Engaging Families in Language Development

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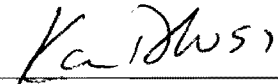
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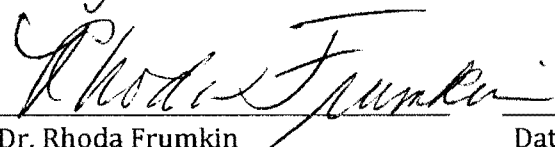
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# Abstract

This exploratory study examines how early career educators can develop their abilities to plan and implement instruction for English Language Learners (ELLs). Seven female Wagner College graduate students were observed working in an English language and literacy development program, and later interviewed about how they were prepared to work in the program, and their experiences in the program. Findings highlight the need for a basic knowledge base of students' native language in order to effectively plan and implement English language instruction. Furthermore, findings suggest that interactive activities, teachers' cultural competence, and the opportunities for reflection all positively impact ELLs instruction. Program and educational improvements are discussed.

## Chapter I: Introduction

### Background: The Need for Language Supports

English Language Learners (ELLs) represent more than ten percent of the nation's public school population and are currently the fastest-growing segment of the school-aged population (Haycock, 2012). According to the New York City Department of Education website, ELLs account for about fifteen percent of the overall population in the New York City public school system. Moreover, out of all of the ELLs enrolled in a New York City public school, about 63% of them are Spanish speaking students.

The neighborhood of Port Richmond in Staten Island is home to a large Mexican and Mexican American population. Many families of Mexican decent in Port Richmond face a variety of challenges related to English language learning and access to educational resources. A significant portion of the Mexican population in Port Richmond is not fluent in English or Spanish, speaking different local dialects of Mexican villages (Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation, 2013). Furthermore, those who do speak Spanish are often not literate in their spoken language, let alone in English (Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation, 2013). These realities may cause some parents to feel shame or guilt when it comes to helping their children in school because they are afraid to expose their language deficits in the school building. According to school data of PS 20 in Port Richmond, the majority of incoming kindergarteners lack basic language and pre-literacy skills when they enter school. Additionally, these students lack more than just literacy skills. Each year, only 16% of the entering class can demonstrate shape recognition skills in English or Spanish. Furthermore, about 70% of these students show no letter

recognition skills (Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation, 2013). The lack of these skills can be an early indicator of the language and literacy challenges that these students will face in the years to come if there are no additional language support systems in place.

There is a wealth of research supporting the connection between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) report that ELL children from low-income families are twice as likely as English speaking students to be below grade level in reading. The Mexican and Mexican American population of Port Richmond face financial challenges, which can cause additional language development obstacles. According to the 2007-2011 American Communities Survey, over 25% of families in the Port Richmond neighborhood fall below the poverty line. This statistic, along with the relevant research regarding socioeconomic status and literacy development, offers insight into the possible challenges that the Mexican families of the Port Richmond community might face.

In addition to academic success, long-term health and economic outcomes are highly correlated with early exposure to and production of language (August & Shanahan, 2006). Furthermore, the above-mentioned statistics support the idea that the family members of these students may have difficulty supporting their children's language development because of their lack of English language.

In schools with a culturally diverse population, a common service that is provided for non-English speaking parents and guardians is the use of a translator during meetings and conferences. Although this service is helpful for communication, it is a temporary solution and does not provide long-term support or language development. Without addressing the language and cultural barriers, ELLs can face many challenges that result

in low academic achievement throughout their school years. Additionally, language and cultural barriers may also result in a decrease in participation in school and at school functions. For example, Peña (2010) states that Mexican American parents that have encountered cultural and educational barriers are less likely to participate in family-school relationships. Furthermore, focus groups with school staff indicate that students' feelings about school are largely influenced by the adults who surround them. Therefore, if parents and other family members are hesitant to participate in school functions, students run the risk of developing poor attitudes towards school. These attitudes can result in a decrease in motivation, which can ultimately lead to lower academic achievement. Lower levels of motivation and academic achievement can be early indicators of drop out rates. St. Clair and Jackson (2006) reported that ELLs' poor school performance in first grade is a significant predictor of students who will later drop out. Port Richmond reflects the kind of community that has had such challenges; it has been reported that 87% of the residents do not have secondary or postsecondary education credentials (Treschan, 2010).

