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Professional Development for Educators to Promote Literacy Development of English Learners: Valuing Home Connections

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Professional Development for Educators to Promote Literacy Development of English Learners: Valuing Home Connections

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Abstract

While families play a vital role in the early literacy skills of young English learners (ELs), their educators often do not share the same backgrounds or cultures, and may not know how to connect with parents who are linguistically and culturally different. As part of a year-long, grant-funded professional development project, the authors led teams of educators from two districts through a series of workshops which included ways teachers could increase home-school connections to support the children's literacy. Data from participant surveys with Likert-scale and open-ended questions provided evidence that the professional development experiences resulted in an increase in the educators' perceived knowledge of how to collaborate with families to foster the literacy development of young ELs.

KEYWORDS: home-school relationship, literacy development, English learners

Children's first and most important teachers are their parents and caretakers in their home environment. They, along with the family and community, "are the foundations of literacy development in the life of the child" (Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015, p. 4). Given the valuable role that families play in the early education of children, educators can help facilitate their students' language and literacy development by recognizing the value of the relationships and interactions at home and by becoming aware of and learning how to draw on the "funds of knowledge" that children bring to school (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

This article focuses on critical components related to fostering parent-teacher partnerships through the implementation of a yearlong professional development project with Pre-K through third grade educators. Through a carefully sequenced set of professional development workshops and experiences, the project targeted the language and literacy development of young English learners (ELs). In particular, the professional development around valuing home experiences was designed to meet participating teachers where they

were philosophically and professionally, and worked systematically to help them reach four important objectives: 1) to examine their own personal literacy experiences and funds of knowledge that have shaped them and their instructional practices, 2) to develop an understanding of language and literacy development of ELs and the vital role of their families and first language 3) to become informed and appreciative of the many different kinds of language and literacy practices that their learners experience, and 4) to begin to build relationships between families and school by changing instructional practices and outreach. After completing the workshops, participants indicated that they had significantly changed their thinking about how to better support their ELs' literacy development with the role of home language and culture becoming an important part of that support.

Review of Relevant Literature

Matthews and Kesner (2008) remind us that “learners begin their literate lives in the laps and by the sides of significant others” (p. 244). Views of literacy development grounded in sociocultural theory maintain that shared meaningful experiences set the stage for learning to occur. Adults or others more knowledgeable than the children structure activities within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), guiding understanding and learning. While a traditional image may come to mind, such as a child sitting next to an adult reading a bedtime storybook, literacy experiences can vary greatly by family and culture (Heath, 1983). For example, Herrera et al. (2015) describe children listening to their *abuelita*, their grandmother, tell the story of “*La Llorona*” while Walker-Dalhouse and Dalhouse (2009) explain how for Sudanese children, bedtime is the time “that scary or comical stories, accompanied by songs, are told to entertain and to impart important lessons” (p. 331). Zygouris-Coe (2007) describes another literacy experience: reading subtitles to her illiterate grandmother and her friend at the movie theater each week. Regardless of the experiences, all types of literacy activities are valuable for young children. Yet, teachers may overlook students' home experiences when they differ significantly from their own familial experiences.

Literacy experiences are but one aspect of larger, more complex sets of experience and knowledge that students bring into the classroom from their home, family, and community. Teachers can build upon these, assuming they are aware of the broad range of experiences and knowledge students bring into their classrooms. Understanding the social, historical, political, and economic contexts of households is of critical importance in understanding teaching and learning (González, et al., 2005, p. 26–27). The notion of funds of knowledge “refer(s) to these historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992, p. 133). A funds of knowledge approach means understanding, valuing, and building upon these diverse experiences and knowledge sets from the household. Using this approach, teachers connect students' unique home experiences to the classroom, convey how teachers value students' experiences and relationships outside of school, and create an alternative to the deficiency model by highlighting a “can-do” approach that builds on students' diverse experiences. Teachers who operate under the deficiency model see the students for all they cannot do or do not have, versus recognizing them for all they bring to the classroom. Bringing in funds of knowledge from students' household experiences and cultures can help to change such perspectives and bridge “the chasm between the household and school, the instantiation of reciprocal relationships between parents and teachers, the pedagogical validation of household knowledge with which students come to school... (and) go beyond the view of culture as a ‘problem’” (González, 2005, p. 40). Moll et al. (1992) explain, the funds of

knowledge “approach is particularly important in dealing with students whose households are usually viewed as being ‘poor,’ not only economically, but in term of the quality of experiences for child” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González, 1992, p. 132). Unfortunately, these funds are not always recognized and valued by their teachers, particularly if the language and culture differ from that of the school (Commins, 1989; Velez-Ibáñez & Greenburg, 2005).

The funds of knowledge approach connects to the biographical approach. Herrera et al. (2015) describe taking a biographical approach to understanding and validating students, particularly students who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Herrera and her colleagues break biographies down into dimensions: sociocultural, linguistic, academic, and cognitive. Taking time to consider students’ different biographies and their diverse funds of knowledge from these various dimensions affords teachers a fuller understanding of their students and their families, and how they may differ from their monolingual counterparts. Also, it further enables teachers to treat differences as springboards rather than barriers when they teach and interact with students.

Both the funds of knowledge and biographical approaches align well with culturally responsive teaching or pedagogy (Gay, 2000), through which teachers seek to engage with their students by acknowledging and celebrating the diverse backgrounds, recognizing their varied preferences for learning, and implementing instructional strategies that include all students. By providing exposure to and experiences with these interrelated approaches to understanding, acknowledging, and valuing the importance of EL students’ families and cultures, teachers may be more likely to capitalize on the language and literacy assets that students bring from home.

