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Top-Notch Supports for Language Learners

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From honing students' interpreting skills, to helping Latinas reach their potential, to developing parent leaders, three schools show how to ensure language learners' success.



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Young Interpreters

by Noah Borrero

Instead of focusing on the linguistic deficiencies of its English language learners, one urban K–8 public school in California is capitalizing on its students' strength—their bilingual capability. The Young Interpreters Program teaches 7th and 8th graders to become on-site interpreters for monolingual parents and, in the process, hones students' language skills.

In a study (2007) I conducted of the program during the 2004–05 school year, approximately 20 bilingual 7th and 8th graders participated. The students were all from immigrant families of Mexican heritage, and all spoke Spanish at home. Like many adolescents from families that speak a language other than English, these students served as interpreters for their families, helping family members and friends communicate with people at school; make doctors' appointments; and do business over the phone with banks, insurance companies, lawyers, and so on.

The goals of the Young Interpreters Program were threefold: to improve students' English and Spanish, send a clear message to students that their bilingualism is important, and increase the school's capability to welcome and communicate with Spanish monolingual parents. The program focused on developing students' English and Spanish skills through a class that met twice each week—once in Spanish and once in English—for the entire year and through the students' participation as interpreters at school activities.

In the twice-a-week classes, students discussed key terms (such as *bilingualism*, *translating*, *interpreting*); reflected on their experiences interpreting outside school; and learned literacy strategies that are key to interpreting (such as vocabulary development, paraphrasing, active listening, and questioning). This curriculum provided direct support for students' interpreting activities at the school, which included providing information to parents and visitors in the main office, giving tours to families visiting the school, and providing bilingual introductions to after-school and weekend activities (see

Borrero, 2008 for specifics of the program; see Angelelli, Enright, & Valdes, 2002 for an effective curriculum model).

The students also worked with monolingual English teachers and served as interpreters in parent-teacher conferences. The young interpreters worked closely with a teacher to set up the twice-a-year conference schedule, discuss the teacher's goals for each conference, and revisit the tenets of professionalism and confidentiality. It is important to note that we asked parents for their permission before using a student interpreter, that young interpreters never participated in a conference with a peer's parents, and that teachers and administrators decided which conferences were appropriate for young interpreters to attend.

Although they were nervous at first, the students gained tremendous confidence once the conferences were underway. Teachers were amazed at how quickly the young interpreters became professional and adultlike in their participation. The students enjoyed the conferences so much that they would arrive at school before 7:00 a.m. to prepare and would often stay until 7:00 p.m. to finish the final conference of the day.

In a series of interviews, students reflected on their improvement as interpreters. At the start of the program, they said they had mainly relied on word-for-word translation while interpreting. As the year went on, however, students began to talk about paraphrasing—a skill they were learning to use in the Young Interpreters class. One 8th grader in the program described paraphrasing as the ability "to talk and be short and do it in your own words." Through paraphrasing, students were able to process larger chunks of speech. They also knew that paraphrasing would help them in parent-teacher conferences, and they truly wanted to succeed as interpreters in this capacity. Moreover, learning to paraphrase helped them at home. "Now I can help my dad if he goes to the bank," said one of the students. "And my Mom's boss—I translate for him."

The program proved beneficial to the students in other areas as well. Students talked about using paraphrasing (as well as other skills they had learned in the class) in their other classes and on standardized tests. As a group, the young interpreters significantly outscored 7th and 8th grade English language learners who were not in the program on the English Language Arts section of the California Standards Test, the state's mandated exam (Borrero, 2007).

The Young Interpreters Program is now in its 6th year. In addition to its regular offerings, the program currently encourages students to work with community partners and professional interpreters in the legal and medical fields, showing students that their bilingualism can provide meaningful career opportunities.

Our students are our greatest resource at school. We need to find more ways of getting them involved in the activities of the larger school community. Using their cultural and linguistic backgrounds in a program like Young Interpreters is a powerful way to do so.

Writing Their Way to Success

by Sara Exposito and Maria Del Rosario Barillas

In an interview conducted by the American Association of University Women,¹ a Latina student shared a comment that her father often made to her: "When you educate a man, you educate an individual. But when you educate a woman, you educate the whole family."

