

Witty Latina Grandmas, Silly Skeletons, and Birthday Cakes: A Library Program Focused on Bilingual Literacy

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In this article, we present a series of recommendations to increase the patronage of Latino/a families in Indiana libraries. We briefly describe a collaborative effort to develop a bilingual program at a public library in the Greater Lafayette area in Indiana, which was funded by a small service-learning grant from Purdue University. We focus on five lessons learned in this initiative and its implications for improving library services for culturally and linguistically diverse families. In particular, we encourage libraries to establish partnerships with local institutions that may help in recruiting patrons and securing funds for library programs.

Libraries' Role in Larger Conversations on Literacy and Reading

Our initiative responded to national level concerns with the literacy development of culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the United States and the libraries' role in providing feasible opportunities for them. Since the 1970s, the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking (REFORMA) has highlighted the value of bilingual literacy for families who utilize English and Spanish and has advocated for their equal access to library services (Position on Language Rights, n.d.). Similarly, national and international professional associations have joined efforts to encourage rewarding literacy practices among individuals, including reading to raise awareness about "themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world" (NCTE/IRA Standards, 1996, p. 3). The need for advocacy efforts towards linguistic and racial minorities has also been echoed at the state level in Indiana. In a recent publication, Garcia-Febo (2013) reminds us that multilingual community members deserve equitable access to information and library services as these "reflect fundamental democratic values by which our society operates" (p. 45). In short, organizations and institutions at multiple levels in the US are promoting literacy and reading to develop citizenry and awareness of diversity. As language educators, we embraced these larger conversations and framed a library program to meet the literacy needs of our local community.

An Overview of the Library Program

The library program "¡Feliz Cumpleaños a Todos los Niños! Happy Birthday to All Children!" took place in the spring of 2011. On this occasion, 43 community members visited the



Children and parents decorated masks together

West Lafayette Public Library for a culturally themed birthday celebration. Graduate and undergraduate students from Purdue University facilitated the bilingual read-aloud of Yuyi Morales's "Just a minute: A trickster tale and counting book where a clever abuela/grandma cheats death." They also carried out a craft making session and the culminating birthday celebration that included singing "Las Mañanitas," the "Happy Birthday" song, and "Feliz Cumpleaños." The Children's Collection activity room

was transformed into a festive space where bright balloons, a piñata, colorful cakes, and artifacts used in Latino/a birthday celebrations, such as the game pin the tail on the donkey, welcomed the Latino/a patrons to the activity. At the end, the children shared their enjoyment by playing tricks on participants using their self-created masks while adults engaged in conversation and explored library services.



Children played tricks on the attendees

Five Lessons Learned

In light of our engagement efforts with our local public library, our affiliation to the university, and our partnership with a community organization, we share a series of lessons learned upon carrying out this library program for Latino/a families. We draw on and hope to contribute to the larger conversation about successful library services for Spanish-speaking patrons. Librarians play a key role in creating a welcoming environment for Spanish-speaking families.

During our program, the librarians' knowledge of available reading materials and the library's layout served to create a hospitable atmosphere for these community members. We are indebted to the wonderful children's librarians, Pam Knoehler

and Linda Klein, for making this initiative a great success. Their knowledge of multicultural literature by multilingual authors and their welcoming disposition helped make this an inclusive program. The library served as an amicable space for all families. Such impressions are of importance for Latino/a families who may otherwise feel excluded due to the perception that reading materials are for English-speaking library users (Villagrán, 2001). For the program, our partner librarians identified prominent places to display age-appropriate cultural materials for the children and young adults. They selected outstanding young adult novels and appealing picture books featuring Latino/a characters and themes and placed them on tables or shelves that showcased their covers. By strategically positioning these selections for the patrons, librarians create inclusive spaces that welcome who they are and extend an overt invitation to peruse and enjoy the resources (see Ewers, 2009, for a thorough discussion on book positioning in libraries). Such approaches also provide access to relevant literature, e.g., alternative canons, while recognizing the cultural and linguistic assets of Spanish-speaking families.