The Role of Parents

Personal and familial experiences generate varying expectations of the relationship between student and teacher, family and school, or teacher and parent. Different cultures may hold conceptualizations about the roles of parents and teachers that are at odds with those found in the schools (Valdes, 1996). In addition, given that instruction, curriculum, communication, and evaluation are all done in English, parents of ELs experience the challenge of not being able to access school information because their native language is not English. While federal mandates require that parental communication must be done “in a language parents understand,” these mandates also contain the language “to the extent possible” (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Yet this can be interpreted in different ways, and districts and schools often lack resources—both financial and human—to fully meet this requirement. Thus, it is up to parents (and often their children serving as language brokers) to make sense of the educational expectations of the grade level, class, teacher, and school.

Teachers, who often report being underprepared to work with ELs (Nutta, Mokhtari, & Strebel, 2012), may not be aware of the differences and challenges that families face when navigating the school system. They may tend to see roles and expectations through the lens of their own educational experiences and expectations. Work done with Latino families, while not generalizable to all families or even to all Latino families, still yields some interesting considerations about cultural variation. For example, Rodríguez-Brown (2010) describes the distinction between “to educate” and “to teach.” She states that Latino parents believe their role is to educate their children (*educar*) which entails a good upbringing with strong values. The concept of “to teach” (*enseñar*), on the other hand, is not something parents feel prepared to do; after all, they have not studied how to teach.

Instead, this is what teachers are prepared to do. Rodríguez-Brown further describes how Latino parents do not feel it is their place to question teachers. She cites Valdés (1996), who conducted an ethnographic study of Mexican immigrant families. Valdés' findings revealed how parents have respect (*respeto*) for figures of authority, including teachers, and feel that it would be inappropriate to interfere with their children's schooling. On a related note, when working with Latino parents, Rodríguez-Brown (2010) described how teachers are often unaware of the significant concept of mutual trust and understanding (*confianza*). Teachers could develop mutual understanding by reaching out to parents. When a trusting relationship is nurtured between the teacher or school and the extended family (*familia*), active involvement is fostered, which can help set the stage for successful language and literacy development.

Studies investigating teachers' perceptions of parents of bilinguals reveal that some teachers report feeling that parents are "uncaring" or "disinterested" (e.g., Ramirez, 2003; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2009). However, research by Commins (1989), Delgado-Gaitán (1992), and Rodríguez-Valls (2009) indicates that lack of care and interest is not the case at all. Their separate studies of children and their families show that parents do care and want to help their children succeed. González (2005) states, "As teachers validate the households' experiences as those from which rich resources or funds of knowledge can be extracted, parents themselves come to authenticate their skills as worthy of pedagogical notice" (p. 42). Percy, Martin-Beltrán, and Daniel (2013) describe how parents worked with educators to support their children's literacy development in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), in which there was "mutual engagement" as participants, a "joint enterprise" of assisting students and families to engage in literate activities, and a "shared repertoire" of common resources, which were chosen collaboratively. Teachers felt supported at home, and parents felt their children were engaged at school. One of the participants in the study referred to the changing relationship as a "mutual admiration society" (Percy et al., 2013, p. 293); such a view is a far cry from believing that parents are disinterested in their children's education. The experience highlights the crucial role of developing mutual trust and respect for a student's home life and the family's contributions to the child's learning.

The Role of the First Language

Students who are learning English in addition to their home language or first language are emergent bilinguals (García & Kleifgen, 2010). The first language and culture are assets to employ when learning another language, even for young learners. Research shows that language and literacy learning—in any language—can be transferred to English (August et al., 2006). Contrary to what might be viewed as language interference, a perspective in which the first language (L1) is viewed as a barrier to learning the second (L2), Cummins' (2000) more positive transfer theory positions L1 as a scaffold for L2. Cummins' (1979) linguistic interdependence model explains how cross-language transfer occurs to promote, rather than hinder, language growth and development. Teachers who have an understanding and appreciation of the connection between L1 and L2 and the relevance of prior knowledge and experience (literacy as biography) are better equipped to effectively foster literacy development.

Given its critical role in later reading, oral language development is particularly important for young emergent bilinguals (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2012). When combined with oral language—in the L1 or L2—the National Reading Panel's (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) five components of reading

(phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) result in effective literacy instruction designed with ELs in mind. Activities that promote oral language—songs, rhymes, stories, role plays, etc.—hone areas such as auditory memory, conceptual knowledge, conversational skills, listening skills, and word consciousness (Rodríguez-Brown, 2010; Eisenhart, 2013; Herrera et al., 2015). Children who have strong language and literacy experiences in their home language are better positioned to do well in school, as these are the foundation for later academic learning (Galindo, 2010).

Professional Development for Teachers of ELs

As the population of ELs continues to increase, it is imperative that teachers be given opportunities for professional development to meet their needs. Minaya-Rowe states, “Most educators do not receive adequate preparation to teach this population before entering the workforces and they have limited opportunities to update their knowledge and skills in an ongoing basis throughout their careers” (Minaya-Rowe, 2006, p. 39). Likewise, Nieto (2003) describes how many teachers do not know about the backgrounds of the students they teach. Nieto further states, “We need to encourage teachers to look deeply into themselves and their own biases and values, because what they bring into the classroom impacts the students they teach” (2003, pp. 165–166). Even when teachers have a positive interest in their students’ backgrounds and an understanding of the necessity to differentiate instruction for their culturally and linguistically diverse students, they need the content knowledge and instructional skills necessary to teach with confidence (Karabenick & Noda, 2004). In one study that asked teachers to describe their training to work with ELs, Echevarría, Vogt, and Short (2013) report that teachers said they had minimal to no preparation to work with ELs; in fact, only 12.5% reported that they did have such training.