**Effective Early Language Development Programs**

Current research has shown that there are common features of language development programs for ELLs. These features include effective approaches for working with ELLs. Four major effective approaches for language development programs are developing cultural awareness and responsitivity, collaboration with whole families, creating a student-centered learning environment, and developing both native language and English language simultaneously.

**Cultural Awareness**

Soto (2012) states that cultural responsitivity is an explicit and continuous effort to understand the implicit values of one's professional knowledge and practices. Educators must be aware of differences in values and beliefs between different cultures. When working with diverse students, it is important for teachers and other school professionals to take the time to get to know the students and their families in addition to their culture so that they can provide them with the most culturally appropriate education. If educators disregard the aspect of cultural awareness while working with diverse students, they risk offending their students and their families, which can deter families from participating in their child's school life. Educators also must reflect on their personal values and beliefs and how they might influence decisions they make relating to their practice. Language development is comprised of not only linguistic features, but cultural standards as well. However, historically, culture has not been emphasized as much as linguistic features in language development programs (Byrd, Cummings Hlas, Watzke, Montes Valencia, 2011). Educators must be provided with the opportunity to develop skills related to integrating a culture standard into their practice.

**Collaboration with Families**

The second most common feature of language and literacy development programs is collaboration with whole families. Numerous outside factors, including parental involvement in education contribute to a student's potential for academic success (Hill & Flynn, 2006). Therefore, it is important for families to be involved in a student's language development. Also, literacy and language skills practice can benefit family members who may struggle with English language development. Ortiz, Stowe, and

Arnold (2001) emphasize the importance of collaborating with families by stating that parent involvement in home literacy activities is linked to higher reading achievement. Additionally, students who work with their family members have improved social and emotional skills (Fantuzzo&McWayne, 2002). Therefore, collaborating with whole families has shown to be a crucial aspect of developing language in young students.

**Interactive Activities**

ELLs must have the opportunity for face-to-face interactions when working on language and literacy development. Student-centered and interactive activities are another common features of language development programs. The less "teacher-talk" there is, the more opportunities there are for students to use and practice expressive language. Hill and Flynn (2006) explained that collaboration through cooperative learning strategies is a powerful tool for fostering language acquisition. If used effectively, cooperative learning strategies can promote positive interdependence, individual accountability, interpersonal skills, and supportive interactions (Hill & Flynn, 2006). Moreover, Perry, Kay, and Brown (2008) report that Latino families prefer literacy and language activities that include an interactive component and that the whole family can participate in. When active participation is encouraged, ELLs have more learning opportunities and chances to practice language skills.

**Development of Native Language**

In addition to developing English language with ELLs, it is important to also develop native language. Previous research has shown that the level of language development in a native language is a strong indicator of the acquisition and development of a second language (Hill & Flynn, 2006). Furthermore, first language plays a major

role in literacy development in English because it allows educators to explain concepts and introduce vocabulary in both languages, which can support comprehension. The use of first language can produce greater achievement in the acquisition and development of English. Programs that offer translations services from bilingual administrators help reduce pressure and anxiety in ELLs. Developing native language with the Mexican and Mexican American population of Port Richmond would be especially helpful because of the lack of fluency and literacy in Spanish (Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation, 2013).

**Reflection**

Another crucial part of teaching language, as with all teaching, is the self-reflective process. Self-reflection helps educators deepen and solidify learning. Educators must engage in self-reflection and reflective processes in order to enhance their own learning and to improve their practices. It is important to understand that effective self-reflection is not a naturally occurring process. In fact, Fandiño-Parra (2011) explains that the reflective process is something that needs to be developed and practiced in order to be as effective as possible. To do this, one must practice writing and speaking skills regarding their planning and delivery of instruction. Additionally, self-reflection is strengthened when academic theories are used to appraise one's practice (Fandiño-Parra, 2011). Gün (2011) reports that the reflective process needs to include observable evidence and can be enhanced through collaboration with peers. Having structured opportunities for reflection is extremely important for anyone who is implementing instruction and activities. Accordingly, reflection is beneficial for those working in language development programs because it can improve the educator's practice, which can have a positive impact on student achievement.

