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Latino Family Literacy Project : a means to parent empowerment

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Latino Family Literacy Project: A means to Parent Empowerment

Cristin Martinez

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Arts in Education


California State University Monterey Bay
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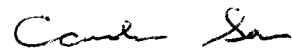
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It is with honor that I thank first of all my parents for always encouraging me to pursue my academic endeavors and helping me overcome the challenges I have faced along the way. If it were not for my parents I would not have accomplished all that I have set out to do. I am also filled with joy to have an opportunity to thank my sister Ana, friends, boy friend David, work colleagues, and CSUMB peers for sharing their unending support as I completed my Master's of Arts degree in Education. In particular, my gratitude goes to Dr. Serna and Dr. Meier for sharing their wisdom, advice and guiding me through the process of completing my graduate degree. I want to give a special thank you to all the parent participants of the Latino Family Literacy Project, whom I hold great respect for and have learned so much from. Finally, I dedicate my thesis to all Latino parents who are making positive contributions to the lives of their children, school, community and themselves.

Abstract

Currently most Latino parents lack a sense of empowerment due to various factors such as poverty, language barriers, educational level, and access to resources (Delgado-Gaitan 1990, Freire & Macedo 1987). This study looks into how the participants of the Family Literacy Project perceive the program impacting their lives and sense of empowerment.

The previous literature on Latino parents stressed the obstacles that influence Latino parent empowerment are school culture, lack of parent's knowledge of school, and schools' ignorance of Latino family strengths (Ada 2003, Delgado-Gaitan 2004). Latino literacy programs were found to increase parents' critical awareness, skill building, and confidence, helping them overcome some of these obstacles.

Methods consisted of action researcher observations, interviews with the parents and weekly course feedback questionnaires. The Shepard and Rose (1995) hierarchy of empowerment model was used to analyze the data on Latino parent empowerment. This model was used to look at how parents demonstrated the four level of empowerment; basic communication, home improvement, volunteering, and advocacy. This study found that the participants met the first three levels, but could not provide evidence of the fourth level. It was also found that having parents use Ada's (2003) four phases of literacy methodology; descriptive, personal, critical and creative helped parents better understand the socio-cultural issues that influenced their lives.

The researcher saw a need to improve her own practice as a facilitator through acquiring more knowledge on the Mexican culture, learning more academic Spanish and managing class time more effectively.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

My initial interest in the study of Latino family literacy programs as a means for parent empowerment arose early in my teaching career. As a kindergarten teacher, at a school serving predominantly Latino students, I began to notice an absence of family centered programs. My second year of teaching I was granted an opportunity to work with parents at my school site. My school site was fortunate enough to have received funds supporting the implementation of family focused programs. One of my fellow co-workers and I used this opportunity to create Latino family literacy workshops as a way of addressing the needs of our Latino families. One of the workshops that we piloted under the umbrella of family literacy was the Latino Family Literacy Project. This particular program addresses Latino family sociocultural issues, and utilizes parents' pre-existing knowledge regarding literacy to make the context of learning a powerful experience that not only benefits children but parents as well. Due to my observations and parent feedback I became interested after my first year as a facilitator for the Latino Family Literacy Project, on the impact this program has on empowering parents. As well, my personal connection to the topic as a Latina teacher was a motivating factor for pursuing a study in this area.

Currently most Latino parents lack a sense of empowerment due to various factors such as poverty, language barriers, educational level, and access to resources (Ada 2003, Delgado-Gaitan 1990, Freire & Macedo 1987, Valdes 1996). Latino parents continue to face the same problems because there has not been a conscious effort to move towards changing these conditions. Latino Family Literacy provides an opportunity to explore issues pertaining to the experiences of Latino parents. The intent of Latino Family Literacy Project is to provide activities that build upon the cultural experiences and knowledge of participants, and consequently influence Latino parent empowerment. My study examined the effectiveness of this program model to empower Latino parents. In particular, the Latino Family Literacy Project

served as a model for exploring empowerment, which is a topic that has not been fully explored.

The purpose of my study was to explore the factors influencing Latino parent empowerment, parent's perspectives on this topic and how this is manifested in this Latino family literacy program model. Furthermore, in this study I looked into the role the Latino Family Literacy Project plays in building knowledge and skills as a result of utilizing curriculum that embodies the cultural experiences of Latino parents. The following research questions have guided the study:

1. How does the Latino family literacy project help parents feel more empowered?
2. What is the perception of the parents of the impact of the Latino family literacy project on their lives?