Recent studies suggest how professional development opportunities for in-service teachers working with an EL student population in mainstream classrooms can have a positive impact. Based on a research synthesis of the effects of professional development on culturally diverse students conducted by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE), Knight and Wiseman conclude that culturally responsive instruction for ELs and a funds of knowledge approach are two “effective instructional approaches” for ELs (Knight and Wiseman, 2006, pp. 81–83). Similarly, findings from the National Literacy Panel on Language—Minority Children and Youth (August & Shanahan, 2006) indicate that teachers appreciate professional development that includes “hands-on” practice, in-class demonstrations, and coaching, as well as assistance from external “change agents,” such as university researchers (p. 4). Yet not all teachers have opportunities to participate in this type of high-quality professional development.

Our Project

Due to the need for better professional development for teachers of ELs, the authors engaged in a year-long project with classroom teachers, English as a second language (ESL) teachers, and administrators. The professional development experiences in the larger project focused on many areas of literacy development. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the components of developing teachers’ and administrators’ understanding of the role of parents, inclusion of L1 and culture, and the importance of partnerships to foster children’s language and literacy development. The following question was posed: Can year-long professional development experiences result in increased knowledge of how to collaborate with parents to foster early literacy development of ELs?

Project Description

Participants

Forty-eight teachers who taught pre-K through third grade and administrators from two districts, who together served more than 1,000 ELs, participated in this project. Teams of educators formed from each participating school. Both districts had reported achievement gaps between ELs and non-ELs and were therefore identified as high-needs districts. In one district, 43% of ELs were concentrated in grades pre-K–3, while there were 49% in the second district; over 90% were from Spanish-speaking homes. The free and reduced lunch rate was over 70%. These teachers and administrators had an average of 10.9 years of teaching experience. For the group, about one third did not know a second language (27.8%). Of the remaining participants, approximately half of the participants knew Spanish (51.9%), while some knew French (11.1%), German (5.6%) or another language (3.7%). Respondents who spoke a second language rated themselves on a five-point scale (1=low proficiency and 5=high level of proficiency) having between pre-intermediate proficiency and intermediate proficiency ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.55$). Gathering this background information allowed us to understand teachers' own language learning backgrounds, which provided insight into their likelihood to empathize with their students and their students' families (Ellis, 2004).

Project Design

Grounded in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978), operating from a culturally responsive pedagogy stance (Gay, 2000) and recognizing that students come to school with different life experiences (Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015) and funds of knowledge (González, et al., 2005), our team created professional development opportunities to help educators become better prepared to meet the literacy needs of young emergent bilingual students. The workshops were held monthly on Saturdays over a 10-month time period and during an intensive one-week summer institute. Everyone also participated in assigned readings, reflective discussions, and shared ideas and resources online. Each meeting involved an expert-led discussion followed by classroom applications that encouraged participants to try out what they were learning. Additionally, opportunities to share within and across school teams were provided. See Figure 1 for a depiction of how we started with the teachers themselves to understand language and literacy practices; we gradually expanded the workshop topics to encompass a broader way of thinking about literacy instruction that builds on home experiences and involves parents as collaborators in literacy instruction and development.

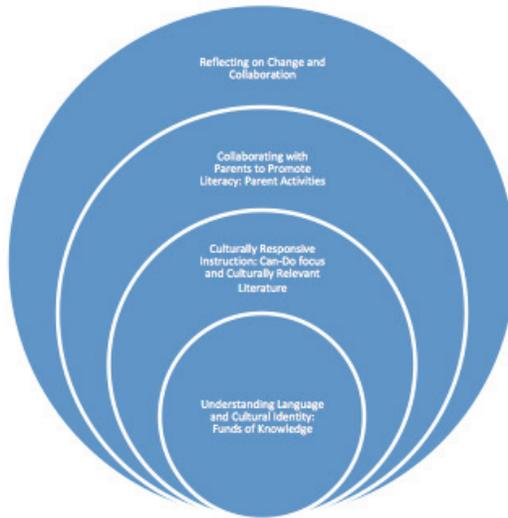


Figure 1. Workshop Design: Examining the Self and Cultural Identity—Taking on a Culturally Relevant Perspective and Reaching out to Parents/Families

As can be seen in Figure 1, initially our focus was working with teachers to help them examine their own literacy and language beliefs. Over the course of the project, our focus intentionally moved toward culturally relevant instruction, including home experiences, parent involvement, multicultural texts and topics, and increased collaboration. Components are described in more detail below.

Funds of knowledge workshop. This workshop happened early in the program. We began with this since many of our participants had assumptions that ELs are lacking or deficient in their language abilities. We challenged our participants to consider their current and past thinking about working with ELs. Through facilitated group discussions and individual exercises, we illuminated how deficit-focused language and other institutional labels systematically identified ELs (among others) based on what they cannot do. We shared research that demonstrated how this deficit approach can

- lead to both stereotyping and the experience of “stereotype threat” for ELs (Steele, 2010);
- obscure the value of children’s prior experiences with other languages and cultures; and
- polarize and dichotomize family life from school life.

Researchers have described how, if left unchecked, the deficit model can lead to the “erasure of childhood,” which violates “an old pedagogical truth: teaching every child depends on knowledge of, respect for, and building on what that child knows and can do” (Dyson, 2015, p. 199).

