (Mercado, 2005; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). Literacy activities present in some Mexican homes relate to parental aspirations, oral literacy activities and text-interaction activities (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). In this study, parents motivated their children both behaviorally and academically to have respect, discipline, cooperation, and success in school. They also told stories which demonstrated cognitive flexibility when they made changes to well-known stories to challenge their children's thinking or to surprise them. In addition, families participated in letter-writing activities to relatives. Mercado (2005) found that some Puerto Rican families strongly value literacy, and it usually centers around making sense of and responding to life situations such as health, legal issues of family members, identity of self or community, and spiritual comfort and guidance. Literacy is not only buying or checking out books to read; literacy activities can also take place in public transportation and in the homes of others. The literacy activities mentioned here are not traditional for most middle class Americans, but they do promote literacy in a way that many Latino families are able to relate to and in which they can support their children.

Educators' Role in Encouraging Family Literacy

Because teachers are aware of the necessity for home literacy activities, and Latino families are responsive to the guidance of teachers, it is imperative for teachers to

encourage Latino families to participate in reading and writing activities in their homes. (Mercado, 2005; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). Although Latino families value literacy activities, some families may need guidance (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). Teachers should support bilingualism, biliteracy and language play as a part of learning; they can encourage families to participate in non-traditional literacy activities (Mercado, 2005). Research on Mexican families shows that many families read at home because of the encouragement of a teacher (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). This demonstrates that Spanish-speaking families are supportive of their children's reading when given guidance in how to support their children. It also shows that teachers have a very important role in encouraging home literacy activities.

Programs Supporting Latino Family Literacy

Several communities and schools have been studied to find the frameworks and programs that have supported literacy in those communities. In one community, it was clear that the parents had high expectations for their children and valued the moral education of their children (Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001). In all of the communities, the parents participated in reading activities with their children. It was also found that schools were able to facilitate the literacy activities in which families participated at home (Reese, et al., 2008, Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001; Larrotta & Ramirez, 2009).

Reading Activities in which Families Participate

In all of the communities that were studied, parents participated in reading activities with their children (Reese, et al., 2008; Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001; Larrotta & Ramirez 2009). For example, parents discussed books at parent sessions and then took

them home to read and discuss with their children (Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001). Also, families took advantage of access to school libraries, appropriate homework, and opportunities to participate in literacy activities (Reese, et al., 2008). Parents also used reading strategies with their children that they learned from a Spanish literacy project. They engaged in reading and dialogue with their children and used their cultural and background knowledge to improve the learning experience of their children. In addition, parents were able to learn to be better readers and enjoy reading (Larrotta & Ramirez, 2009).

Schools and Communities Facilitating Literacy Programs

All of the settings in which the parents participated in literacy activities with their children have one common thread: the schools or communities facilitated this opportunity (Reese, et al., 2008; Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001; Larrotta & Ramirez, 2009). In one community, the school libraries were made available to the parents and literacy activities were provided to the families; even in communities with limited resources, families participated in literacy activities when the schools provided the resources and activities (Reese, et al., 2008). In another community, educators sent home questions for families to discuss in their first language, they wrote books as models for families to write together, and they facilitated parent sessions with books and discussion questions (Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001). In another community, a Spanish literacy project was formed for Latina mothers and their children. The parents learned and practiced reading strategies to use with their children because the school provided this opportunity and the parents cared about their children's success (Larrotta & Ramirez, 2009). The Latino

parents in all of these settings were interested in helping their children become successful, and the schools facilitated programs or opportunities that enabled the parents to support their children in literacy.

The Gap

These studies show that the participation of parents in their children's literacy learning at home is very important. They also support that bilingualism and biliteracy is of benefit to children and give suggested activities. However, there is a gap in the research showing how to implement a program that applies to the specific needs of the families in my context; namely, a suburban elementary school of approximately 500 students with 140 ESL students, 100 Hispanic students, and no bilingual education services. Therefore, my over-arching research question is:

What support do Spanish-speaking families need from schools to help their children develop literacy?

In order to answer this question, I gathered data to answer the following sub-questions:

- 1) What types of Spanish and English literacy activities take place in the homes of my Latino students?
- 2) How do Latino parents' school experiences in their own countries impact the education of their children in the United States?
- 3) How can my school support Latino families and their educational needs?

Conclusion

The information in the above studies shows the importance of parent involvement to achieve strong first language speaking skills and literacy activities for Latino children.