This study contributes to the literature on family literacy projects by describing how this one program attempts to help parents can build a sense of empowerment. Overall, my findings serve as means for informing the parent, school, and research community on the effects of providing programs such as Latino Family Literacy.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this section of my thesis I look at what the literature says in regards to the effect of Latino family literacy programs in empowering parents. My literature review will outline findings on the topic of empowerment and its potential relevance to Latino parents. As well, I will look at different Latino family literacy programs. In order to begin my research on the topic of empowerment, I start by looking at how it is defined, and then proceed to look at how I will define this term for the purpose of my study.

Specifically, my literature review is divided into three sections according to the areas I will explore when looking at empowerment as I have defined it for my study. The first area I explore is looking at the problems that Latino parents face and how these can be factors that prevent them from becoming empowered. Specifically, I will look at participants' relationship to school and how poverty, oppression, beliefs, access to information and literacy knowledge and skills play a role in empowerment. Next, I will define empowerment and outline the conceptual framework that I use to analyze my findings. Then, I look at previous studies on Latino family literacy programs.

Problems Latino Parents Face

The problems Latino parents face and how these factors play a role in their being empowered is an area that has not yet been fully explored. Understanding what factors impact parents' ability to be fully empowered is important because it gives educators insight into how we can work with parents. In the current study on parent literacy programs and empowerment, as will be shown, we will look at constraints that Latino parents face. Some of the constraints that we will be looking at more in depth are parents' relationship to schools, literacy skills, and language.

One key factor that impacts Latino parents' relationship with schools are schools themselves. In particular, Delgado-Gaitan (2004) states that schools play a large role in maintaining obstacles that influence Latino parent involvement, thus

disempowering parents. Some of these obstacles include school culture, lack of parent's knowledge of school, and schools' ignorance of Latino family strengths. In other words, there continues to be a gap between Latino parents and schools as a result of misperceptions, and not reaching out or not being inviting to parents. Thus, the historical disconnect between Latino parents and schools continue to exist.

Further impacting the relationship between Latino parents and schools' is Latino parents' perceptions of themselves. Many Latino parents have limited schooling and exposure to literacy; thus they have not had opportunities to develop their skills in this area (Ada, 2003). Due to many Latino parents lacking literacy skills, they don't perceive themselves as being capable of learning literacy skills, much less being effective and influential teachers for their children. Freire and Macedo (1987), through their research, discovered that literacy plays a significant role in helping to empower not only students but parents as well. Thus, not having this essential skill has a direct impact on how parents view themselves and consequently on their willingness and openness to take part in school programs and functions.

A third issue that Latino parents face are language barriers. Delgado-Gaitan (1990) found that language barriers were at the core of why parents felt isolated and ignorant regarding their role in their children's schooling. Ortiz and Ordonez-Jasis (2005) found that parents who don't speak English encounter difficulties in being able to fully participate in their children's literacy development. Lack of language knowledge and skills impacts the link that parents play in supporting and guiding their children. In other words, language constraints can impact parents' involvement in their children's education.

In sum, the authors presented issues that play a role in parents' ability and desire to participate in literacy programs and other school functions, and how these issues impact empowerment. Having a more comprehensive understanding of Latino parent's reasons for not involving themselves in their children's schooling, gives context to why parents are not being empowered. My study will further look at how the Latino Family Literacy Project addresses the issue of empowerment and why this

is of importance.

Conceptual Framework

To begin, empowerment is defined by Merriam-Websters online dictionary as “the ability to promote self-actualization, to influence or enable” (2009). Furthermore, empowerment in terms of parental involvement is described in Shepard and Rose’s (1995) model as a hierarchy in which as parents ascend to each successive level, they demonstrate different degrees of empowerment. Therefore, the degree of empowerment changes depending on where parents lie on this hierarchy. In this way empowerment shifts and evolves. In addition, as Shepard and Rose (1995) emphasize, “The goal of empowerment is not simply to ‘change’ people, but to provide them with the tools which will enable them to better manage their own lives” (p. 376). In other words, empowerment is seen by Shepard and Rose as an ongoing process in which parents utilize their skills and knowledge in dealing with situations impacting their family and themselves.

