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Family Literacy Programs in Immigrant and Refugee Communities: Some Observations from the Field

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In this paper, I share insights gained from developing and implementing a bilingual family literacy program, Parents As Literacy Supporters (PALS) in Immigrant Communities. More than 500 immigrant and refugee families from five language groups in six communities in the Greater Vancouver Area of British Columbia, Canada participated in the project. I first review some of the foundational research in early and family literacy and the development of family literacy programs. Next, I examine key literature on bilingualism and first, or home language maintenance and loss. I then look at some recent studies of bilingual family literacy programs, including PALS in Immigrant Communities. I conclude by sharing some of the insights I have gained from my work with immigrant and refugee families over the past decade or so.

Denny Taylor is usually credited with bringing the term “family literacy” into popular usage with the publication in 1983 of her foundational book, Family literacy: Young children learning to read and write. She spent three years documenting the literacy activities and events in the daily lives of six children from middle class families in the Northeastern United States. In a subsequent ethnographic study, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) demonstrated how young African American children, living in extreme poverty and facing many challenges in an inner-city neighborhood, were successful in becoming literate, with the support of their families. Indeed, a plethora of studies over the years (e.g., Gregory, 2005; Mui & Anderson, 2007; Purcell-Gates, 1996) have shown that across different cultural and social contexts, families potentially can be rich contexts for young children’s literacy learning.

About the same time as Taylor was publishing her foundational research, a number of parent academics (e.g., Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1985) published detailed accounts of their own children’s literacy development. Like Taylor’s research, these case studies demonstrated that young children were capable of acquiring or learning considerable literacy knowledge,

before any formal literacy instruction in preschool or school. I was quite intrigued by that body of research and conducted a case study with my daughter showing how as a 5 and 6-year-old, she exhibited considerable knowledge of different genres typically found in the workplace (Anderson, 1994). I realized of course, that children of academics are privileged, and agreed with Adams (1990) that we need to be cautious of generalizing and drawing implications from this research.

The findings from ethnographic studies with families, and parents' accounts of their own children's early literacy development, were consistent with two earlier studies of young children's precocious literacy learning at home. Two earlier studies Margaret Clark (1976) in Scotland and Dolores Durkin (1966) in the United States involved typically developing children who had learned to read prior to formal instruction at school in their research. It appears that the confluence of these three lines of research led community workers and educators to develop family literacy programs that usually involved preschoolers and their parents and focused on enhancing the children's language and literacy development and parents' ability to support it. These programs were often offered to socially and economically disadvantaged families, including new immigrants and refugees, and according to Auerbach (1989) and others, often assumed a deficit perspective, ignoring (or discouraging) the vernacular literacies and home languages of families.

Meanwhile, meta-analyses and meta-studies of the efficacy of family literacy programs indicated that they worked in that they significantly enhanced young children's language and literacy development and that parents benefited from participating in them, as well (Brooks, Pahl, Pollard, & Rees, 2008; Marulis & Neuman,2010; Senechal, & Young, 2008; van Steensel, McElvaney, Kurvers, & Herppich, 2011). For the most part, the studies that were included in these analyses focused on programs offered in English and Auerbach's critiques of the colonizing and deficit stances of many family literacy programs continued (Reyes, & Torres, 2007). However, more recently, educators have begun to develop bilingual family literacy programs, drawing on research and theory demonstrating the positive effects of bilingualism and first language maintenance and recognizing the detrimental effects of the loss of one's first language. For example, Eleanor Bialystok's corpus of research suggests that bilingualism provides cognitive, linguistic, psychological and social advantages that

persist across the life span (e.g., Bialystok, in press, 2016). As well, Cummins and others postulate that learners transfer underlying cognitive and linguistic skills and knowledge from their first language as they acquire or learn a second or additional languages (e.g., Cummins, 2016; Zaretsky, 2014). Furthermore, there is a rich history of bilingual education in the United States and elsewhere, including French Immersion programs in Canada where unilingual English-speaking parents clamor to enroll their young children in them (Sherlock & Skelton, 2014). And finally, Wong-Fillmore (2000) illustrates the negative impact on communications and family life when immigrant and refugee children acquire the dominant language (typically English) but lose their home language and when parents and other family members do not acquire the dominant language.