We guided participants through a process of self-reflection so they could examine their own assumptions (often rooted in stereotypes) and recognize their implicit paradigms about teaching literacy to ELs. The majority of the participants recognized the ways in which these institutional deficit-centered paradigms had an impact on their own thinking. We encouraged them to shift their teaching paradigm for ELs away from views of what

their students could not do to a positively oriented, and socioculturally connected approach of “look at all that these students can do!” The can-do paradigm (WIDA, 2014) framed our engagement with all of the dimensions of literacy and laid a foundation for validating ELs and their families by encouraging teachers to highlight what additional perspectives and experiences they bring into the classroom discussions.

We purposely incorporated a funds of knowledge activity focused on the teachers’ own familial, household, and early literacy experiences, rooted in their personal autobiographies and generating their own funds of knowledge. After unpacking and understanding the forces shaping their own understandings and experiences, teachers were ready to discover their students’ diverse biographies and funds of knowledge. For the activity, we taped several pieces of poster paper around the room, each with a different question written across the top. Questions ranged from “Growing up, how did you feel about your school?” to “What is your earliest memory of reading?” (see Appendix A for full list). Participants were asked to go around the room and write their individual responses. After the participants completed the activity, we discussed the wide range of responses to each question, as well as the different ways their students might respond. By connecting personally to their own biographies and identifying how relevant funds of knowledge played a role in their own literacy learning, participants became aware of how their particular experiences and funds of knowledge informed their current perspectives and approaches to teaching literacy. The activity illuminated to the group a few important take-away points:

- We each have distinct experiences and feelings associated with school, home, family, etc.
- Our childhood experiences played some role informing our perspectives as current educators.
- We are often unaware of the ways that others, including our students, might have very different experiences and thus perspectives on these same topics.

We were able to refer back to the funds of knowledge activity throughout the program, reminding participants of the variety of responses to each question.

Instructional Practices Focused on Literacy: “Fab 5” to “Super 6.” As the workshops progressed, we spent time building lessons linked to key components of literacy that connected to meaningful literature and students’ home experiences. We focused on the National Reading Panel’s (NICHD, 2000) five components of effective reading instruction, sometimes referred to by teachers as the “Fab Five.” These five components include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. As described earlier, August and Shanahan’s (2006) and August, Shanahan, and Escamilla’s (2009) work impacted the workshops, and oral language was included to become part of the “Super Six.” While framing literacy practices around the Super Six, we focused on how ELs build on literacy knowledge in their first language. Then the teachers systematically explored ways to make literacy instruction linguistically and culturally relevant (Herrera et al., 2015). Knowing that learning to read is an extremely complex process requiring readers to integrate sources of information as they construct meaning, we emphasized an interactive and comprehensive model of reading instruction (Pearson, Raphael, Benson, & Madda, 2007; Reutzel & Cooper, 2005), including Pearson’s and Gallagher’s (1983) gradual release of responsibility model, in which teachers provide the scaffolding necessary for ELs to be successful and confident before expecting them to perform independently.

Home-school connection: Parent-child literacy activities. We know that when teachers communicate to parents how they can reinforce and support literacy

learning for their children at home, a relationship of mutual collaboration can be actively cultivated. The project's teachers were asked to design parent-centered activities to send home with students as part of a final unit of our professional development program. These activities were at home extensions to their literacy lesson plans. We hoped that through fostering parent-teacher collaborations, the participants would recognize the critical role and value of the home language (L1) and culture; embrace and build on the linguistic and cultural interactions that happen at home and in the community; and create activities for parents that would draw on the families' strengths and resources to support language and literacy development. Appendix B shows one example of a parent activity focused on comprehension. The activity is broken down into easy-to-follow steps, accompanied by visual examples and definitions of academic terms. These examples were accompanied by brief explanations of the learning goals of each activity in order to increase parents' understanding of literacy development. In daily interactions with their children, parents can use simple repetition and intentional conversations to practice the Super 6 and make connections between oral and written language. Providing families with accessible resources to support their children's learning raised the issue of translating materials into the home language. As 90% of the ELs' home language was Spanish, we had a selection of the final parent activities translated into Spanish. The participating teachers were thrilled to be able to provide these materials to their students' families in Spanish as well as English (see Appendix B).

Culturally relevant resources. During each session, we began our time together with the read-aloud of a culturally relevant book. This modeling underscored the importance of selecting quality literature; and this time was especially enjoyable for all involved. We emphasized the necessity of using authentic and culturally relevant texts to contextualize literacy lessons. Teachers were asked to survey the literature in their classrooms, and in response to their needs we allocated small stipends (\$100.00 per teacher) for the purchase of multicultural books to enhance students' connections to literature (Ebe, 2010). When visiting the classrooms, we encouraged teachers to contextualize their literacy lessons using these books. On our final day together, we raffled off multicultural books, assisting the teachers in building their libraries (see Appendix C for a partial list of books teachers selected).

Instruments

The postsurvey information gathered was developed in collaboration with an external evaluator. We gathered information on several constructs, including classroom preparation, knowledge of early literacy instruction, knowledge of collaboration with parents, and self-ratings of teaching. As we neared the end of the program, we also included questions about their experiences with the program: what was most helpful, any obstacles they had encountered, what they gained most, suggestions for program improvement, how the program influenced their ability to work with ELs, and what additional topics we might cover to better prepare teachers of young ELs. Participants rated statements on a 5-point Likert scale from "not at all helpful" (1) to "completely helpful" (5). For the purposes of this paper, we will discuss only survey questions and participant responses that targeted educators' perspectives on L1, home culture, and parent interactions.