The Shepard and Rose (1995) levels of empowerment are basic communication, home improvement, volunteering and advocacy. The first level of the hierarchy focuses on basic communication, which consists of parents initiating more contact with teachers and mutually sharing ideas. The next sequential step looks at home improvement in terms of parents taking a more active role in their own personal development as well as their children’s through improving skills and enhancing learning. Volunteering is the third level in which parents involve themselves in activities outside of the home and develop stronger relationships with other parents and school personnel. As well, parents at this level demonstrate more confidence in their networking abilities. The last level of advocacy describes parents impacting change through setting policies and influencing the decision-making at their children’s schools. Due to the structure of the Shepard and Rose hierarchy model and its relevance for examining the parental participation of the parents in my program, I will use their definitions on empowerment as a framework for looking at my study.

In my study, aspects of empowerment are reflected in Alma Flor Ada's (2003) four phases of literacy methodology; descriptive, personal, critical and creative. Her four phases are used to help the participants gain deeper insight into the topics addressed in the literature they are reading and sharing with their families, thus enhancing awareness. In the descriptive phase parents are asked questions in which they have to describe in their own words what they recall from the stories they read. In the personal phase parents are presented with questions that require them to explore their feelings, emotions and make connections to the stories. The critical phase focuses on the parents critically reflecting on the stories by considering situations that are beyond their personal reality. The creative phase helps participants recognize themselves as protagonists of their own lives. This phase promotes the transformation of ideas that improves and enriches their lives. These four phases will help in analyzing how the participants in my study felt empowered.

Studies on Parent Literacy Programs

In this section I have outlined what various researchers have found in their studies of Latino parent literacy programs and their relevance to empowerment. The benefits found among the studies on Latino literacy programs that are presented in this section are parent critical awareness, skill building, and confidence.

Several authors (Ada, 2003; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Ortiz & Ordonez-Jasis, 2005; Rodriguez-Brown, 1999) have found through their research that certain family literacy programs can empower parents. They found that the programs that focus on expanding parent's views of themselves within society and that help parents build skills and confidence to make changes in their lives, are empowering parents. Through continuing to look at parent literacy programs the authors consider that we can continue gaining insight into the topic of empowerment and potentially benefiting from the results.

One of the benefits associated to the implementation of Family literacy programs found by Ada (2003) and Rodriguez-Brown (1999) was Latino parent confidence. Ada (2003), who helped generate the first Latino family centered programs in her

local community, stated that several participants expressed being more comfortable coming to school and interacting with teachers and administrators as a result of their participation in her program. Similarly, Rodriguez-Brown in her own study found that parents had increased confidence in their ability to act as positive role models to their children, and parents strengthened their relationship with their children's school.

Yet another benefit of family literacy programs consist of parents building and acquiring skills. Ada (2003), in her study, found that parents gained skills that made it easier for them to participate in groups and speak in public. Rodriguez-Brown (1999) supported the claim that literacy programs for Latino parents build skills that help parents to be active participants in the educational experiences of their children. Furthermore, Ortiz and Ordonez-Jasis (2005) state through their study that schools who provide family literacy workshops where parents have an opportunity to reflect and discuss among themselves the ways in which literacy affects their lives, stimulates the role parents play in building literacy skills for their children and themselves.

The third benefit of Latino parent literacy programs is that they provide an opportunity for parents to become aware through critically looking at how their language, values, resources, and cultural knowledge impacts their children's education. Delgado-Gaitan (2004) found that "empowerment is a process, an exchange of power that occurs through the process of sharing, reflecting on and learning from our stories" (p. 175). Through Latino parents learning that their contributions and life experiences are significant they are empowered to take a more active role in their children's education.

Areas of concern

One concern regarding Latino family literacy programs is that we need to look at the intended goals and outcomes of each program (Valdes, 1996). Valdez states that many programs set out to intervene and change Latino parent's views and ways of being so that they fit that of the status quo. These programs are not intended to empower parents, but instead to fix people. Similarly, Freire and Macedo (1987)

agreed that although literacy can be transformative and liberating, it can also serve hegemonic roles in perpetuating inequity in terms of gender, social class, and so forth. Thus the authors recommend that we look at current Latino family literacy program models and how these are structured and whether they are truly empowering parents. The program for this study was specifically designed to provide an opportunity for participants to share their knowledge and skills, with the goal of empowering them.

Another area of concern regarding Latino family literacy programs is whether the program models are the best suited for the community they are being introduced to. Delgado-Gaitan (2004) cautions that “what is highly successful in one community may not fit the needs in another one because the trained personnel, fiscal resources, and student needs could differ enormously” (p. viii). She recommends that each school site needs to look at their own individual Latino parent needs in order to best serve them. Through my study of the Latino Family Literacy Project model, I have an opportunity to look at how this model impacts this particular group of participants.