As noted, educators have more recently begun to document the effects of bilingual family literacy programs. For example, Hirst, Hannon and Nutbrown (2010) reported on a yearlong family literacy program in Sheffield, U.K. in which a teacher and a cultural worker regularly visited the homes of families originally from Pakistan who spoke Mirupuri, Punjabi or Urdu, providing them with bilingual books and other literacy materials and demonstrating ways that they could interact with their children to promote language and literacy development. Hirst and colleagus found that the children who participated in the program made significant gains in early literacy knowledge, compared with a control group. Zhang, Pelletier, and Doyle (2010) measured the impact of a bilingual family literacy program involving 42 Chinese families offered in community centers in Toronto. The facilitators modeled shared reading using big books, had the families engage in developmentally appropriate language and literacy activities, and provided literacy materials to take home. Zhang and colleagues found that children made significant gains in receptive vocabulary but not in expressive vocabulary. Also, I believe it is important to acknowledge the work of Rodriguez-Brown (2008) and her colleagues with Latino families in Project FLAME in the Chicago area. Although not framed as a bilingual family literacy program but reflecting on English as a Second Language orientation, Project Flame promoted and encouraged families to value and use Spanish as they acquired or learned English. I regard it as a forerunner of current initiatives in this area.

The PALS in Immigrant Communities project involved more than 500, four and five year old children and their parents or other significant

adults in six communities in the metropolitan area of Vancouver, Canada. A cultural worker and an early childhood educator facilitated 10-12, two-hour sessions in English and the first language of the families-Farsi, Karen, Mandarin, Punjabi or Vietnamese. After the facilitators introduced the topic of each session, the families engaged in age appropriate activities at learning centers in early childhood classrooms. A debriefing session followed, during which parents were encouraged to share their reactions to the various activities, what they believed their children had learned, what they had learned themselves, suggestions for improvements, and so forth. The facilitators then presented each family with a dual language children's book and other learning materials to take home. As we have reported elsewhere: on average, the children made significant gains in their early literacy knowledge with a large effect size or impact (Anderson, Friedrich, & Kim, 2011); the families appreciated the bilingual nature of the program and the emphasis on first language maintenance (Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich & Teichert, 2017); and they appreciated learning about western curriculum and pedagogy and felt more comfortable in schools (Anderson et al,, 2011). In this paper, I assume a more reflective stance and focus on insights gained and understandings garnered in working with the families.

Insights and Understandings

Learning English and Maintaining First Languages

As reported elsewhere, the families were generally committed to maintaining their first language and they identified cultural, instrumental/pragmatic, and social reasons for doing so (Anderson, Freidrich, Teichert, & Morrison, 2016). However, on occasion, the cultural workers indicated that some families believed that they should be reading the dual language books in English, even when their own abilities in English were limited and they were not able to provide fluent reading models, whereas they could in their first language (e.g., Tabors & Snow, 2001). When we first introduced the dual language books to the families, we indicated they could share the books with their children in their language of choice, although we encouraged them to always read the L1 text at some point. But some families worried that by continuing to use L1, they were impeding their children's acquisition of English. We worked with the cultural workers to share with families current knowledge about L1 maintenance and on occasion, provided them with appropriate articles and stories explaining its benefits. However, it appeared that many parents

continued to worry about this issue, even after we shared preliminary assessment results indicating that the children were making excellent progress in early literacy development in English and anecdotal evidence indicated the children were acquiring English vocabulary at a rapid pace.

A guiding principle of the program was that we would use both L1 and English equally, and in the initial two-day professional development institute for facilitators prior to the start of the program and in the regular, ongoing professional development sessions with them, we stressed the centrality of L1 maintenance and promotion. For example, in addition to providing the dual language children's books, we stressed the importance of preparing a written agenda providing an overview of each session using L1 and English, side by side. However, as the program progressed, we noticed that at some sites, facilitators presented agendas in English only (Anderson et al., 2016) and there appeared to be decreasing attention overall paid to L1. We consistently revisited this issue with the facilitators, stressing what we saw as a key underpinning of the program, but we felt it was never fully resolved, despite the ongoing conversations and discussions about it. Of course I recognize the hegemony of English (e.g., Macedo, Dendrinos, Gournai, 2003; Pennycook, 2016) and the reality that immigrant and refugee families see it as essential for gaining employment, accessing services, and participating in civic society (e.g., Hope, 2011). Thus, the palpable desire on the part of families to acquire English as quickly as possible, was understandable, and may have influenced the facilitators, perhaps unconsciously, to emphasize it and unwittingly, to downplay L1.