It also describes the current literacy practices in which many Latino families participate. It suggests some ways to present literacy activities to families. However, these studies focus on specific situations and do not necessarily take into account the specific needs and desires that may be expressed by the parents of children at my school. The following study will investigate the perceptions of Latino parents of elementary school children at my school in regards to what they find to be the most effective ways to prepare them for promoting their children's literacy. Chapter Three describes the process of how this information will be researched.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

What support do Spanish-speaking families need from schools to help their children develop literacy? I answered this question by investigating Latino parents' opinions about needs in the area of the education of their elementary school children and to plan an event to support their needs that is consistent with their values.

This was a qualitative study that utilized focus groups and short questionnaires to learn about the opinions, values, ideas, and needs of the Latino parents at my elementary school to be able to support parents in helping their children develop literacy. The focus groups were used to find initial information. I planned and carried out a Spanish reading event in response to the focus group information, and questionnaires were used to find parent feedback. I carried out a follow-up focus group to receive parent feedback from the event and find if they were able to participate in the presented activities at home.

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter explains the methodologies used for this study. First, I will justify the reasons for the use of qualitative research design. Second, demographic information will be presented about the participants and the setting, and the data collection techniques of the focus groups and questionnaire will be explained. Third, I will describe the procedures for my study. Fourth, I will explain how I analyzed the data in this study.

Fifth, I will tell how I ensured that the data was valid. Finally, I will explain the safeguards that were used in this study to ensure that it was ethical.

Qualitative Research Paradigm

The paradigm that I used to answer my research question is qualitative research. Qualitative research is a type of inquiry that seeks information in its natural setting, uses rich description, is often influenced by the researcher, is focused on one particular case or situation, and includes few participants (Anderson, 1998; Tomal, 2003; Mackey & Gass, 2005). This form of research fit well with my data collection because I needed to gather information from the families in a setting that was as natural and comfortable as possible in order for them to share their true thoughts (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). Because qualitative research uses rich description, I described the results of the focus groups and the questionnaire that was completed by parents after the event (Tomal, 2003; Mackey & Gass, 2005). Parents' thoughts and ideas were organized through description as they cannot be truly represented through numbers. The focus group was an effective way to have a natural conversation with a group of people about their feelings, practices, and needs about supporting their children in school (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). I worked with a small group of participants to meet the needs of families in my school following the protocol of qualitative research, as it is often focused on a small group and the results do not need to be generalizable to other populations (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Therefore, the open-ended questions on the questionnaire also allowed the parents to respond to the questions by giving them the chance to write their opinions.

Focus Groups

The first data collection technique I used was focus groups. According to Anderson (1998), “A focus group is a carefully planned and moderated informal discussion where one person’s ideas bounce off another’s creating a chain reaction of informative dialogue” (p. 200). I used the specific method of focus groups to gather information from parents on their home literacy practices, their ideas about educational practices, and their opinions of how the school could better support them.

Conducting focus groups is an effective way for a person with power to gain feedback or information from a group of people with little power (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). This is important to my research setting because many of the Latino parents at my school may not have had the opportunity to share their ideas and opinions in the past; they may feel that they lack power, and the teachers and administration of the school are the people with the power. This lack of power is based on how the American educational system has not represented Latino parents’ opinions in the past and has sometimes even discouraged the participation of Latino parent. In the American school system, school personnel are sometimes not welcoming toward Spanish-speaking parents, administrators often do not understand them culturally and linguistically, and important decisions have been made without the input of Latino parents (Olivos, 2004).

Using focus groups is also effective when there is a gap between professionals and the group being researched; this gap could be in language, culture or logic (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). For example, teachers may use their own cultural understanding in deciding how parents should support their children’s academics and school work; the

parents may also have a very logical reason based on their culture for believing that they can best support their children's academic progress in a different way. A focus group allows the professional to hear and better understand the way the group thinks and talks (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). In order for me to serve the needs of the Latino families at my school, I need to understand how they think and what their perceptions are; focus groups provided the setting to do this. In the two initial focus groups I gathered information on the parents' ideas in relation to these ideas and their wishes. The follow-up focus group gathered information on what the parents liked about the Spanish reading event, if the families were able to do any of the presented activities at home, and on their suggestions for future family events.

Questionnaire

A short questionnaire was used to gather information about the parents' opinions of how helpful the final family event was for their families, what they liked, and what they did not like. The questionnaire was completed by the parents who attended the Spanish reading night at the end of the event. I chose to use this form of data collection because questionnaires are used to gather information from large groups on beliefs and reactions to activities or learning (Mackey & Gass, 2004). The questionnaires were short because the parents participating were at a variety of literacy levels. The questionnaires were offered in both English and Spanish, but all of the parents chose to complete it in Spanish. The questionnaires allowed me to gain this information from all of the participating parents as the Spanish reading event drew some families that did not participate in the focus groups.