Summary of Literature Findings

In sum, the studies discussed above reflect what other researchers found in the course of their own investigations regarding the effect of Latino family literacy programs in empowering parents. These research studies present examples of Latino parents demonstrating various forms of empowerment such as through acquiring new perspectives, gaining skills and demonstrating confidence. Although, there are several benefits associated to Latino family literacy programs, there continue to be areas of concern in relation to whether they empower parents. Due to this topic being relatively new, my study will provide further insight into how the Latino Family Literacy Project serves as a means for empowerment. Furthermore, the Shepard and Rose empowerment model along with Ada’s four phases of literacy methodology have served as a means for analyzing the findings of my study exploring Latino parent empowerment.

Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this study was to look at Latino Family Literacy Project as a model for building parent empowerment. Specifically, I looked at how the Latino family literacy project helped parents feel empowered, and parents' perceptions of the impact this literacy project had on their lives. In exploring this topic and organizing my findings, I have used a qualitative teacher action research design utilizing ethnographic methods. My information on this topic has been gathered through observing Latino parent participants interacting in different group activities during the Project sessions that I have lead, as well through the interviews that I conducted.

Setting

My study of the Latino Family Literacy Program took place in a rural low-income elementary school in coastal California. This school serves mostly a Latino low-income population, located in an agricultural area. The majority of families are migrant, and do not speak English. The perspectives and information gathered on the topic of Latino parent empowerment are representative of this particular group of participants whose children attend this elementary school where I work.

I have used the cafeteria at this school to conduct the Latino Family Literacy Project sessions. I used the cafeteria for our sessions in the evenings once a week for two hours during a ten-week period. The cafeteria was set up in a manner that was conducive to learning. Specifically, the tables were facing the white board and power point screen in order to access information more easily, and to allow the participants and myself to be in close proximity to each other. Other tables in the cafeteria were used for food and materials that were all provided by the program. I also utilized another classroom for childcare. Next door to the cafeteria we had another classroom with two childcare providers overseeing activities for the children of the program participants. The proximity of the childcare classroom allowed parents to go and check on their children if they felt a need to do so.

Participants

My main criteria for participant selection was: Latino elementary school parents or family members. This criteria allowed me to focus specifically on elementary school Latino parent empowerment program, which was my target area of focus. I asked fellow teachers for recommendations of parents who they thought might be interested in participating in the program. I limited the number of participants to 20 as smaller groups are more conducive to achieving the outcomes of the program. All participants in the program were invited to be part of the study; 19 agreed to be included. Not being part of the study did not impact or influence participation in the program in any way.

Most participants tended to be females and mothers, but it was not always the case. It varies each time the program is offered. On this occasion for my study I had 18 females and two males participate, and only the females gave consent to be audio recorded for the study. The age range varied anywhere from 22 to 60 years old, from young parents to grandparents participating in the program. Most participants only spoke Spanish and wrote or expressed having limited schooling. The Latino Family Literacy Project is designed to serve this population of parents and family members. Some parents and family members are participating for a second time in the Latino Family Literacy Project. The parents who participated in this program signed up voluntarily, having learned about the program via flyers distributed by teachers and through presentations at different school functions. Some parents I called and invited to join the program based on teacher recommendations.

Procedures

Throughout the duration of the Latino Family Literacy project, parents engaged in activities that required that they critically reflect on topics that impact their lives as Latinos. Some of these topics focused on issues pertaining to culture, injustice, environment, and discrimination. In addition, the books they read in class and shared with their families also focused on these topics. Along with Latino parents looking into issues impacting their lives, they were also introduced to Dr. Alma Flor Ada's four phases of

literacy methodology. Her methodology was used as a means for parents to connect at a deeper level to the literature they were reading and discussing in class and with their family. These four phases—descriptive, personal, critical, and creative—were used each week to guide the discussion on the literacy activities.

As well, parents worked on creating a family album that consisted of various assignments reflecting their learning and life experiences. The album symbolized an artifact of the participants' learning experience that was meant to be passed down to their children. Along with having created new literacy experiences with their families at home, parents were able to discuss the topics reflected in their albums among the other participants. At the end of the 10 week sessions the Latino Family Literacy participants took part in a celebration where they were presented with certificates and were able to discuss their learning through being able to share the one piece of their album that they thought was the most significant.

Data Collection

To gather information on the topic of Latino parent empowerment, I worked directly with the participants of the Latino Family Literacy Project. My means of data collection consisted of interviews with the participating parents (conducted in Spanish), informal observations of our class sessions, and weekly written feedback from the participants.