Libraries can promote high quality award-winning Latino/a literature.

By preparing collections of such titles, libraries can share with patrons the significant contributions made by Latino/a authors and illustrators. Identifying these books as a special collection moves them beyond the language-bound section labeled “Spanish” or “Other languages” and towards a list of sources selected and endorsed by professionals with an expertise in the field of Latino/a literature. The creation and labeling of collections of award-winning Latino/a literature, such as the Pura Belpré Award and the Américas Book Award for Children’s and Young Adult Literature, bring prestige to a relegated group of books that tends to be overshadowed by mainstream titles. These awards are of special relevance to Latino/a families because several of these books are available in English, Spanish, and bilingual editions. As Gangi (2005) explains in her critique of literary awards such as the Caldecott and the Newbery Medal, “there is no reason, given the pools of talent available, that [culturally and linguistically diverse] children cannot find people who look like themselves in books and cannot find writers and illustrators who look like themselves in book jacket photographs” (p. 257).

Non-Spanish speaking librarians can serve Spanish-speaking patrons.

Serving patrons from diverse backgrounds can be a challenging task for librarians (de la Peña, St. Lifer, & Rogers, 1993; Meltzer Frostick, 2009), especially those whose typical staff comes from racially homogenous backgrounds (Smith-Woodard, 2013). Members of the library and information science field have suggested the creation of frameworks for advancing librarian’s cultural competence (Montiel Overall, 2009). In our case, the librarians in the WLPL already demonstrated this multicultural competence and were eager to sponsor the program. They also expressed the desire to learn about and from the local community, a practice recommended by Flores

and Pachon (2008). By gathering knowledge from specific community groups, librarians familiarize with their patrons’ cultural nuances, language preferences, and information needs and can draw on this knowledge when selecting library materials and providing services.

Librarians should rely on the ability of community partners to recruit Latino/a patrons for library programs.

Latino/a families in Greater Lafayette actively volunteer and participate in community centers and other local organizations. In our experience, the families tend to develop relationships and establish trust in them. Therefore, organization leaders would be ideal contacts to develop community efforts in other venues because they know the families and have suitable ways of approaching them. One of the many lessons we learned from our community liaison was that Latino/a patrons might not learn about library programs through regular media, such as local newspapers and library websites, because these are predominantly in English. To address this disconnect, community partners generously volunteer to distribute flyers among local businesses and offices of federal government sponsored services frequented by Latinos/as. They can also include this information on their printed Spanish newsletters or other periodicals that circulate locally.

Libraries can partner with community centers.

In addition to recruiting families, community centers may have transportation that can be used to pick up participants and take them to the library program. As mentioned earlier, the library may be a new and unknown place for Latino/a patrons, and group visits and the guidance of a community liaison could make them feel more comfortable. Trust and comfort, we have learned, are essential when working with these families.

Community leaders can also provide valuable information about the families’ characteristics, including language use, children’s ages, and countries or cultures of origin. In our case, the community liaison’s familiarity with the group was key when developing various aspects of the program. For instance, we learned that most children were well versed in English while their parents were more proficient in Spanish. Thus, we chose books, games, and songs in both English and Spanish, and prepared materials in the predominant language variety of our prospective patrons.

Final Remarks

During our program, various groups came together with a set of common goals for an event: a growing excitement of meeting and sharing, an expectation for establishing rapport, and a desire to promote bilingual literacy. The funds allocated for our library initiative served to expand the Latino/a children’s book collection of the library, to create learning opportunities about literature written and/or illustrated by prolific Latino/a writers, and to host a cultural celebration for these patrons. As a result, the library became a wonderful middle ground for the integration of community, libraries, and university students.

We hope the information presented here can be of service to those planning bilingual literacy programs in and for their local communities.

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