Data Collection

Participants

The participants in this study were thirteen Latino parents of 17 children in kindergarten through fifth grades at the school where I teach. The English proficiency level of the students and their parents varied, but they were all parents of students who receive ESL services. Most of the parents are originally from Mexico, but many of their children were born in the United States. The opportunity to participate in these focus groups was offered to the parents of the Latino students with whom I work. I sent an invitation home to the parents, asking them to RSVP if they would like to participate in the initial focus groups. Because only two parents attended the first focus group, a mother who attended offered to call the other parents who had responded to remind them about the second focus group. All Latino families in the school were invited to the Spanish reading event; the families who attended were invited to the follow-up focus group. Table 3.1 documents the attendance of the parents at each event. In parenthesis is the number of children they have attending our school. Note that mother M and Father M are parents from the same family.

Table 3.1

Event Attendance

	Focus Group One	Focus Group Two	Spanish Reading Event	Follow-Up Focus Group
Mother A (2)	X	X	X	
Mother B (2)	X			
Mother C (2)		X		
Mother D (1)		X	X	X
Mother E (2)		X	X	
Mother F (1)		X		
Mother H (2)		X		
Mother I (1)			X	
Mother J (1)			X	
Mother K (1)			X	X
Mother L (1)			X	X
Mother M (1)			X	X
Father M (same family as Mother M)			X	X

Location

This study took place at a suburban elementary school in the upper Midwest. The school had approximately 500 students at the time of the study, including about 110 Latino students. This school had between 140 and 160 English language learners during the time of the study and had seen an increase in the number of ELLs in recent years.

Focus Groups

The steps to carrying out a focus group, according to Anderson (1998), are as follows. First, the researcher must find the focus for the group and invite participants to participate in the group discussions. Then the researcher must develop five or six questions to guide the discussion. Next, the focus group is conducted with a skilled moderator. At the focus group, the questions are presented, and the moderator facilitates

discussion so that all participants feel comfortable and have the opportunity to share their ideas. It is often helpful to record the discussion and have an assistant who takes notes. Following the focus group, it is essential to analyze the data as soon as possible. I used focus groups for my data collection because there is a perceived power difference between me, a teacher, and the Latino parents of my students. According to Morgan and Krueger (1993), focus groups are ideal for gaining information from groups of people when a difference in power exists because it helps the person with perceived power to understand the person who does not have power.

Some potential challenges in using this method are that some participants may talk too much and others may not talk at all (Anderson, 1998). In order to minimize this challenge, I used body language, eye contact, and direct language to signal to participants that it was necessary to move on (Anderson, 1998). I also asked specific individuals their opinions on some topics if they did not participate very much (Anderson, 1998). The questions for focus group 1, focus group 2, and the follow-up focus group can be found in Appendices A, B, and E respectively.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire is a written tool that gives the respondents questions or statements to which they respond by writing an answer or choosing among the options for answers (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The components to making a questionnaire are determining the research questions, drafting the questionnaire items, sequencing the items, formatting the questionnaire, pilot-testing the questionnaire, and forming a strategy to collect and analyze the data (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). A challenge to using

questionnaires is that questions that bring insightful responses are difficult to create (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). I faced this challenge by carefully drafting and sequencing the items; in addition, I pilot-tested the questionnaire with a native Spanish speaker.

The questionnaire included closed and open-ended questions. This was done because close-item questions are often more reliable and can be more easily analyzed (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The close-item questions should have seemed less overwhelming to parents who do not feel very comfortable writing; they were multiple choice questions. I also included some open-ended questions because they allow for more creativity in responses and could contribute more insights to my research (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The questionnaire was short to meet the needs of parents with limited literacy skills. In addition, there were Spanish-speaking people present to read the questions or clarify the questions to parents who did not understand the format or the meaning of the questions. The questionnaire is included in Appendix C.

Procedure

Focus Groups One and Two

The initial focus groups took place in a classroom of the school, and I carried them out in Spanish. There were two focus group sessions before the family event that were to allow parents to share and reflect on new ideas. I limited the number of sessions to two because typically when focus groups have more than two sessions, they run out of new ideas (Anderson, 1998). Each session was 90 minutes in length to allow time for an introduction and discussion. The children were supervised in another room of the school

during the parent sessions. There was a follow-up focus group after the Spanish reading event that was a similar format to the two initial focus groups.

All of the Latino parents of my students were invited to participate in both of the initial focus group sessions. However, at the first group there were only two participants. At the second group, there were six participants. They were seated in a circle with me as the moderator to create a comfortable environment for discussion (Anderson, 1998). I asked the questions in Spanish and took notes on their responses; a digital recorder was also used to record the events. The parents' responses were in Spanish, but some parents occasionally inserted English words into the conversation, probably because they were more familiar with the word in English or did not know the Spanish equivalent to the English word.