One program designed to improve Latinas' education outlook is the Girls at Promise Writing Club, which provides a place for Latina youth who are struggling academically or behaviorally to share their lives through writing, visual arts, and field trips. Since implementing the program in November 2007, we have met twice each month with a dozen first- and second-generation Latinas at Bell Gardens Intermediate

School, which is located eight miles south of East Los Angeles. Approximately 98 percent of students at Bell Gardens are Latinos (mostly Mexican and Mexican American); 50 percent are English language learners; and 85 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch.

The Girls at Promise Writing Club is committed to the belief that first- and second-generation immigrant girls can become exceptional writers when provided with three supports.

Engaging writing instruction. Through sharing visual arts, photography, and stories, students discuss what their lives are like moving from their current situation toward future aspirations. The club organizes writing events around broad themes—self, family, community, and the future—and short relevant literature related to the urban Latino experience. For example, the girls read a student essay by Loretta Chan titled, "Tired of Being a Target." The writing prompt for that day was *Write about a time when you felt like a target.*

To help the girls expand their narratives, we used a modified writer's workshop in which the students wrote and shared in short, frequent intervals. We encouraged the girls with limited English proficiency to write and discuss in Spanish; small-group sessions and teacher-student conferences provided additional support with writing skills.

Over the course of the program's first year, the girls began to enjoy writing because they liked sharing their stories. As time progressed, they became more confident and began to develop identities as writers.

Flexible learning opportunities. Although originally we attempted to rush the process to cover more themes, we quickly learned that instruction suffered as a result. By slowing down to listen and support students, we accomplished more and were better able to meet students' needs.

For example, during the first session, one girl told the story of her father's arrest, imprisonment, and deportation. In tears, she spoke about the strain the event placed on her family. That day, many of the girls opened up regarding family experiences related to incarceration. Slowing down to listen and following up with time to write and share taught all of us about the healing power of writing.

It also enabled us to teach some lessons about respectful listening. The girls had a lot to communicate, but they were not always good listeners. We decided to generate behavior agreements and model respectful listening and appropriate ways to give feedback. As the girls gradually learned to listen, they began to talk about writing in more sophisticated ways. They learned that they weren't alone in the challenges they wrote about, and they became more respectful of one another as a result.

Consistent mentorship. At one point, we took the girls on a field trip to Pacific Oaks College. Although the purpose was for the girls to have access to technology, we realized the benefits of expanding networks and experiences through field trips. During the 30-minute drive back and forth, we connected to the girls in ways that extended beyond writing. The conversations served as sobering reminders of the complexity of the lives of immigrant youth in urban areas: the day-to-day survival, the poverty, and the fear.

As our relationship with the girls deepened, the writing became more personal. We had the good fortune to have support from the principal and counselors as we entered territory that often blurred the lines between the private and public selves. One of the school counselors, a Latina who had grown up in East Los Angeles, began attending sessions to assist when difficult topics came up. She became a role model, providing the girls with a glimpse of what might lie ahead for them if they did well in school.

Our involvement in the writing club and the improvement in the students' writing have made one thing clear: The best writing programs challenge students to meet their potential by teaching them not only about writing but also about building caring relationships and networks inside and outside the community.

"Where I'm From"

*I am from the joy and love of my family
 A square dining room table in the corner of the kitchen
 I am from the backyard filled with adoring brothers and nieces
 From toys and a hammock hanging from a huge tree
 I am from a neighborhood full of scary gangsters
 Hanging out in the corner with their baggy clothes and hard faces
 Some cool, some bad
 I am from Ariel, a wonderful dad that makes delicious caldo de res
 I am from, "Si yo tubiera tu edad yo estuviera en la escuela estudiando duro para
 agarrar una carrera" (If I was your age, I would study hard to get a career)
 My mom makes me want to work hard so I can make my family proud
 I am from dark, rich mole, juicy red enchiladas and warm menudo
 I am from the secrets I keep in my heart
 —Liliana, 13 years old*

Learning to Lead

by Merriane Dyer

When faculty members at Fair Street Elementary School convened to analyze the results of current parent outreach and engagement efforts, they realized that something was missing. The school, which is located in a midsize city northeast of Atlanta, Georgia, serves a large percentage of second language learners (70 percent), predominantly Latinos, with 94 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. The faculty had used research-supported practices to bridge cultural gaps and encourage parent participation through the school's International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program. Nevertheless, there was an absence of input and ideas from the parents of the school's English language learners.