L1 Language or L1 Literacy?

As expected, during focus group sessions and in informal conversations, many of the families saw L1 as an important part of maintaining their cultural identity (e.g., Darvin & Norton, 2014). However, as we conversed with them, it appeared that they saw speaking and listening as more important in that regard than reading and writing. Some participants indicated that they used computers and smart phones to read newspapers and other texts and to communicate in L1 to friends and relatives in Canada and in their country of origin, and there were few opportunities for their children to see the L1 orthography or to use it in their homes and communities, aside from the materials we were providing.

At the midpoint of each year of the program, we gave each family a large manila envelope with their child's name and the date and asked them to collect the drawing, scribblings, printing/writing, and so forth (e.g., Ferreiro & Teberosky,1982; Rowe, 2013) that the child produced over one week and to return the envelope with the child's written products to us. Unexpectedly, and contrary to what Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) found in their foundational study of young children's writing, there was no evidence of L1 orthography in any of the samples that were analyzed. It should be noted that like the children in the Harste and colleagues study, the children were quite young and it might that they will learn to read and write in their L1 as they grow older. It might also be the case that the proliferation of digital tools may be reducing children's exposure to written language in their L1. However, some of the graduate students with whom I work who grew up in Canada, while still able to converse in L1, are unable to read and write it and we wonder what other factors are at work here. Of course, whether the focus on oral language and the apparent lack of attention to literacy will contribute to the diminution of L1 and its eventual loss is open to speculation.

Resourcing Bilingual Family Literacy Programs

Despite the fact that there is converging evidence that family literacy programs significantly contribute to children's literacy development and also positively impact parents (e.g., Brooks, et al., 2008; van Steensel et al., 2011), they continue to be underfunded. Typically, program providers rely on short term grants from government agencies and philanthropies, entailing endless rounds of writing grant applications or proposals, and then the attendant reports at the conclusion of projects. Bilingual family literacy programs present even greater challenges in that they require considerable translation, dual language books and materials are often more expensive than unilingual ones, and there is a need to provide facilitators with ongoing professional development in areas such as bilingualism, culturally responsive pedagogy, L1 maintenance, and so on. Furthermore, ongoing formative assessment and evaluation are necessary.

My colleagues and I were quite fortunate in the case of the PALS in Immigrant Communities project in that we obtained significant funding for three years from a Government of Canada agency. As well, once the funding ended, a Not-For-Profit literacy organization assumed responsibility for

continuing and supporting the program. Still, we faced challenges. For example, we were unable to find dual language books in Karen-English, and so the cultural worker devoted an incredible amount of her own time, translating the texts into Karen and affixing overlays into individual books. Although we provided what we thought was intense and continuous professional development, at the end of the program we felt that more was needed, especially in attempting to ensure that L1 was present on an equal footing with English and that different cultural ways of child rearing, learning, and teaching were recognized and valued. Furthermore, the ongoing assessment and evaluation that we saw as essential, was virtually eliminated, once the NGO assumed responsibility for the program. Peter Hannon (2010), a leading scholar in early and family literacy in the United Kingdom, proposed that a portion of the budget, of all family literacy programs needs to be allocated for assessment and evaluation. I believe that there is an ethical and moral responsibility to do so and given the nascent nature of bilingual family literacy programs and the complexities associated with them identified here and elsewhere, the case is even more compelling.