Spanish Reading Event

The Spanish reading night that followed the initial focus groups was opened up to all Latino families in the school to participate in. At that event there were nine parents in attendance representing eight families; the families included eight mothers and one father. When parents arrived at the event, there was a Spanish-speaking paraprofessional that greeted them and directed them to take their children to the cafeteria. In the cafeteria, there were six adults at three different literacy stations. The adults were two teachers from the school, two Reading Corps volunteers from the school, and two outside volunteers who were also teachers. Then the parents went to the Media Center where they sat around tables with Spanish books in the middle. The parents, Spanish-speaking cultural liaison, bilingual paraprofessional and I introduced ourselves. Next I gave a

multimedia presentation on the benefits of reading with children in the first and second language, places to find Spanish books (such as the public library), and how to make connections with children while reading. Several parents contributed ideas and asked questions. Following the presentation, I modeled the reading connection of making connections. Next, the children came to the media center and read with their parents. After that, the children returned to the cafeteria to have refreshments and choose a Spanish book to take home while the parents filled out a questionnaire. Eight of the parents filled out questionnaires. Some parents checked out Spanish books from me. At the end the parents returned the cafeteria for refreshments with their children.

Follow-Up Focus Group

Five parents representing four families attended the follow-up focus group, which had the same format as the first two focus groups. I asked the questions in Spanish, and the parents responded in Spanish. The parents at this focus group did not talk very much. Their children were in a different room with the cultural liaison participating in games and learning activities. At the end of the focus group, the children each chose a Spanish book to take home.

Data Analysis

Triangulation

I used triangulation in my study by using two different methods to collect data; by the use of methodical triangulation, I hoped to strengthen the reliability of the results (Mackey & Gass, 2005). I used two initial focus groups, a questionnaire, and a follow-up

focus group to collect data on parents' ideas pertaining to supporting their children in literacy.

Focus Groups

To analyze the data from each focus group, I first went through the data immediately following the group sessions to record the big ideas and concepts that were discussed (Anderson, 1998). Following this, I transcribed the data (Knodel, 1993). I reviewed the results from the focus groups with another ESL teacher to ensure accuracy. Next, I coded the data with different colors according to categories of responses (Knodel, 1993). The categories were created based on the initial concepts, or big ideas, that were written down following the focus group (Anderson, 1998). Once the data was sorted into themes, I wrote a summary statement for each theme based on frequency of response and any negative comments (Anderson, 1998).

Because analysis of focus group data is subjective, I asked for the help of an ESL teacher as an assistant to interpret many of the sections (Knodel, 1993). This provided for better reliability in the analysis of my data.

Questionnaire

In analysis of the questionnaires, I sorted the responses into categories to find similar themes (Anderson, 1998). I looked at the parents' comments for suggestions for future literacy events.

In order to establish reliability in the questionnaires, I used grounded theory in analyzing the data. I allowed the data to drive the analysis and examined the data from multiple viewpoints (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

Verification of Data

In order to ensure internal validity in the data and its analysis, I worked closely with an assistant who is an ESL teacher. This assistant reviewed the data to check for any inconsistencies or inaccuracies in the collection and analysis of my data. In addition, grounded theory was used to look at the data from multiple perspectives. I also used triangulation to ensure that the results I obtained were valid by using two initial focus groups, a questionnaire, and a follow-up focus group.

Ethics

The following safeguards were used in this study to protect the participants' rights:

1. The participants were explained the objectives of the research.
2. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.
3. The study was submitted to human subjects review before it took place.
4. The names of participants were not used in reporting the results of the study.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explained the methods I used to gather information from Latino parents on their educational ideas and preferences for ways the school can assist them in supporting their children's educational success. Focus groups and questionnaires were used in this qualitative study. In the Chapter Four, I will report on the results I found from this study.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The focus of my study was to answer this research question: What support do Spanish-speaking families need from schools to help their children develop literacy? I will first report on the two initial focus groups and the major findings that came from the focus groups. Next, I will explain the events of the Spanish reading night for families and the results from the questionnaire the parents filled out after the event. Finally, I will share the results from the final focus group.

Focus Groups One and Two

For the first focus group, the parents of all of my Latino ESL students were invited through a flyer and asked to RSVP. The flyer stated that the event would include a discussion group for parents, childcare, refreshments, and a free book for each child. Only two mothers attended the event, but they contributed many ideas. In fact, one mother volunteered to call the other families to remind them of the next event.