Interviews

For the interviews, I developed a protocol that addresses the topic of empowerment (appendix A & B). I conducted the interviews at the beginning and end of the ten-week sessions. Due to time constraints I only interviewed and audio recorded 10 out of the 20 participants who consented to be part of the study. I selected a representative sample of different views and types of participants. During these interviews, I asked questions that focused on Latino parents perspectives in relation to the program and the topic of empowerment. I have asked participants questions about the role they see themselves playing in their children's literacy learning experiences. In addition, I asked parents what they thought they would learn through their participation in the Latino Family

Literacy Project and how it compared to what they actually learned. Other questions I asked focused on parents' perspectives regarding the topics addressed in this program, and what they felt they acquired through their participation. These interviews were conducted in Spanish, the primary language of the participants. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by me the researcher.

Observations

Another component of my data collection consisted of tape recordings and writing down informal notes during specific activities and interactions with parents during each session. In these observations I have looked for indications of empowerment such as parent comments and suggestions as well as parents taking the lead in different activities throughout the duration of the Latino Family Literacy Project.

Weekly evaluations

In addition, at the end of each session parents filled out an anonymous evaluation stating what they learned, what positive outcomes were achieved for the session, and how the sessions could be improved (appendix C). Due to most participants only speaking Spanish, these evaluation forms were written in Spanish.

Data Analysis

My initial means data analysis consisted of looking at the patterns that arose in my observation notes, parent questionnaires, and interviews and I created categories based on these findings. Participant statements and behaviors were then color coded and organized into the following categories; literacy, creativity, confidence, communication and interactions. As well, the Shepard and Rose (1995) model on parent empowerment was used as a guide for looking at how the participants in the Latino Family Literacy Project demonstrated empowerment. The four levels of empowerment; basic communication, home improvement, volunteering and advocacy as described by the Shepard and Rose model were used to analyze the data in my findings. For further understanding of literacy, I used Ada's (2003) four phases of literacy methodology. I also meet with my advisor on a regular basis in order to

receive feedback and insight on improving my thesis.

Chapter 4: Findings

In conducting my ten week study on the Latino Family Literacy Project as a means for Latino parent empowerment, I was able to gather data on this topic through my reflections and observations during the program meetings, interviews with participating parents, and regular participant feedback questionnaires. Through looking at the data I was able to see certain themes arise. I have used these themes in creating the categories for outlining the results of my data analysis on Latino parent empowerment.

In this study I found that Latino parents demonstrated growth in the following areas: literacy, confidence, critical awareness, creativity, communication and interactions. My findings will describe how the participants in the Latino Family Literacy Project achieved their results and what occurred along the process. As well, I have utilized the empowerment model developed by Shepard and Rose (1995) to analyze my findings. Their model focuses on looking at empowerment as a hierarchy in which as parents ascend to each level, they demonstrate different degrees of empowerment. This model is organized and described in four sequential levels; basic communication, home improvement, volunteering, and advocacy.

Literacy

The data in this study collected through the initial interviews and written parent responses showed that at the beginning of the Latino Family Literacy Project almost all participants expressed a desire to improve their reading skills. Thus the Latino Family Literacy Project provided a format for parents to strengthen and acquire literacy skills. In one of the initial interviews one parent expressed, “My struggles in helping my daughter have been because of my lack of education*.” Other parents I interviewed expressed similar concerns in relation to the impact of their limited schooling. These parents felt that because they never acquired strong literacy skills,

* All parent quotations have been translated from Spanish to English by the author.

their ability to help their children has been limited. Several parents wrote that their desire to help their children in this area had been a reason for them to take part in the Latino Family Literacy Project. Several parents said that they wanted to learn concepts of print, comprehension skills, vocabulary and they wanted to enjoy reading and be able to read to their children. One parent said, "I read to my daughter, but she tells me I am not doing it right and this is why I want to learn to read how teachers do." Specifically, the Latino Family Literacy project focused each week on having in class activities in which parents' practiced literacy skills such as concepts of print, fluency, and comprehension.

I found that each week parents began demonstrating more ease in modeling the literacy skills they were learning with the group. At the beginning of the ten week sessions parents hesitated in helping model these skills; therefore my parent helper and myself did most of the modeling during the first two sessions. As we moved further along in the program, I noticed growth in parent's willingness to share in our literacy practices such as group reading which helped strengthen reading fluency. During our readings of the stories we would use a strategy that consisted of several participants volunteering to help in the reading, and each session I noticed different parents jumping into the reading. As well, before reading each book, one parent who chose to do so was able to model the concepts of print. Each week my parent helper and I would encourage different people to volunteer so that everyone had an opportunity to practice this skill. During our discussions of the books several parents, including those who tended to mostly listen, demonstrated comprehension skills through their comments and question asking. One participant on the sixth session commented for the first time in the whole group discussion that "The book reminds me of where I grew up, we had a lot fields with plants and now it has many buildings."