Hybridity and Family Literacy Programs

There is a tendency in some of the scholarship in family literacy to present home/community literacy and school literacy as a duality. Furthermore, home or vernacular literacy practices are often positioned as more desirable and school literacy practices less so. My own experiences suggest that such bifurcation is likely counterproductive and that there are other ways of conceptualizing family literacy practices, rather than through what I see as this oppositional perspective. For example, Pahl and Kelley (2005) describe family literacy programs as a third space where families draw on the domains of both home and school. In a similar vein, Gutiérrez, Baquedan-López, and Tejeda (1999) refer to hybrid practices where learners draw on "aspects from multiple contexts" (p. 292) such as home, community and school.

Although we attempted to draw on families' home literacy experiences to the greatest extent possible, there was no doubt that the family wanted to learn about school literacy practices, particularly since many of the adults had not experienced schooling in North America (Perry.

2009). For example, during focus group sessions, parents indicated that they appreciated the learning through play orientation of the program that their children would also experience when they entered kindergarten and the primary grades. One father indicated in one of the sessions that he had never thought of play as a context for learning and would have been dubious about it, had he not participated in the activities with a learning-through-play focus alongside his child. Indeed, just as Pahl and Kelly (2005) and Gutiérrez and colleagues (1999) suggest, the families did draw on their own cultural ways of teaching and learning, for example emphasizing correctness, providing hand over hand guidance as the child attempted to print her name or explicitly modeling how to construct a craft before allowing the child to attempt to make one on his own (Anderson & Morrison, 2011).

Concluding Thoughts: Humility and Nuance

Lakeside Elementary School, March 6, 2006
I chatted with Mr. Truong at length today during the break. He has attended all of the PALS sessions and appears very engaged. He explained that he works on a mushroom farm and with the permission of his supervisor, he starts work at 4:00 a.m. on the days when there are PALS sessions so that he can work his eight-hour shift and still be able to attend.

The excerpt above is from my fieldnotes as colleagues and I worked with a group of Vietnamese families who had requested that we offer a bilingual version of PALS in their community. Mr. Truong's commitment to his children and his belief that literacy will enable his children to have success in school and in life is humbling. As I have worked with literally hundreds of immigrant and refugee families over the years, I am constantly reminded of the challenges and obstacles that many of them face, their commitment and dedication to their children's education, and their resilience.

Committed to incorporating families home literacy practices and encouraging and supporting them in maintaining their home languages, I also realize the tremendous press they feel for themselves and their children to learn English and for their children to "get ready" for school. If we truly subscribe to and attempt to enact in our programs, the socio-

contextual responsive stance that Auerbach (1989) so cogently argued for, I believe we must listen to parents' voices and try to meet their needs.
I infer from some of the literature that many participants in family literacy programs lack agency. As we have argued, families who participated in the PALS in Immigrant Communities project elected to attend of their own free will as there was no external pressure to participate, there were no inducements other than the light meals and the dual language books and other materials provided at each session, and recruitment was by word of mouth (Anderson et al., 2016). Furthermore, families did not blindly take up the activities and suggestions offered but instead within the program and at home, modified the activities and used the materials in ways that made sense to them (Anderson & Morrison, 2011; Friedrich, 2016). And as we discussed earlier, they indicated when they did not understand activities or when they had concerns. My interpretation is that families do exert agency, when program facilitators create an environment that is conducive to doing so.

Of course, we deliberately established a strong rapport with families, getting to know them as individuals and creating structures (i.e., debriefing as part of each session; focus group sessions), and an environment that encouraged families to provide feedback, allowing us to change and modify the program in attempting to meet families' needs. Although I had considerable prior experiences working with families and extensive knowledge of research and theory in early literacy and family literacy, I also recognized that we were working with "other people's children" (Delpit, 2006) and it was essential that I listen to their voices. I see such a stance crucial for those working in family literacy programs.

Obviously, bilingual family literacy programs are not a panacea and immigrant and refugee families continue to face barriers, challenges and obstacles. Furthermore, there are complex issues in play here and these should not be trivialized. However, when those of us who facilitate and work in such programs respect families and their languages and their cultural ways of knowing and realize that we do not have all the answers and that reciprocity is essential and we must also learn from families (e.g., Purcell-Gates, 2017), I believe these initiatives offer considerable potential for immigrant and refugee children and their families. But this is hard work and much more remains to be done.

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