Six mothers participated in the second focus group, and all of them were Mexican. I explained the purpose of the groups to them. Several of them said the phone call reminded them to attend the event. Some of the questions from the first focus group were repeated because only two mothers attended the first focus group. Some mothers spoke very little during the focus group, and other mothers contributed a great deal to the conversation. I had to guide the conversation and ask questions of some specific mothers

in order to ensure that they all contributed their ideas. Toward the end of the event, the mothers appeared to be getting very excited about some of the ideas shared and the possibilities those ideas might bring.

Focus Group Data

After categorizing the comments of the focus groups, several major themes arose. Some themes were the challenges with homework, the greater responsibility of children in Mexico, family events in Mexico, how Latino parents support children, and how schools can help Latino families. Through the first two focus groups, the mothers expressed several important ideas to consider when deciding what type of Latino family events to provide at the school. First, they explained that in Mexico schools have family events; these events are often social activities such as graduations or Mother's Day events. This demonstrated that these parents were used to attending school events. However, some of the mothers stated that they did not feel comfortable coming to events at the school in the United States because they did not speak English well enough. Also, they explained that Mexican parents care about their children's education and show this through encouraging them to do well at school; however, Mexican parents do not always help their children with their homework or read with them. This reinforces the idea that children in Mexico take more responsibility for their own education because the parents encourage their children to do well but give the responsibility to their children for their performance. In addition, the parents expressed that they highly valued the bilingualism of their children. Some of the mothers explained situations with their families or friends in which the parents spoke to their children in Spanglish or in English, and, as a result,

the children were unable to function completely in Spanish. Some parents said they had tried reading with their children in English, but most of them stated that it was a challenge for them because they did not know how to pronounce the words correctly in English, and some did not read in English at all. Many of the parents had tried reading with their children in Spanish, but it also presented challenges—their children do not read in Spanish, and some children prefer reading in English. Some mothers felt the need for better communication among Spanish-speaking parents so that they would feel more comfortable coming to school. The parents also expressed a need for better communication in relation to homework and their children's progress.

The ideas shared at the initial focus groups demonstrate a need for encouraging parents to be involved in their children's education through family events that are presented in Spanish which give them suggestions for how to help their children at home in Spanish. They also show that many parents are unable to help their children with reading or homework in English, so a way to help their children in Spanish would be beneficial to many Latino families. Also, because parents value the bilingualism of their children, parents would be in support of activities that support their children's Spanish skills.

Spanish Reading Event

Five months after the focus groups, a Spanish reading event was organized to address the needs of the Latino families in the school and to encourage parents to participate in their children's education through reading to them in Spanish. All of the Latino parents from the school were invited to the Spanish reading night through a flyer,

and the parents who returned an RSVP form were called by a parent to remind them about the event. Nine parents attended with their children, representing eight different families. There were eight mothers and one father. There were activities for the children in the lunchroom while the parents were in the school media center. During the event, information was presented in Spanish on the benefits of reading with children and on the specific benefits of reading in Spanish with children. Next, parents were provided information about finding Spanish books, including information on the public libraries and the activities they offer in Spanish. After that, the reading comprehension strategy of making connections was explained and modeled through a read-aloud. It was explained to the parents that students in all grade levels are taught to make connections while they read. Text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections were briefly explained, but the focus was mainly on making text-to-self connections. The parents were given a handout with all of this information. Then, the parents chose a book, the children were brought into the media center, and the parents read the books to their children, modeling how to make connections and helping their children make connections to the book. At the end of the event, the parents completed the questionnaire, the children chose two books to take home, and there were refreshments. Parents were also given the opportunity to check out Spanish books to take home to read with their children, and several parents did this.

Questionnaire Results

Appendix D contains the results from the questionnaire. The questionnaire was offered in Spanish and English; however, all parents chose to complete it in Spanish. I

later translated the results into English. Parents were asked to choose one answer for multiple-choice questions, but many chose all of the options that they felt applied.

The results of the questionnaire show an overall positive response to the Spanish reading event. Most parents liked several of the activities, and the two areas that were chosen most for what they liked were the information on how to make connections and receiving a free book for their children. None of the parents responded that they disliked any of the activities. All of the respondents said that they could participate in one of the reading activities at home or go to the library with their child, with the two most frequently chosen responses being reading Spanish books with their child and making connections when they read with their child. Several parents requested future events and requested that there be similar information presented. Other suggestions for the future that were mentioned by a few parents were to have parents participate more in the future, to have math activities, to have someone call parents to remind them of events, to have an event to get to know other cultures, to have the events more often, and to provide information on how to help children with homework. One parent wrote that the event was important because it demonstrated to the Hispanic parents that someone was listening to them and wanted to help them be better parents.