Data analysis

The external evaluators examined the survey responses and determined statistically which constructs yielded valid and reliable information. The data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Mean scores and standard deviations for

each construct of interest on the survey were compared between preprogram knowledge reported and postprogram knowledge reported using a paired-samples t-test. Qualitative data from the surveys and observations were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Survey: Likert-scale questions. To evaluate changes in attitudes regarding ELs, their language development, their ability to instruct ELs in their classrooms, and the importance of parent collaboration, participants took a survey measuring their perceptions of how their knowledge had changed over the course of the program and how helpful they perceived the topic of parent involvement to be. These questions were designed as five point Likert-scale questions (see Appendix D for sample survey questions).

Survey: Program evaluation questions. In addition to the scale questions above, we included open-ended evaluation questions at the end of the program (see Appendix D for postsurvey with open-ended questions). The questions were:

- What do you feel you gained most from this experience?
- How has the experience influenced how you think about the capabilities of young English language learners?
- How has your instruction changed over the past ten months?
- What activities/ideas have you tried as a result of this project, and what did you think about the effectiveness?
- What are your main take-aways from the project that you would like to remember?

Findings

The results from our study indicate that the professional development experiences of the participants resulted in increased knowledge of how to collaborate with parents to foster the early literacy development of ELs, including an increased understanding and valuing of ELs' home languages and cultures.

Surveys: Likert-scale Responses

A total of 42 (out of the original 48) participants completed the 21-question postproject survey. Survey questions covered a range of workshop topics. In this section, we will highlight those responses related to L1, home culture, and parent collaboration.

First, the participants responded to the following questions in the postproject survey: Using the scale provided (1=not knowledgeable to 5=completely knowledgeable), please tell us how knowledgeable you were on the topic indicated. The topics we report on here are 1) knowledge of L1 and culture; 2) knowledge of how to apply culturally responsive practices in teaching; and 3) knowledge of collaborating with parents to foster early literacy. Each of these questions posed asked for ratings before the participant began the program and after participating in the program.

Knowledge of L1 and Culture. Based on responses of 39 participants for this question, the mean rating for knowledge of L1 and culture before the program was 3.03 (SD = .84) and the mean rating after participating was 4.00 (SD=.51). Results from a paired samples t-test ($t=8.61$, $p < .05$), demonstrated a significant increase in participants' perceived knowledge of L1 and culture.

Knowledge of how to Apply Culturally Responsive Teaching. For the 42 respondents, the mean rating for knowing how to apply culturally responsive teaching

strategies before the program was 2.71 (SD = .97) and the mean rating after participating was 3.90 (SD=.69). Results from a paired samples t-test ($t=9.26$, $p < .05$), demonstrated a significant increase in participants' perceived knowledge of how to apply Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies in their classroom.

Knowledge of Parent Collaboration. Finally, of particular interest for our report here, the mean rating ($n=42$) for knowledge of collaborating with parents before the program was 2.57 (SD = .97) and the mean rating after participating was 3.95 (SD=.67). Results from a paired samples t-test ($t=10.15$, $p < .05$), demonstrated a significant increase in participants' perceived knowledge of collaborating with parents to foster the literacy of the children.

Interestingly, many participants indicated on the “before” rating that they really did not interact with parents regarding literacy development. Of the 42 who responded to this question, 6 (14%) rated themselves as having no knowledge of how to collaborate with parents to foster literacy, while an additional 14 (33%) rated themselves as having “a little knowledge.” Another 14 (33%) reported being “somewhat knowledgeable” in this area before their participation while only eight (just under 20%) shared that they had “quite a bit of knowledge.” As indicated by the results of the t-test above, their project-related experiences resulted in significant growth in this area.

Participants were also asked to rank on a 5-point scale (from 0=not helpful to 5=completely helpful) the topics presented in the workshops. When responding to the helpfulness of the parent collaboration topic, 33 participants (79%) rated the topic regarding collaborating with parents to foster early literacy learning of young ELs as “quite a bit” to “completely helpful.” No one rated the topic as not helpful (see Figure 2).

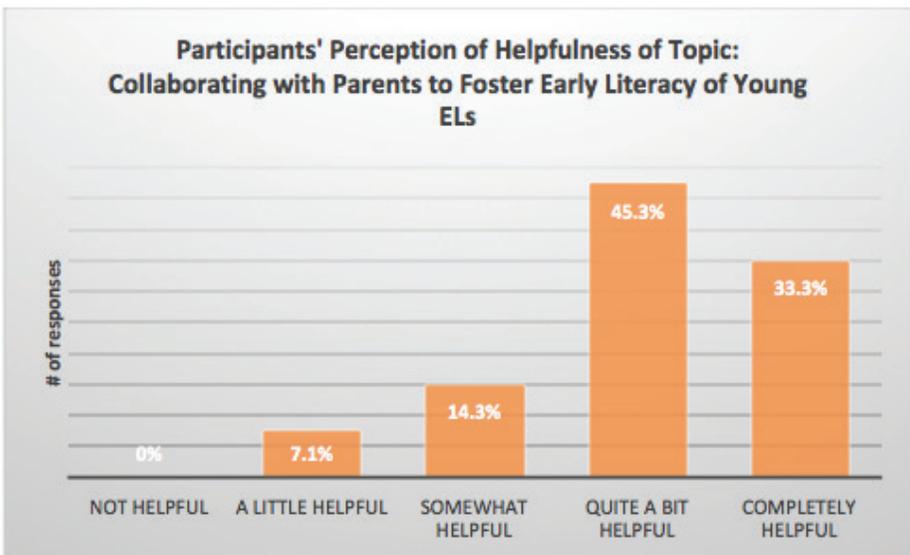


Figure 2. Participants' responses to “Collaborating with Parents” topic helpfulness.