The purpose of the current study is to examine the effectiveness of a language development program taking place in the Port Richmond community. This study aims to answer the question of how early career educators develop their ability to promote language and literacy development within a family. Specifically, it focuses on how a group of pre-service teachers in the Wagner College Literacy and Early Childhood masters programs planned and implemented language development lessons and activities.

## Chapter II: Review of Literature

There is a plethora of research explaining the different challenges associated with language barriers and academic success of English Language Learners (ELLs). Additionally, common features and effective strategies involving language development programs have been studied at length.

### Challenges ELLs Face

The challenges that ELLs and their families face have been studied for many years. Not only do Spanish-speaking families encounter language barriers with their new schools, but they also have to adjust to the differences between schooling in their native country as opposed to schooling in the United States. Ixa Plata-Potter and Guzman (2012) performed a study that examined Mexican families' perceptions of the United States school system. This study examined Mexican immigrants as they attempted to navigate and help their children succeed in the United States education system. Overall, families felt that the U.S education system afforded their children more educational opportunities. School costs are less than those in Mexico and include additional services like free meals for those who qualify. However, being able to navigate a new and unknown system is difficult for immigrant families, and therefore parents feel like they cannot support their children's education to the best of their abilities. Knowing that immigrant parents from Mexican backgrounds are both pleased with yet disconnected from the educational system can aide educators in creating a more culturally responsive language development program.

Other studies have produced findings that highlight ELLs and their families' attitudes towards school. In a study that focused on parent involvement, results showed

that language barriers deterred ELLs' family member from participating in their school functions (Peña, 2000). This study also concluded that parents sometimes felt out of place at school meetings. Findings stated that ELL parents felt that their presence was unnecessary at parent meetings that were conducted in English because they could not understand the teacher.

**Cultural Competence of Teachers**

When working with families from diverse backgrounds, educators should be aware of some evidence-based practices related to language and literacy learning. The National Institute for Literacy produced a report in 2010 explaining strategies for working with ELLs. This report highlights the importance of not only focusing on and targeting their weaknesses, but also concentrating on their strengths. Remembering to incorporate a focus on strengths of ELLs can help educators working with ELLs enhance and improve their instructional strategies. A similar report produced by the Center for Applied Linguistics in 2010 presents a framework for professional development for teachers working with adult ELLs. The authors stress the aspect of culture when teaching language, stating that, in addition to teaching language, teachers must also teach cultural aspects of life in the United States so that their students can be prepared for life outside of school.

Many studies have reported findings that state parents and families of ELLs might not be willing to participate in their children's school career because of language and cultural barriers mentioned earlier. In response to these findings, other studies have examined ways in which teachers and other school professionals can become culturally responsive and practice cultural awareness in their practice. Soto (2012) explains that

professionals must provide families full access to their services, which might necessitate, for example, translation services or scheduling flexibilities. Furthermore, she states that not only do teachers and other professionals need to be aware of the values and beliefs of other cultures, but they also have to think about how their own personal values and beliefs influence their instructional decisions. A study by Byrd, Cummings Hlas, Watzke, and Valencia (2011) reports findings along the same lines. The authors examine the role that culture plays in language development, and specifically the concerns, motivations, and barriers to teaching culture. The findings state that language teachers agree it is important to include an aspect of culture into teaching a second language. However, the participants in this study report not having ample opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills of using culture in their instruction. Overall, the implications of this study propose that teachers need additional time and funding in order to develop the knowledge and skills needed to incorporate a cultural aspect into their teaching.