District Latino Parent Events

A challenge to attendance at the Spanish reading night was an event the school district planned for Latino parents on the same night. The district invites Latino parents to these events several times per year but does not communicate information about the events to the teachers, so I was unaware that the event was taking place on the same date.

Increased communication between the district diversity department and teachers could also increase the effectiveness of events for Latino parents.

Follow-Up Focus Group

All of the parents who attended the Spanish reading event were invited to the follow-up focus group through a flyer at the reading event, a flyer sent home with the child before the event, and a phone call the day of the event. Five parents attended this group, representing four families. There was childcare provided for the children, refreshments for everyone, and the children received a free Spanish book to take home after the focus group session. The group took place in the same classroom as the two initial focus groups with the chairs set up in a circle. I asked the questions in Spanish, and the parents responded in Spanish. The parents did not talk very much in response to the questions, and the same responses were repeated frequently.

The responses to the Spanish reading event shared at the last focus group were positive overall. They showed that all of the parents had been able to read with their children in Spanish, make connections while reading, or take their children to the library since the Spanish reading event. Several of the parents shared that they had successfully made connections with their children while reading and that their children enjoyed it. One parent said that the information on the library helped her, and she was able to visit the library and learn about the activities that the library offers in Spanish. For future events, the most common responses were that parents would like similar events, and they would also like events related to how to do math homework. Parents also requested more help with homework on the questionnaires. According to some parent comments, the

challenges with making connections to some books and with asking follow-up questions to reading show that parents could also benefit from learning other reading strategies to practice with their children when making connections is not the best strategy.

Another thing to be considered is how to encourage parents to participate more in future events for Latino families. Some parents mentioned that other parents' work schedules may have prevented them from attending the events, and if events were offered at different times on varying days of the week, other families may be able to attend. They also mentioned in the focus groups and questionnaire that they were more likely to attend an event when someone called them to tell them about the event. This is significant because for two of the focus groups and the Spanish reading event, parents were called by a Latino parent or cultural liaison to remind them about the event and to encourage them to attend. This information suggests that parents are more likely to attend an event when another parent or Latino staff member affirms the event or explains the event to them.

Conclusion

This chapter shared the findings from the two initial focus groups, the questionnaire after the Spanish reading night, and the follow-up focus group. The results from the two initial focus groups led me to plan and implement a Spanish reading event for families. Based on the findings from the questionnaire and final focus group, I concluded that the families believed that the events at the Spanish reading event benefited the families who participated. Based on the results from the questionnaire and the focus group, the parents found the Spanish reading event beneficial and were able to participate

in Spanish reading and the strategy of making connections with their children at home. This suggests that Spanish reading events can be an effective way for the school to support Spanish-speaking families so they can help their children to succeed academically. As suggested by parents, an event for Latino families about math homework would also be helpful in the future. In Chapter Five, information will be presented on the major findings of the research, implications, limitations, future research, and communication of the results.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to answer the following question: What support do Spanish-speaking families need from schools to help their children develop literacy? In the last chapter I presented the results of two initial focus groups asking Latino families about education, bilingualism, reading, and family events at schools. I also summarized the results to the questionnaire parents filled out after the Spanish reading night and to the focus group that followed the Spanish reading event. In this chapter, I will discuss the major findings of my research, the implications of the research, limitations to the research, future research that could be done in similar areas, and how the results of the research will be communicated.

Major Findings

The Spanish Reading Event was Beneficial

Based on the results of the questionnaire and follow-up focus group, it is evident that the Spanish reading event was a success for several reasons. First, parents said they liked many of the activities at the event, including information on where to find Spanish books, information on making connections, practicing making connections with their children, and receiving a free book for their children. Also, parents at the focus group stated that they had read with their children in Spanish since the Spanish reading event, and several of them reported that making connections had improved the experience of

reading with their children. In addition, some parents were appreciative of the opportunity to have an event in Spanish in which they could participate, since most school events are in English. Because research suggests that increasing the frequency of literacy activities at home is a strong indicator of the academic success of Latino children (Hammer, et al., 2003), this event encouraged parents and gave them some skills to help facilitate this success in their children. Research also indicates that Latino parents are willing to perform literacy activities with their children at home when educators guide them in what to do (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990), and my study supported this research because the Spanish reading event was an event that provided Latino families with the guidance so that they could help their children develop literacy. These factors show that the Spanish reading event was a success.

