Chapter 1
Literacy and Early Childhood: A Culturally Responsive Program for Mexican Mothers

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ABSTRACT
In this chapter, the authors explore the components needed for a culturally responsive workshop specifically tailored to meet the needs of Mexican mothers participating in an early childhood literacy learning after school program in the United States. The impact of visualization, use of videos, and small and large group sharing of perspectives is discussed. In addition, authors provide opportunities for readers to reflect upon the impact of culturally responsive practices and intercultural communication.

INTRODUCTION
Culturally responsive practice focuses on “…a solid pattern of interaction, accommodation and ownership so that students feel comfortable working together, knowing their opinions will be valued, and expressing themselves in multiple ways” (Edwards & Edwick, 2013, p. 10). When working with families with a variety of language needs, being able to utilize familiar materials and information can be helpful in order to spark prior knowledge, encourage active participation and increase engagement. Many argue that engagement in educational activities can be facilitated by closely connecting to the experiences and traditions of the group. An understanding of the needs of Mexican immigrant mothers or maternal figures, often responsible for a large proportion of the home-school activities of students of Mexican descent, has become a priority in many schools in the United States because it is not uncommon for English language learners (ELLs) to lag behind English-only peers in standardized testing results. For example, Abedi and Dietel (2004) stated that comparison of ELLs’ participation in standardized assessments to that of their native-English-speaking peers indicated that ELLs’ performance on state assessments is lower and that improvement

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occurred at lower rates. Accordingly, schools often seek support from programs, experts, or services to assist them as they try to close the achievement gap with many of the efforts focused on ways in which parents can augment or reinforce the school curriculum.

Universities are partnering with community groups to develop research-based community programs to increase literacy-learning for ELLs. Parents in the community are often searching for additional support to help their children succeed in school. Research indicates the importance of parental involvement to the success of a child’s schooling experience (Banerji, Berry, & Shotland, 2012) and, accordingly, consideration of the language and cultural needs of parents with different educational experiences becomes paramount.

This chapter explores the development, adaptation, and implementation of a culturally responsive literacy-school practices curriculum for Mexican mothers with minimal English language skills who have children attending schools in the United States. The authors provide a first-hand account of ways in which connecting with Mexican teachers and community members helped transform a literacy workshop for families that was provided in the United States.

BACKGROUND

An area of schooling that has received significant attention when it comes to immigrant children and families is literacy, especially emergent literacy. Emergent literacy is a “continuously emerging and evolving ability that results from one’s experiences and experiments with language in literacy contexts” (Leu & Kinzer, 1999, p. 81). Effective literacy practices between children and parents is seen as the cornerstone to overall success at school and as necessary for emergent literacy to flourish. Several research studies have noted a significant gap between some Latino children and their native English-speaking counterparts when it comes to emergent literacy practices at home, and when thinking about overall vocabulary learning and growth during the early years. Often, this gap is attributed to the type of verbal interactions and exposure to words Mexican parents provide to their children prior to schooling. Researchers have indicated how vocabulary learning, regardless of the language of instruction, can significantly impact cognitive development due to the interconnections between language and learning (Tamis-LeMonda, Song, Kuchirko, Kalman, & Roufman, 2014). Because language learning happens in a “socio-cultural” context, it is important to keep in mind how “...vocabulary is the product of social interactions in which children are continually exposed to new words and associated concepts” (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2014, p. 71). Parents play an important role in the type of interactions and exposure to words their children have since “...rich language input benefits children by promoting growth in vocabulary that snowballs into enhanced cognitive skills in multiple domains” (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2014, p.85).

Literacy programs for immigrant families with school age children living in the United States have often focused on ways to expand opportunities to practice and enhance English language skills while exposing families to educational and parental practices commonly used for increasing children’s school readiness. At times, program development is impeded by misconceptions about Latino parents’ involvement in their children’s education in comparison to that of other families living the United States; specifically, that Latino families will be less involved. Miano (2011) explained how research related to overall parental involvement in schools and ways teachers collaborate and work with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to focus on strategies from an “European-American, middle class” perspective,
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