Surveys: Open-ended Responses

Qualitative data gathered consisted of responses to open-ended questions. As survey responses were analyzed, they were grouped into categories or themes; as more responses were analyzed, the categories were compared and revised as needed. We found the following categories emerged: Understandings of ELs, Benefits of PD, and Instructional Changes in the Classroom.

Understandings of ELs. A noticeable theme for the participants was a shift in what they thought about the emergent bilingual students' capabilities. A total of 38 out of 42 (90.5%) answered this question. Many respondents indicated that they already knew that ELs were very capable, but others indicated how the experience had changed the way they think about ELs and the ways they can better teach. Here are a few of the responses:

- To view English learners through different lenses. To focus more on what they are able to do, rather than what they cannot do. It has also helped me see more of what I can do for them to help the learning. [1st grade teacher]
- It hasn't changed what I believe—all students can learn—what it has changed is what I can do to better support them. [Kindergarten teacher]
- ELs are very capable learners. As teachers, we need to tap into the primary language. Furthermore, we need to scaffold the learning so the content is more comprehensible. [EL teacher]

Participants were also asked what they might share with their colleagues to help them better understand the literacy needs of emergent bilinguals. In total, 32 of 42 (76.2%) shared ideas. One teacher stated “the importance of primary language” and three indicated “the parent involvement piece” of the workshops.

Benefits of Professional Development. When asked about what they gained most or their main take-aways, respondents mentioned work on strategies, learning about standards, and relating data assessment to instruction. They also described “creating an inclusive community for my students,” “activating prior knowledge,” and we were delighted to see that about a third of the respondents chose to highlight the parent involvement piece. These responses indicate that, even though the whole group of 42 did not consider this the main take-away, many teachers and administrators found the information and practical application of it to be important enough to single it out for this response. Several discussed making cultural connections with their lessons, while others addressed the importance of involving parents. One teacher's main take-away was “cultural responsiveness including parents with family activities,” while another directly identified “parent activities and translations with picture supports” as highlighted in the parent activity described earlier (see Appendix B for a sample). In addition to these practical take-aways, one teacher described her main take-away as, “Parents of ELs want their children to be successful even though it may not seem that way.” Initially, this comment may seem surprising; however, recall our earlier discussion of how teachers often misinterpret cultural expectations that are different from white, middle-class expectations as the parent being uncaring or uninterested (Rodríguez-Brown, 2010). For this teacher, this realization is critical; further, she wrote this as her response to one of our most important project evaluation questions: What was the biggest take-away from this professional development?

Instructional Changes in the Classroom. Finally, as we were hoping to affect change in the ways that these educators work with emergent bilinguals, the postsurvey questions about instructional practices were critical. From our group, 42 participants

(100.0%) answered the question. While many responses involved using particular texts, technologies, or strategies with their students, 12 of the respondents identified changes that resonate with the value of home language, culture, and the connections with parents, such as the following:

I have focused more on culture and the family connection. I have sent several family activities in which families were given an opportunity to share their culture, their language, and their own uniqueness. I love the responses of families and the way that it helps connect them to the students' learning.
[2nd grade teacher]

Fourteen teachers also described how they built on the students' backgrounds and cultures by “integrating culturally relevant content” and “authentic texts,” and “becoming more culturally responsive.” One teacher observed that she had a better understanding of finding and selecting more authentic texts, and another teacher stated:

It's not that hard to relate texts to the students' culture...it just takes a change in thinking about lessons to make them more accessible to ELs. [1st grade teacher]

Some teachers made similar comments about connecting with families and culture (“send home parent activities,” “incorporated the parent component,” “activities to integrate parents”), while others talked more about using bilingual word walls, visual aids, realia, pictures, modeling, pair-shares, think alouds, and including more time for oral language and vocabulary development. Some of the positive effects reported in regards to teachers' instructional changes included:

- Having better home–school and school–home connections provided great ideas for the class.
- Using more authentic texts for 1st and 2nd grade intervention classes helped with students' engagement.
- Feedback from two administrators indicated that they now had more strategies to share with their teachers. One mentioned the students were having a positive response to the improved practices.
- Nine educators commented on how collaboration with each other and/or families was an important practice that helped support their learners.

As described above, participants indicated that, throughout the professional development, their understanding of how to collaborate with parents to promote literacy development increased, as did their acknowledging and valuing of the ELs' home languages and cultures, which had positive effects on their practices.

Discussion and Implications

This year-long professional development program sought to improve the literacy instruction of students learning English through a series of workshops for their teachers and administrators. Workshops provided a range of opportunities for educators to reflect on their current paradigms about working with ELs and their families and then encouraged them to change their thinking from a deficit lens model to a positive can-do approach. Recognizing these students as emergent bilinguals (García & Kleifgen, 2010), not as having a deficit, motivated our participants to teach in more culturally competent, sensitive, and responsive ways (e.g., Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2009). Our readings and discussions underscored the critical role of parents and/or caregivers as children's first teachers. Collaborative partnerships among parents, communities, and schools were examined and encouraged (Epstein, et al., 2009), culminating in lessons with extension activities for parents. Teachers learned

foundational concepts, including the valuing of different funds of knowledge, the notion that literacy is biographical, the significance of supporting L1 as a scaffold for (not barrier to) L2 literacy; the Super 6 literacy skills, and the importance of connecting to parents and families to best support their mutual learners.