Using a \$3,000 MetLife Sharing the Dream grant from the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the school conducted a Latino Parent Leadership Project to increase understanding of Latino parents' needs, create programming to address those needs, and promote Latino parent participation in governance and advocacy. We developed the project using the Epstein Model of Parent and Community Involvement.¹

We began by inviting all Latino parents to meet weekly (for two hours on Thursday evenings) for eight weeks. The school provided transportation through a special contract with the city buses, and meetings began with a family meal. A bilingual facilitator led the parent meetings, with school staff taking on a supporting role. The school also provided supervised programming for children during the meetings, which included open gym, technology lab, and story time for young children. By the end of the fourth session, we identified a small group of potential leaders who agreed to meet for an extended time to focus on leadership skills.

Since the implementation of the project, a dramatic and sustained improvement has occurred in the role that Latino parents play in the school. The following strategies contributed to the program's success.

1. Design a program that responds to parents' needs. Get outside help if necessary.

Although they had completed training in cultural understanding, our predominantly middle-class, English-speaking faculty members agreed that they did not have the perspective to anticipate what Latino parents valued and needed. So they looked for outside help. They found a group leader in local real estate consultant Leo Llonch, a first-generation Cuban immigrant with a background in leadership training.

Llonch began by developing a survey that asked Latino parents the following three questions: What are your dreams for your children? What is your role in helping your children accomplish this dream? What are the obstacles?

Results revealed that parents wanted their children to learn English, be educated and obtain jobs, care for their families, and experience happiness in their lives. Parents viewed their role as providing a home, ensuring school attendance, supporting their children financially, and spending time together as a family. The obstacles that parents identified were learning English, furthering their own education, and managing their time and money. Our previous parent programs had centered on having parents help their children with reading, math, and homework. This survey revealed that our parents' priorities were different.

Subsequent meetings focused on providing resources to parents about English language classes, ways to obtain a General Education Diploma (GED) or technical training certification, time and financial management, and links to community resources. Llonch connected this work to the importance of parental participation in their children's education. Parents began to understand the school structure.

Also, the teachers supplied concrete examples of how the parents could support their children's learning. Parents could attend the School Governing Council and understand what participants discussed because translators were available on-site. Parents could complete parent surveys in Spanish to inform school decision making, and they could attend student-led parent-teacher conferences to view student work that teachers had rated using a bilingual rubric. Parents began to see that they didn't need to speak English to participate in setting school practices.

2. Form a facilitation team.

A team of four Spanish-speaking teachers joined the group to facilitate communication. Parents felt comfortable sharing with them their concerns, such as not being able to help their children with their homework. The parents suggested that teachers assign homework in a more consistent way. Teachers responded by assigning homework that required minimal parent involvement and designing homework practice collaboratively in the grade levels to establish a regular weekly pattern and sequence. Teachers noted an immediate improvement. To remove any inhibitions for the parents to participate, the principal and non-Spanish-speaking faculty removed themselves from the parent group, participating only in the meal and children's activities.

3. Develop leaders and sustain a relationship with them.

Four parents who emerged as natural leaders of the group were asked to stay an additional 30 minutes at each meeting to discuss leadership and advocacy. This group learned about the governance structures and the board of education. They also learned about the formal ways that parents could advocate, such as by submitting recommendations through surveys or submitting formal requests to the school governing council to take to the superintendent of schools and the board of education. The superintendent met with them to explain the decision-making process, and the group attended a school board meeting.

As leaders in the Latino community, these parents opened doors of communication to other Latino networks for the school, such as Catholic Social Services, the Hispanic Ministerial Association, the

Hispanic Business Committee of the local Chamber of Commerce, and university initiatives that support Latino issues. After the project concluded, these members continued as leaders of a Latino Parent Advisory group, providing a level of leadership from the Latino community that the school had not seen before.

As a result of the project, the school now better serves its English language learners. For six consecutive years, our Hispanic and English language learner subgroup has achieved adequate yearly progress. This small grant investment resulted in exponential returns in positive intercultural relationships and student support.

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