Creating school-family relationships is an essential aspect of language development. Historically, many Mexican American parents believed that the responsibility of educating the children rested solely on the teachers (Carrasquillo& London, 1993). However, recent research reveals that this is no longer the case, and that parents wish to be more involved in their children's education (Peña, 2001). Parent involvement can have positive effects on the students and the school. Specifically, involving families of ELLs in their schooling helps improve student achievement (Collier &Auerbach, 2011). Nevertheless, involving families in their children's education is not a naturally occurring process, especially when the adults themselves need language skills in order to effectively participate. In fact, Collier and Auerbach(2011) explain that there are

five factors that educators must take into account when working with families in order to create a family-school relationship. First, a baseline assessment is needed to gain information about the family's literacy levels, preferences, questions and concerns. Next, the planning and implementation of instruction must be informed by best practices for teaching adult language learners. Scaffolding must also be included in practices such as visuals and connections between native language (L1) and English (L2). Additionally, parents must be equipped with home literacy strategies that they can use to reinforce literacy in English. Finally, cultural connections must be made to encourage parent voice and to enhance language/literacy development.

**Family Involvement**

Other areas of research have examined in great detail the specific effects of family involvement in the education of ELLs. St. Clair and Jackson (2006) performed a study that examined the effects of parent involvement on kindergarteners' English language skills. Results of this study indicate that when parents are actively involved in their children's literacy education, higher levels of success are reached. Furthermore, equipping families with the necessary skills needed to nurture their child's language skills leads to positive learning outcomes. There are two major implications for language development from this study. The first is that ongoing communication between the parents and the classroom teacher is essential. The second implication is that better results were reported when there is an additional adult literacy component partnered with the students' literacy curriculum. Students from non-English speaking households benefitted more when their parents were also learning English language skills. Therefore,

a partnership between student learning and adult literacy learning is needed in language programs.

The research regarding the effectiveness of parent and family involvement on language development is irrefutable based on the numerous studies supporting this claim (Peña, 2000). However, some educators might not know exactly how to include the parents of their ELL students in their school life due to language barriers. Hill and Flynn (2006) offer many recommendations to help schools involve parents and community in the educational process. Schools must make it evident that they accept people from all different backgrounds and cultures. This can be done by hanging "welcome" signs in different languages or displaying artwork from different regions around the world. Schools should also involve community members that share the same native language as the families of ELLs. This way, instead of just having a family-school partnership, there can also be a family-community-school network. Meetings to inform parents how they can participate in decision making about their school is another way to include families. Meetings should offer translation services so that families feel welcome to participate.

**The Use of Interactive Activities**

Another popular theme in current research about English language development is the inclusion of cooperative learning strategies during instruction. In a chapter from Hill and Flynn's 2006 book, *Classroom Instruction That Works with English Language Learners,* they describe the benefits of using cooperative learning with ELLs. The authors state that using heterogeneous cooperative group work not only promotes language development, but can also improve social skills, promote interdependence, and provide face-to-face interactions. All of these features make learning English more

supportive and enjoyable for ELLs. Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2010) performed a study that also examined the benefits of using cooperative group work with ELLs. In addition to the benefits discussed in Hill and Flynn (2006), the study found that cooperative group work also reduced anxiety for ELLs. This reduction of anxiety made it easier for students to volunteer and participate, which ultimately offered more opportunities to practice and develop their English language skills. Ultimately, students in this study who felt less anxious and more willing to participate obtained higher language proficiency.

Similarly, Perry, Kay, and Brown (2008) note the importance of involving families and including an adult literacy component. The authors suggest that families should incorporate school-based literacy activities into their home literacy activities. They also examined Hispanic families' preferences of types of literacy activities. Results of this study showed that parent involvement in children's literacy learning was linked to higher achievement and improved social skills. Furthermore, four major aspects of literacy activities were discussed. This study revealed that Spanish-speaking families preferred literacy activities that included a pleasurable or entertaining component. They also looked for activities that contained moral messages and taught children skills such as following rules and taking turns. Additionally, activities that allowed parents to scaffold instruction were preferred, as well as activities that allowed parents to use bilingual approaches. This information would be especially useful when planning and implementing language programs for Spanish speaking families because it allows the program to cater to what Hispanic families prefer and would ultimately promote the most participation and involvement.