Implications from our project for researchers and educators engaged in professional development for teachers are twofold. First, as is already well established, professional development that offers interaction and the building of relationships over time results in the best conditions for actual changes in instructional practice. Second, although every project has a timeline and a set of topics to cover, it is important to allow for some flexibility as the project unfolds. As described in the limitations below, our original survey did not focus intently on the parent piece of this project, although we did plan this piece as part of the workshops. Thus, we had to add questions to our postsurvey and add to our presentations/workshops because this direction developed organically over the course of the project.

In terms of the sustained professional development, we found the monthly workshops combined with a week-long summer institute enabled us to lay the groundwork with the funds of knowledge activity, and introduce the importance of language and culture in shaping who we are and who our students are. As our workshops continued, we cycled back to these discussions with “remember when...” and “wasn’t it interesting to learn...” discussions. The inclusion of culturally relevant literature provided additional ways to connect with all of our participants and modeled for them how they might connect to the diverse language and cultures in the classroom.

As the project continued, intense work on lesson design aligned with state language and content standards helped the teachers put into practice culturally relevant lessons designed to promote language and literacy development. Viewing the home language and culture as a springboard (and not a hindrance), the participants discussed and included ways to have parents engage with their children’s learning. Then, taking the inclusion of parents in a slightly different direction, the teachers themselves selected particular aspects of literacy development that could easily be supported at home, and they created literacy activities with easy-to-follow steps. Recognizing the need for translated curricular materials, these activities were also made available in Spanish, the most common L2 in our area. These activities validate the parents as teachers, in their best language, and set them up to team with teachers to support their children’s learning.

Limitations. This study was limited by several factors including project time-frame, sample size, and project survey design. First, funding for the project was awarded in the spring and was completed during the fall semester, which meant the children ended one school year and began a new one. However, a benefit to the project’s timing was that it gave the participants an opportunity to change their practices from the end of one school year to the next, with summer providing an opportunity for reflection and restructuring curriculum and practices. While the number of participant survey completers, 42, was not a large sample from which to generalize the results, the project’s implications suggest that additional studies could be conducted to determine whether results could be replicated with a larger sample. We recognize that a major limitation to this project was that the post-survey had to be adapted to include additional constructs. As the significance of home-school partnerships became apparent during the project and later was confirmed through the process of data analysis, what became the focus of this article was not necessarily anticipated at the project’s beginning, although the importance of parents working with

teachers was always included in the project design. If this project is replicated in the future, we will build participants' knowledge and perceptions related to teacher–parent partnerships into the presurvey design, instead of having participants reflect only at the end of the program on their perceived changes. Given the unanticipated nature of the participants' developing awareness related to teacher–parent partnerships, only perceptions of knowledge and helpfulness were measured on this topic.

Conclusion

Our next steps as educators can be informed by the positive results of this professional development project focused on language and literacy development by enhancing family connections. By recognizing and honoring all students' L1s, home cultures, and prior experiences as part of teacher preparation and in-service teacher professional development, we know that educators can come to value the L1 and culture of their students and their families. Additionally, they can work closely to collaborate with parents and families to enhance the language and literacy learning of children at home and at school. Through intentionally sequenced experiences that provide opportunities for learning and applied practice, teachers can significantly adjust their thinking about and change their educational approaches for working with ELs and their families. These changes can create more inclusive classrooms for emergent bilingual students, increased teacher–parent collaborations, and positive connections between schools and families—all dynamics that support the language and literacy development of students learning English.

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Appendix A

Funds of Knowledge Activity for Teachers

Set Up: Place 8 to 12 large poster pages spaced out on the walls around room. Each poster page should have one heading, which poses an open-ended question that will allow participants to share and reflect upon their own experiences as children. Leave most of the poster blank for participant comments.

Some sample headings:

Growing up, how did you feel about your school? (What emotions come up?)

When did conversations happen in your home? (Who talked? What did they talk about?)

What brought your family (however you would define it) together?

When you were growing up, how did people around you view the police?

In your family, what did it mean to be an American?

How were you disciplined as a child?

Outside of school, what did you spend most of your time doing as a child?

What were your favorite books to read? Why?

What occupations/professions were represented in your extended family?

What is your earliest memory of reading?

As a child, what were your favorite stories? Who would tell them?

Describe your experience with languages (other than English) as a child?

Explain: We all have funds of knowledge rooted in our own personal, familial, cultural, and biographical contexts. We need to be more aware of where we are coming from in terms of our own funds of knowledge as educators and become more aware of the funds of knowledge that each of our students bring into the classroom.

Activity: Each participant takes a marker and walks around the room, writing his/her individual response to the question on each poster page. Participants should also be encouraged to read the range of responses on each poster page as they walk around.

Debrief: Once the group is resettled, collectively review a few selected poster pages, highlighting the variety and spectrum of responses. Teachers could also be asked to discuss how their own biographies informed their funds of knowledge. They could also be asked to reflect on the ways some of their students might respond to the questions.

Appendix B
Sample literacy activity in English for young learners
Comprehension Activity

This easy activity will help your child with comprehension, which is understanding a text he or she has read. Here is what you do:

Step 1: Pick and introduce a book. Discuss the front cover, title, author and illustrator, and make predictions about the story (good guesses about the main idea).



Author: Person who writes the words in a book.