Communication Between Parents and Schools

In the questionnaire and the focus groups, parents expressed the need to be reminded about events through a phone call. Several parents mentioned that they attended an event because they received a phone call. Also, the number of parents that attended the focus group increased from two to six from the first to the second focus group when a parent called the other parents to remind them to attend. Based on these occurrences, having a Latina mother make phone calls to remind parents about Latino family events may increase attendance at the events and, therefore, get more parents to attend so that more will have the opportunity to learn information that could help them contribute to their children's academic success. In addition to reminding them about the

event, having another parent call them may endorse the event in their eyes or show them the value of the event.

Homework

In the focus groups and in the questionnaire, parents mentioned the need for help in assisting their children with homework. They expressed confusion about how to help their children with their homework and about the purpose of assignments. During the second focus group, some parents stated that they need clearer communication from the school in the area of homework.

Parents also shared that they need more information in the area of math homework. This indicates that many parents find it challenging to help their children with homework, specifically in the area of math, so including more information on how to complete math homework at future events would be beneficial to families.

Implications

Based on the research findings, it is evident that it could be beneficial for schools with Latino families to hold Spanish reading events in order for families to support their children's literacy. As was indicated by Delgado-Gaitan (1990), many families read at home because of the encouragement of teachers. The families in this study also applied what they learned during the Spanish reading event; they read more with their children and went to the library more frequently. In future events at this school and at others, similar topics could be covered to give parents additional suggestions for reading with their children. This could be presented in a format in which the parents could participate more by having the parents who attended this Spanish reading event take more leadership

roles in future events. This participation could be through inviting other parents, leading icebreaker activities, or sharing how they have had success through reading with their children.

In addition, it would be beneficial to Latino families if educators organized future events related to math and homework. Since the main homework challenge that parents expressed was math homework, an event related to math homework would be a good place to begin an event on homework. Based on parents' comments, an explanation of the terminology and format for their children's homework would likely be of benefit to them. It would also be beneficial for teachers to be prepared to explain the homework in a way that would be clearer to Spanish-speaking families and answer the questions that they have about homework.

My study indicates that it is important for someone who speaks Spanish to call parents to remind them about future events and encourage them to attend. In the second focus group and in the questionnaire, parents said this was helpful. The attendance was also notably increased by making these phone calls. For future events, it would be important to not only call parents who say they will attend, but also to invite parents by phone who do not respond to the flyer inviting them.

Limitations

This study also has some limitations. One limitation to the results is that parents may not have felt comfortable telling a teacher if they did not like an aspect of the event; in order to be respectful, they may have avoided giving constructive criticism. This makes it difficult to know if any parts of the event should be changed.

Also, a small group of parents from the school participated in the event. The findings presented in this study only represent the ideas and actions of parents who decided to come to the events; this may mean that only the parents who had a strong value for reading shared their ideas. What other Latino parents in the school may find beneficial in helping their children succeed academically could be different from the ideas of the parents who participated in the Spanish reading event and focus groups.

Future Research

While this study reports on the benefits of a reading event for Latino parents, it leaves several areas that could still be researched. Further research could be done to see the long-term results of more than one Spanish reading event for families. In addition, more research could be done on math homework events in Spanish, getting families to come to school events, how parents perceive their role in their children's education, and teaching children to read in Spanish.

Communicating and Using Results

I will communicate the results of this research to the principal, the teachers, and the two cultural liaisons at my school. It is important for me to share this information with the teachers at my school because research by Marschall (2006) showed that as teachers became more culturally aware, Latino parent involvement increased in schools. This information will be shared through a short summary and a brief explanation of the needs that parents expressed. I will also discuss the findings further with a committee of teachers who are responsible for planning family events for the school, especially regarding the needs and preferences parents expressed about future events. With this

committee, the results will be used to plan and implement future events for Latino families in the school.

Summary

I have learned several important ideas while researching what support Spanish-speaking families need from schools to help their children succeed academically. First, I found that holding a Spanish reading event in which families are taught the importance of reading in Spanish and how to carry out a reading strategy was appreciated by parents, and the parents performed the activities they learned at home with their children. I also learned that parents need more guidance in the area of math and homework to support the academic success of their children. Finally, I found that in order to increase attendance at events, it is very important for a Latino parent or school liaison to remind families about events through phone calls. I hope that through the knowledge I have attained in these areas, I will be able to facilitate more successful events at my school to guide Latino families in helping their children to succeed academically.

APPENDIX A

Focus Group One Questions

Focus Group One Questions

1. Did you have the chance to go to school in your country? What was different about school in your country from the schools here?
2. How do teachers and parents communicate with each other in your country?
3. What type of family events do schools in your country have?
4. What role do parents play in helping their children succeed in school in your country?
5. Do you feel confident in helping your child in his/her studies in the US?
6. What are the challenges to supporting your child's education in our school?
7. What could the school do to help you to support your child's education?