**Use of L1 and L2**

Whether or not ELLs should be using their native language (L1) while learning a second language (L2) has been a debated topic for many years. However, recent research has explained that the use of L1 can help ELLs acquire and develop a second language. Hill and Flynn (2006) state that opportunities for primary language growth at home are extremely important. Furthermore, a strong foundation in the primary language allows ELLs to acquire another language with more ease than if they did not have this foundation. Likewise, other studies such as Rumberger and Larson's (1998), have examined the use of L1 in developing social skills in ELLs. One study in particular reported better social skills and closer teacher-student relationships of ELLs were formed when teachers spoke some Spanish in the classroom (Chang, et. al, 2007).

Brooks-Lewis (2009) reported similar findings in a study regarding the use of L1 in foreign language teaching and learning. These findings showed that participants felt less anxious when able to use some L1, and they were able to incorporate their life experiences into the curriculum. Furthermore, this study supported the use of L1 when learning an L2 because it promoted the development of critical thinking, social and interpersonal skills, and enhanced independent study skills. Therefore, not only does the use of the native language help students develop a second language, but it also allows students to build better social skills and relationships within the classroom, which can lead to higher student achievement.

**Self Reflection of Teachers**

Recent research has provided information and guidelines about self-reflection and the reflective process in general. All professionals should be reflective about their

practices because it helps deepen their knowledge. It also allows professionals to critique, change, and improve their practices. Self-reflection is especially important for teachers. Teachers must be able to reflect on their practices and the effectives of their planning and delivery of lessons. Fandiño-Parra (2011) examined the importance of reflection as a teaching practice. Reflective teaching has been described as consciously recalling and examining past experiences for biases and as a source for planning and implementing. The research states that reflection is not a naturally occurring process, but there is a developmental process in becoming reflective. Before being able to reflect on one's practice in an effective way, a person must work on building vocabulary for talking and writing about practices. One must also be familiar with academic theories and use this background knowledge to appraise one's own practice. Assuming a self-reflective teaching philosophy is necessary for all teachers, but especially for teachers of a second language. In addition to developing the skills for self-reflection, other studies have reported that in order to properly reflect on their practice, one must have observable evidence (Gün, 2011). Types of observable evidence for teachers would be videos or audio recordings of their lessons. Also, Gün states that collaboration is an important aspect of self-reflection. Educators should work with other professionals while reflecting on their practice so that they can gain insight into their methods and delivery from other people. It also allows educators to review and reflect on their work from different perspectives.

In 2007, Jeffery performed a study that found it unhelpful to just "think about" work; there must be opportunities for structured reflection. In his study, the author used journaling as a way of reflecting on his practice. He found that writing about his

experiences offered him a time to pause and reflect on his practices while also creating a sense of responsibility about his work.

In Van den Boom and Van Merrienboer's (2007) study about reflection, results showed that reflection had a positive impact on the learning outcomes of the participating students. This indicates that there is a need for self-reflective processes with learning. These results offer insight into the importance of reflection for pre-service teachers who are working to develop and deliver interventions in a language development program. Educators, and specifically educators working with ELLs should be reflective in their practice in order to ensure that their students are receiving the highest quality of instruction.

## Chapter III: Methods

### Setting

The setting for this study was an after school program for the Spanish speaking students and family members of PS 20, The Christy J. Cugini Port Richmond School. This program took place Wednesday afternoons in the social hall of the Faith United Methodist Church. The church is located close to the school in the neighborhood of Port Richmond in Staten Island, New York. The purpose of the program was to help students and their families develop language and literacy skills that they could practice at home in order to improve their literacy levels.

### Participants

The participants in this study were seven Wagner College graduate students pursuing different degrees in a teacher education program. All participants were female, ranging in age from 22 to 25 years old. Four of the participants were enrolled in the Early Childhood Education/Special Education program, two of the participants were enrolled in the Teaching Literacy program, and one of the participants was enrolled in the Childhood Education/Special Education program.

The participants were required to work with students and their families in this afterschool program as a part of their practicum for one of their courses. They were responsible for planning and implementing different lessons and developing learning centers for the students each week. At the end of the program, the participants assessed their students using different measures of language and literacy skills.