Illustrator: Person who draws the pictures in a book.

Step 2: After reading the book, discuss the characters.



Character: Person, animal, or creature that the story is about.

Step 3: Discuss the setting.



Setting: Where and when the story happens.

Step 4: Discuss the problem



Problem: Something that needs to be fixed.

Step 5: Discuss the solution to the problem.



Step 6: Discuss the main idea (Was your prediction right?) and discuss details (the little things that happen to support the main idea).



Main Idea: What the story is mainly about

<p>Solution: The way someone fixes the problem.</p>	<p>Details: Information that clarifies and completes a story</p>
<p>Step 7: Extend the conversation by asking "What if..." questions (for example: "What would happen if Little Red Riding Hood has to swim across the ocean to get to Grandma's house? What kind of animal would be the bad guy—a wolf or a shark?")</p> 	<p>Step 8: Have a conversation about your child's responses to the "what if" questions. Discuss connections to the real story.</p> 

Same sample literacy activity in Spanish for young learners

Actividad de Comprensión

Esta actividad fácil ayudará a su niño con la comprensión, que consiste en el comprender del texto leído.

Aquí verá cómo hacerlo:

<p>Paso 1: Decida cuál libro le gustaría leer. Luego, junto a su niño, examine la portada, el título, el autor y el ilustrador. Hagan predicciones sobre el cuento (que coincidan con el tema principal).</p>   <p>Autor: Persona que escribe el libro o texto. Ilustrador: Persona quien hace dibujos en el libro.</p>	<p>Paso 2: Después de leer el libro, analice los personajes. Haga que su niño describa...¿cómo eran los personajes de la historia?</p>  <p>Personaje: Persona, animal, o cosa en el cuento.</p>
<p>Paso 3: Ahora, hable sobre la escena. Haga que su niño describa...¿Cómo es?</p>   <p>Escena: Ambiente donde se desarrolla el cuento.</p>	<p>Paso 4: Analice el problema. Pregúntele a su niño...¿Cuál fue la causa o motivo del problema?</p>  <p>Problema: Algo que necesita ser arreglado.</p>

<p>Paso 5: Pregúntele a su niño...¿Cómo se puede solucionar el problema?</p>  <p>Solución: Manera en que se arregla el problema.</p>	<p>Paso 6: Analice la idea principal (pregúntele a su niño si su predicción fue correcta) y examine los detalles (pregúntele a su niño sobre las pequeñas cosas que sucedieron en el cuento).</p>  <p>Idea Principal: Tema central de la historia</p> <p>Detalles: Información que aclara o completa un cuento</p>
<p>Paso 7: Incluya “Qué pasaría...” preguntas (por ejemplo: Qué pasaría si Caperucita Roja tuviera que nadar a través el océano para llegar a la casa de Abuela? Qué animal sería el tipo malo—el lobo o un tiburón?</p> 	<p>Paso 8: Haga una conversación con su hijo sobre sus respuestas a las “Qué pasaría...” preguntas. Finalmente, haga conexiones con el cuento y su vida.</p> 

Appendix C

Sample Multicultural Texts

- Cave, K. (2004). *W is for world: A round-the-world ABC*. London, England: Frances Lincoln.
- Chavarria-Chairez, B. (2000). *Magda's tamales*. San Diego, CA: DelSol Books.
- Choi, Y. (2003). *The name jar*. New York, NY: Dragonfly Books.
- English, K. (2009). *Nadia's hands*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mill Press.
- Hayes, J. (2001). *El cucuy: A bogey-man cuento*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.
- Mora, P. (1994). *Listen to the desert/Oye al desierto*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Montes, M. (2003). *Get ready for Gabi: A crazy mixed-up Spanglish day*. Jefferson City, MO: Scholastic.
- Park, G. (2010). *My freedom trip*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mill Press.
- Say, A. (1993). *Grandfather's journey*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
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Appendix D

Post-Project Survey: Selected Questions

One of the main objectives of this program is to provide professional development opportunities that lead to your professional growth. We want to get a sense of how you perceive your current abilities, knowledge and efficacy in areas related to the current project, and this survey was created to assess your current levels on each of these factors. Please answer each question honestly with the first answer that comes to mind. There are no right or wrong answers, and all your responses are confidential.

About Your Experience					
1) Using the scale provided, please tell us how knowledgeable you were on the following topics before you began the program and after participating in the program					
	Not at all knowledgeable	A little knowledgeable	Somewhat knowledgeable	Quite a bit knowledgeable	Completely knowledgeable
BEFORE the program					
Understanding the language and cultural identity of young ELs	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
Application of culturally responsive early literacy knowledge and skills	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
Collaborating with parents to foster early literacy of young ELs	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
AFTER the program					
Understanding the language and cultural identity of young ELs	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
Application of culturally responsive early literacy knowledge and skills	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
Collaborating with parents to foster early literacy of young ELs	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
2) Using the scale provided, please tell us how helpful each of these topics was toward understanding and addressing the needs of young early English language learners in the program:					
	Not helpful	A little helpful	Somewhat helpful	Quite a bit helpful	Completely helpful
The following topic was...					
Collaborating with parents to foster early literacy of young ELs	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
Open ended questions:					
What do you feel you gained most from this experience?					
How has this experience influenced how you think about the capabilities of young English language learners?					
How has this experience influenced how you think about the capabilities of young English language learners?					
How has your instruction changed over the past ten months?					
What activities/ideas have you tried as a result of this project, and what did you think about the effectiveness?					
What are your main take-aways from the project that you would like to remember?					
THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY!					

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