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Two Questions

Focus Group Two Questions

1. How do parents in Mexico help their children to be successful in school?
2. Is it important for your children to speak and read in Spanish, English or both
3. What kind of reading/writing activities in English to your kids do at home languages?
4. What kind of Spanish reading or writing activities does your child do at home?
5. What language do you read with your child in?
6. Is there anything that is challenging when your read with your child?
7. What could the school do to help you to support your child's education?
8. If we had events for Latino parents, what topics would you like?

APPENDIX C

Questionnaire

Questionnaire – Choose one answer for each question.

1. What did you like most about the family night?

- A. Receiving information about where to find Spanish books.
- B. The explanation of making connections.
- C. Practicing making connections with my child.
- D. Receiving a free book for my child.
- E. Other (explain) _____

2. What part of the family night did you like least?

- A. The information on where to find Spanish books.
- B. The explanation of making connections.
- C. Practicing making connections with my child.
- D. Other (explain) _____

3. Could you do any part of these activities at home? Yes _____ or No _____

If so, what: A. Visiting the library.

B. Reading Spanish books together.

C. Making Connections while reading with my child.

D. Other (explain) _____

4. What should we keep the same at the next family night?

5. What should we do differently at the next family night?

6. Do you have suggestions about other types of activities we should have in the future?

APPENDIX D

Questionnaire Results

Question 1

What did you like most about this reading event?	Number of people who selected this response
A. Information about how to make connections.	6
B. Other (explain).	5
C. Receiving a free book for my child.	4
D. Practicing making connections with my child.	3
E. Information about where to find Spanish books.	2

Comments on B (Other):

- I like to participate in these events because I always learn something new.
- I liked all the information that I received today.
- Reading books, we spend time together and get ideas.
- Everything was of great interest to me.
- Everything, there was a lot of important information.

Question 2

What part of the reading event did you least like?	Number of People who selected this response
A. Other (explain).	6
B. The information about where to find Spanish books.	0
C. The information about making connections.	0
D. Practicing making connections with my child.	0

Comments on A (Other):

- I liked everything.
- I have no complaints I liked everything.
- None. Everything was good. No opinion
- I liked everything.
- All the information was important.
- I liked everything.

Question 3

Could you do any of the activities at home? Yes or NO?

Yes: 8

No: 0

Which part?

Number of people who
selected this response

A. Reading Spanish books with my child.	7
B. Making connections when I read with my child.	6
C. Visiting the library.	4
D. Other (Explain).	1

Comments on D (other):

-All (This was calculated in above numbers)

Question 4

What should we do the same at the next family event?

-Invite more parents.

-Read with our children.

-Have another event like this one where you give me information about how to help my child.

-Everything, because the ideas that were presented at this event were of great interest and they were helpful to be able to support my daughter in her studies.

-How to do homework with my child.

-The same. More suggestions to explain to the children how to learn better.

-Remind the parents of how important it is to read with our children.

-We should do these events more often so that the Hispanic people know that someone is listening to us and helping us to be better parents.

Question 5

What should we change for the next family event?

-Nothing. If it's possible to get the parents more involved so they participate.

-Everything was good.

-To have more events. One event at least every 2 weeks or for example one meeting every Tuesday.

- I don't think it needs a lot of changes because the personnel are trained to give the necessary and basic information to be able to understand our children.
- More information, teaching strategies to keep our children attentive when they are learning.
- Everything that we did was very nice.
- I don't think that anything needs to be changed.
- Everything was good.

Question 6

Do you have suggestions about what kind of activities we should do at future events?

- A way to get to know the other parents and their cultures better because maybe not all the parents are Mexican.
- That the events be more often.
- Practicing reading a lot. Doing crafts.
- Possibly make it a little more dynamic so parents participate more, but not because of the personnel, just to get the parents to participate a little more.
- What creative learning activities I can do with my child, ideas.
- More events for parents to be able to learn more things to help them.
- Activities related to math.
- That someone should call us on the phone to remind us about these events. To have a time for parents to converse about school and our children.

APPENDIX E

Follow-Up Focus Group Questions

Follow-Up Focus Group Questions

1. What part of the Spanish reading event helped you the most?
2. Have you been able to do any of the activities that we talked about last week?
3. What should we do the same at the next event?
4. What topics would you like to see at future events?
5. What could we do to improve or change other events?
6. Were there any challenges to reading with your child?
7. Do you think the parents who haven't come are interested in family events? What could we do to encourage other parents to come to the events?

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