The seven participants' teaching experiences included part-time preschool teacher, teacher assistants, substitute teaching in the New York City Department of

Education, and student teaching field experiences. Most of the participants reported working with students from diverse backgrounds in the past. However, none of the participants had worked exclusively with English Language Learners (ELLs), or specifically with families of Mexican descent.

## Participant Observer

A participant observation methodology following the guidelines of Patton (2001) was used in this study.

## Instrumentation Design

Based on the review of literature, an interview protocol was developed by the researcher (See Appendix A). The interviews contained seventeen questions about the participants' experiences in the program. These questions were organized into six different categories: cultural awareness and preparedness of the participants, collaboration with the families, use of interactive activities in the program, opportunities for the students and families to use their home language, self reflection of the participants, and general program questions.

## Design and Procedure

Permission for the researcher to conduct this study was granted by the approval of the HERB Approval Form (See Appendix B). The HERB is an institutional review board (IRB) created by the Wagner College Psychology department to review the use of human participants in research. All participants were presented with, and signed, an informed consent form prior to the study. They were also notified about the purpose of the study, and about their right to stop their participation at any time.

This study followed a two-part, mixed methods approach. The first component of the study was a set of observations that took place over a four-week period. The participants, having given consent (see Appendix C), were observed during each session of the after school program. During these observations, there was no interaction between the participants and in researcher. The observations allowed the researcher to become familiar with the program's format and to be able to create context for the interviews that would take place later in the study. The parents in the after school program were also asked to sign a consent form explaining that the study was about the teachers but that the researcher would be observing the literacy program (See Appendix D). The form was translated into Spanish, and its completion allowed the researcher to observe parents and their children during the sessions.

The second part of the study was a formal interview with each participant individually.

**Data Analysis**

A qualitative data analysis by question and by participant was performed to identify patterns and derive themes from the participants' responses to the interview questions. The data description and analysis are presented in the following chapter.

# Chapter IV: Results

The data results are presented according to the themes and questions developed for the interview protocol.

## Cultural Awareness

*Question 1: What were some ways that you were prepared to work with families from diverse backgrounds?*

Four out of the seven participants reported that learning about ELLs in their classes was the main form of preparation for working with students from diverse backgrounds. Another way that one participant was prepared to work with the families was by researching the school that the students attended. Additionally, two participants stated that they had prior experience through student teaching and field observations that prepared them for working with ELLs. One participant noted that she had family from Spain, and because of this she felt connected to the families. A typical response for this question would be represented by one participant's comment, "I've learned about working with families from different backgrounds through past experiences in my undergrad when I observed and student taught. We also learn about it in our class when we talk about being culturally responsive."

*Question 2: Were there any gaps in your preparation? Could you have done something differently to create a more culturally responsive environment? If so, what?*

In terms of gaps in their preparation, three major patterns were found. Three of the participants reported that learning more about the students' culture would have helped them better prepare for the program. Two participants stated that learning some Spanish would have also been beneficial. For example, one participant noted, "I think that

learning a few Spanish phrases or having some Spanish phrases written out could have helped to engage more with the families." Another two participants thought that meeting the families and getting to know them would have helped them prepare for the program as well.

**Collaboration with the Families**

*Question 3: Can you tell me a story about a time you felt you were closely collaborative with the family you were working with? What made it stand out?*

When asked about their experiences collaborating with the families, three of the participants specifically reported that they felt appreciated by the students and the family members when working together with them. Most of the participants stated that they felt more collaborative with the families when they made an effort to speak Spanish or use a translator to communicate.

*Question 4: Were there any aspects of working with the families that made the collaboration difficult?*

All seven participants stated that the language barrier between the families and themselves made collaboration difficult. A typical response to this question was "One aspect of working with the families that made collaboration difficult was the language barrier. There were times when I was asking a question and both the student and the mother had a difficult time understanding what I was saying."

**The Use of Interactive Activities**

*Question 5: How were the lessons designed to maximize interactive experiences and minimize teacher talk?*

Participants expressed their opinions about what made activities successful and about the opportunities for the students to use expressive language. Although all participants reported that interactive activities were used in every lesson, one stated that the effort to minimize teacher talk was difficult because of the language barrier. This participant's response was "All of the lessons involved some type of hands-on activity. We also tried to involve the students and parents as much as possible so that we weren't the only ones talking, but this was very difficult because of the language barriers. They either didn't know what we were saying or asking, or they just didn't feel comfortable enough to participate."