Another aspect of the program consisted of the participants having an opportunity to use these skills when reading at home with their children. Many parents commented in their questionnaires and interviews how helpful these newly acquired literacy skills have been in working with their children. Several participants were able to share their

success stories. One mother stated, “Before participating in the Latino Family Literacy Project my daughter was teaching me how to read, and now I am teaching her how to read.” Furthermore, at the end of the program parents stated that indeed they did learn or improve upon their reading skills to one degree or another. One participant said “I have learned how to read and have shown my children how to make reading a habit.” These literacy skills have made it easier for them to help their children in the area of reading. Using Shepard and Rose’s empowerment model, the participants demonstrated being at the “home improvement” level through utilizing the literacy skills they acquired as a tool for enabling them to direct their own actions in helping their children and thus impacting their own lives. Increased parental empowerment was achieved through these Latino parents being actively engaged in their own personal development along with that of their children.

Communication and Interaction

Along with literacy skills, the data also showed that communication was an area that was strengthened. Even though parents for the most part did not mention at the beginning of the program learning how to communicate and interact with others as an intended goal, many parents during the course of the program mentioned that through their participation they were learning this skill. As one parent put it, “This program has helped me to learn how to share and interact with others. In the past I would never speak and give my opinions. I would just listen. And now I am learning from others and their perspectives.” Another parent commented, “I learn by sharing with other people.” Parents said that they enjoyed learning from each other and thought this was one of the benefits of this program.

In addition, many parents mentioned that, due to the results this program had on their own lives and those of their family, they are planning on or have spoken to other parents about participating next year. One parent in particular said “I have told parents to participate so that they can learn more and new things that will help them read better.” Not only did parents learn how to read better and change their family’s situation in terms of literacy, but they also were taking an active role in speaking to

others and sharing their knowledge. The participants, according to Shepard and Rose's empowerment model, were demonstrating basic communication through being able to share information with other parents and the teacher.

Confidence

The data in this study also showed that parents demonstrated and stated being more comfortable in sharing their ideas with fellow participants. Some parents mentioned that at the beginning of the program they were apprehensive about expressing their thoughts. They said that they considered themselves good listeners, but for the most part held off from sharing. The more timid parents said that through continually sharing they were able to work on their fear of speaking. One mother stated, "I am very shy, so when I share it helps me overcome this fear of speaking, it helps me to see how other parents are able to share and this motivates me." In this case the more vocal participants served as role models for the more quiet participants and were the direct cause for these parents to feel it was all right to share. Indeed I was able to observe through the course of the ten sessions that a larger number of participants were sharing every week. At the end of the ten week Latino Family Literacy Program sessions one parent in her interview stated, "Now I am more confident, I know that I can be in front of a group and speak like teachers do." Thus, this program was also a format for Latino parents to practice speaking and sharing with others, which in turn served to motivate participants.

Through having participated in this program, the data showed parents expressing that it has motivated them to be more involved in their children's learning and school. One participant shared "I personally think this program has helped me by getting me interested in reading and participating in school functions and programs." They also felt that by participating they have sent a message to their children. This is reflected in the following comment, "We come for two hours a week and this time is valuable because we are showing our children that school is important." As well, parents see themselves as role models who are influencing their children. One mother stated "We must create consistency and do what we say we are going to do, and if we don't our

children will learn this.” In addition, one parent said “This program has helped me to be more motivated and to think about getting my GED. Before I didn’t think I was able to do things or that I could understand things. Now I know I can accomplish what I set out to do.”

Along with parents motivating each other to participate and wanting to be more involved in school, participants looked forward to attending every week because this was a time for them to do something outside of the home, which they enjoyed. The participants in the Latino Family Literacy Project were involved in activities that demonstrated greater contact with the school and other parents. According to the Shepard and Rose model parents were at the level they call “volunteering” and thus had already demonstrated behaviors described in level one and two. This is the third level, and at this level parents are involved in other activities beyond their home environment and are exhibiting more confidence in themselves and their abilities.

Critical Awareness

Through the Latino Family Literacy Project, parents were able to look at topics impacting their lives and discuss their significance. Each week parents would participate in an activity which addressed a topic related to the lives of Latino parents and which was tied to the books they would be reading to their children at home. One parent said that, “These books help children and adults learn about life, and they help us value what we have.” The parents were exposed to topics such as the environment, immigration, injustice, and culture. As well, during each session questions were posed to parents that required a level of reflective thinking to take place that helped provide them with new insights. One parent mentioned, “The topics have made me think a lot.” Parent’s also commented that through hearing other participants’ stories of what they have encountered in life helped them reflect on their own lives. Another parent stated that she had heard about certain topics before but had never really taken the time to think about their significance. This workshop has provided her and other parents with the opportunity to look into these topics. One parent said “Discussing these topics has helped me learn new things, dialogue, share ideas and find solutions.”

Parents found commonalities among each other's experiences through being able to discuss what they have lived. One mother mentioned "Through hearing other people's stories, I have realized we have gone through many of the same struggles." These examples indicate that parents are critically thinking about certain social issues and how they impact society.

Parents expressed that through reflecting and thus having a broader awareness of issues impacting their lives has led to positive results in other areas of their lives. One result is that parents were encouraged to talk about their experiences to their children, thus they now see a benefit in sharing their stories. One mother stated "Before participating in this program, I did not talk much about my past with my children. Now I have an opportunity to speak to my children about my childhood experiences." Another result is that parents are more aware of larger social issues. For instance one parent spoke about global warming and their family's role in slowing it down. "My family and I are more consistent about recycling now." As a result parents are more conscious about certain topics and others are taking steps to apply what they are learning to their daily lives, therefore they are creating change, which correlates to "home improvement" level in the empowerment model.

Creativity

Another impact I witnessed during the program was that the program helped these parents develop their creativity. During each session parents had an assignment to complete at home on the topic discussed for that day. The following week parents were able to share that assignment with the group. The activities and assignments incorporated parents using different mediums such as art, poetry, and different styles of writing. For example, some parents did a diorama of their childhood home, others wrote poetry or took pictures, and one parent did all her written and pictorial assignments on the computer. Thus they had an opportunity to improve on and demonstrate certain skills. One participant mentioned "This program provided me an opportunity to be creative and I have done a lot of assignments on the computer, which is something that I enjoy." During the last session of the program parents were

provided with an opportunity to share a piece from their collection of work that had special significance to them. One parent said, “I look forward to coming each week and sharing my work.” Thus through parents learning to embrace and share their own unique abilities they were demonstrating having more confidence which is described as an important characteristic of the third level of empowerment “volunteering.”

Summary

To summarize, through the participants in the Latino Family Literacy Project describing how they felt they benefited and what they learned from participating in this program, shaped the data findings of this study on Latino parent empowerment. The themes that arose from the data findings; literacy, confidence, critical awareness, creativity, communication and interactions provided insight into how Latino parent empowerment was manifested by the participants.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Through my study I have found that the participants in the Latino Family Literacy Project demonstrated three of the four levels of the Shepard and Rose model on empowerment. Various degrees of empowerment were manifested by the participants within the basic communication level, home improvement level and volunteering level. In the first level of “basic communication,” the participants took their own individual steps to strengthen their involvement in their children’s education and school through establishing a mutual exchange of ideas with the teachers, and other participants. The Latino Family Literacy Participants through their growth in the area of communication and critical awareness demonstrated being at the level of “basic communication.” For the second level of “home improvement,” the participants reached this level through having developed their own literacy skills which enabled them to better assist their children, thus they expanded learning for the entire family. The highest stage of empowerment that the participants moved up to was “volunteering.” At this level, the participants showed that they were more confident in their abilities and as a result were working more closely with their children’s school.

The fourth level in the Shepard and Rose empowerment model focuses on “advocacy.” At this level parents involve themselves in local, district and statewide groups as a means to impact policy and institutional changes. Although the parents in the Latino Family Literacy Project were affecting change within their home and their children’s school, they were not yet impacting change at a broader level as outlined by the Shepard and Rose model. Thus, “advocacy” the last level in the Shepard and Rose model is the only level in the empowerment hierarchy that the participants did not demonstrate mastery in. Over all, the empowerment model by Shepard and Rose helped in distinguishing at what levels the participants in the Latino Family Literacy Project demonstrated empowerment, and what level they still need to work towards.