*Question 6: Which activities were most successful and why?*

Six of the participants mentioned that the most successful lessons and activities were those that were hands-on, or play based. They reported that these activities lessened anxiety and allowed for the students and families to feel comfortable expressing themselves. One participant discussed specific lessons that were successful such as a lesson about phonemic awareness and one about rhyming. She mentioned that these were successful because they were less complex than the other lessons. A typical response was "The hands-on activities were the most successful. They were more successful than just asking questions because even though they couldn't understand everything we were saying, we were able to model for them and that way they could follow our lead. These activities made it easier for the children to learn by doing."

**The Use of Home Language**

*Question 7: What opportunities were there for students to use expressive language with other students, adults, and teachers?*

The participants discussed that the students had opportunities to use expressive language during the opening activities and learning centers. One participant specifically said, "Whenever we worked with the students, we made sure the students had time to express themselves and answer verbally. They also were able to talk to their mothers about different things throughout the lessons."

*Question 8: What role did home language play in the planning and implementing of each lesson?*

In terms of considering the students' home language when planning lessons, participants reported that they tried designing lessons and activities that the families could do at home in their home language. One participant mentioned that she tried to use what they knew about the student's home language and prior knowledge while planning each lesson. Two of the participants shared that they differentiated the material for the lessons by including Spanish words or phrases. Four of the participants stated that while planning the lessons they considered the fact that English was the students and their families' second language. A typical response was "It played a huge role. All lessons were designed with the thought that English was the second spoken language."

*Question 9: What opportunity was there for students to talk in their home language?*

When asked about the opportunities for the students to use their home language, the participants' responses varied. One participant stated that there were minimal opportunities for the students to speak in their home language because the instructors wanted them to practice and develop their English. Other participants noted that the students and their families spoke in their home language often, particularly when speaking to each other. Specifically, five of these participants noted that the students

would translate what the instructors were saying for their parents. As one respondent noted, "The students always spoke in Spanish when they engaged with their moms."One participant also mentioned that one opportunity for the students to use their home language was in the beginning of each session when the group would sing a song in English and Spanish.

**Reflective Process of the Educators**

*Question 10: What opportunities did you have to reflect on your practices?*

All participants discussed the different ways in which they were able to reflect on their practices. A typical response to this question was "We often discussed it with the professors of the class and wrote weekly reflections after each time we met with the students." Two main methods of reflection that were reported by all participants were discussions with peers and professors after each lesson and structured written reflections that were due each week. Five participants mentioned that there was time to discuss the lessons after each session. One participant stated that each week they were required to write a reflection, and, during this time, they were able to think about which components of the lesson worked well and which did not. One participant stated that there were weekly reflections but did not describe the reflection process.

*Question 11: Can you describe any structured reflection opportunities? Have any of these been helpful? Can you explain what makes them stand out?*

The participants stated that the written reflections were beneficial because they were able to think about the effective and ineffective aspects of their lessons and make any necessary adjustments for the following week. One participant shared that the written reflection that stood out to her was the one that asked her to state her thoughts

before the project started, and how they changed after. Another participant stated that even though the reflections were helpful, they became repetitive and could have been improved if there were more specific questions asked each week.

*Question 12: What impact did reflection have on your practice?*

All of the participants reported that reflection had a positive impact on their practice. Specifically, four of the participants mentioned that reflecting upon each lesson impacted how they planned the following lesson. Two of the participants stated that the opportunities for reflection allowed them to think about their teaching styles and methods. One participant reported that the reflections made her think about the home life of the families and how they were going to benefit from the program. Although the responses to this question varied, a typical response was "It allowed me to improve my lessons either through planning or using different methods of implementing them."