In this study the Latino parents' perceptions of their experiences serve as a testimony to how the Latino Family Literacy Project helped them feel more empowered. The parents' expressed that the activities, literature, and family album were a format for them to dialogue, share ideas, and expand their learning. The Latino participant comments indicated that they experienced significant growth in the areas of literacy, critical awareness, confidence, creativity, communication and interaction. In addition, through the participants' comments we can see they demonstrated being at some level on the Shepard and Rose empowerment hierarchy. These findings suggest that the Latino Family Literacy Project did affect various aspects of the participants' lives thus impacting their development of empowerment.

The findings in my study affirm that the Latino Family Literacy Project has been a successful means to empowering parents. Based on my research I would recommend that this program model be used by all school sites who serve a Latino population. This empowerment model provides a culturally appropriate approach in terms of working with Latino parents and utilizing their strengths in the development of empowerment. Not only do parents benefit personally and in turn their children, but as well, the school community benefits through having parents who are self confident, demonstrate strong skills, knowledge, and are involved.

Previous literature, in addition to my findings, confirms that such program contributions can be significant. Others who have examined similar programs (see Ada 2003, Freire & Macedo, Ortiz & Ordonez-Jasis 2005) found that programs that focus on having parents reflect on social issues and that build skills, knowledge and confidence are empowering to parents. In addition, research by Rodriguez-Brown (1999) correlated with my findings that empowerment model programs help parents feel and demonstrate more comfort in working with their children and the school community, thus strengthening their relationship with both. Based on my research, I join the call of other parent participation advocates and researchers (Ada 2003, Delgado-Gaitan 1990, Freire & Macedo 1987, Ortiz & Ordanez-Jasis 2005) for furthering such projects. Further research will help in learning the long term results of implementing programs such as the Latino Family Literacy Project.

The data I obtained through my study on the Latino Family Literacy Project model as a means for Latino parent empowerment will be shared with other colleagues, parents and the community. Due to what I found in my study, I recommend that other school communities implement the Latino Family Literacy Project at their own school sites. The program participants' testimonials serve as evidence for how Latino parents can be empowered and how this program benefits families and the school community.

One of the limitations of my study was that I could not follow the participants further than ten weeks to see what impacts their participation had in the future. It would be informative to discover if parents have continued to demonstrate the levels of empowerment described by Shepard and Rose and if they have built on their empowerment. I recommend further research to examine the long term effects of Latinos participating in program models such as the Latino Family Literacy Project.

My experiences in working with the Latino participants have helped me realize that I can make changes to my practice as a facilitator. I have learned that in order to effectively facilitate, I need to improve my skills in the area of managing my time more efficiently, to allow sufficient time for all the participants who wanted to share to be able to have an opportunity to do so. As well, expanding my own knowledge of Mexican culture and acquiring stronger Spanish vocabulary will make my role as the facilitator easier in terms of being able to connect better to the participants. My study has reaffirmed the importance of creating an environment with parents in which their contributions are utilized, valued and respected. Without this foundation empowerment could not have been achieved; thus I will continue using this type of model in my own practice. As well I have learned that in order to have a successful school and students it is critical that we involve parents in the process and empower them to take part in creating a positive change. In sum, the study has been a testament for how structured and culturally sensitive program models that focus on empowering parents can be an asset to all schools.

Appendix A:
Latino Family Literacy Pre-Questionnaire

*All answers will be kept confidential and will be utilized solely for the
purpose of my thesis*

1. Do you think you play an important role in your children's education, if so how?

2. How do you think you can help your children be successful in school?

3. Are there any activities that you currently engage in with your family that you feel is beneficial to the personal and academic growth of your children?

4. Are there any difficulties that you face in being able to help your children either due to your home situation or related to your children's school? If so what are they?

5. What do you think you will learn from this program and how will this help your family and yourself?

Comments:

Appendix B:
Latino Family Literacy Post-Questionnaire

*All answers will be kept confidential and will be utilized solely for the
purpose of my thesis*

1. Do you think you play an important role in your children's education, if so how?
2. How do you think you can help your children be successful in school?
3. Are there any activities that you currently engage in with your family that you feel is beneficial to the personal and academic growth of your children?
4. Are there any difficulties that you face in being able to help your children either due to your home situation or related to your children's school? If so what are they?
5. What have you learned from this program and how has this helped your family and yourself?

Comments:

**Appendix C:
Weekly Questionnaire**

- How does the topic we learned today relate to your life?

- What did the icebreaker help you learn anything today?

- How will you use what you learned today in your life and or with your family?

- What part of today's session did you enjoy the most and why?

- What part of today's session can be improved, and why?

Comments:

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