**General Program Questions**

*Question 13: What are your thoughts about this type of practice being used in a general education setting?*

Most of the participants mentioned that this program was extremely beneficial for the students and families participating in it. They also stated that they believe all parents should be more involved in their child's academic life, not just ELL parents. However, two of the participants stated that this type of program would not work in a general education setting because of factors such as time constraints and the implementation of the common core standards. One participant suggested that this program could be used as an extension program for general education students. A typical response to this

question was "I think it's beneficial to have parents involved in their child's academic life, no matter if they're ELLs, special education, or general education."

*Question 14: How does this model of learning parallel or differ from other learning experiences in your graduate program? Specifically, what were its strengths, weaknesses, and what has helped you grow as an educator?*

Only one participant reported that this program was similar to previous fieldwork that they have done in their graduate program. Two participants stated that it was different because they were specifically working with ELLs, and they hadn't had that opportunity before. Additionally, three participants mentioned that this experience was more hands-on than any other learning experience they had had.

The participants discussed that the main strengths of this program were that it allowed them to collaborate more and have more first-hand experience working with families. Another strength mentioned was that because there was no set curriculum, the participants were able to target a student and design lessons for an individual child. One participant stated, "To get to actually see and work with the kids each week made me feel like I was doing something more productive than just observing a classroom."

The only two weaknesses of the program that were reported were the issues of time and stress. One participant stated that this model of learning was more time-consuming and stressful than other experiences. Another participant reported that there was not enough time and she was "leaving with the feeling that there is much to do and not enough time to do it."

Three of the participants discussed three related concepts of the program that they felt helped them grow as educators. One participant stated that this model highlighted the

importance of being culturally responsive, and that is something she felt helped her grow as an educator. Another participant noted that getting to work directly with the children was the best way to grow as an educator. The third participant reported that the aspect that helped her grow the most was the opportunity to learn about teaching techniques and to apply them in the program.

*Question 15: A key component in this program is collaboration. What role did collaboration play in the planning and delivery of the interventions?*

    *a. Collaboration with professors*

    *b. Collaboration with other students*

    *c. Collaboration with the families*

Three of the participants focused on the aspect of collaboration with professors in terms of planning. They stated that collaborating with the professors helped them learn how to develop their lesson plans. Another three participants stated that collaboration with the professors allowed them to receive guidance and meaningful feedback on their lessons each week. One participant highlighted both of these ideas by stating "We were able to run ideas by them before the lessons and then ask for tips and feedback after the lessons."

All seven participants stated that by collaborating with their peers they were able to brainstorm ideas for their lessons and learn from one another.

In terms of the role of collaboration with the families, the participants' responses varied. Two participants stated that working with the families helped them learn their specific strengths and weaknesses so that they could plan lessons to meet the needs of the students and families. Another two participants reported that working with the families

allowed them to ask the individual family member what they wanted to focus on throughout the program. Two other participants mentioned that collaboration with the families was the most difficult type of collaboration in this program because of the language barrier. One participant stated that working with the families allowed her to see how members of a different culture interact with their child and their child's education.

*Question 16: How has collaboration helped or hindered your practices?*

All seven participants agreed that collaboration helped their practices because they were able to brainstorm ideas, receive feedback, and work together as a team to implement the lessons. One participant highlighted the importance of collaboration in the education field. She stated, "We learn about working with children and other teachers, but one part about education and being a teacher that is really not addressed enough is how to interact with the families of your students." Another participant shared that the program would not function without collaboration.

*Question 17: How has it affected your impact on the students participating in the program?*

All of the participants stated that collaboration positively impacted the students in the program. Specifically, four of the participants mentioned that collaboration allowed them to develop the most effective lessons and activities for the students in the program. One participant stated that it helped her incorporate multiculturalism into her practice. Two of the participants reported that without collaboration teachers and students could not accomplish anything. One of these participants also stated "collaboration was one thing that made all aspects of this program a lot easier and more enjoyable."

## Chapter V: Discussion

### Findings and Implications

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine a new afterschool language and literacy program. The specific aims of this study were to identify elements of an effective language program for English Language Learners (ELLs), and to understand how novice teachers can be prepared to effectively utilize each of these elements in their practices. The four elements of an effective ELLs language program that were identified are (1) cultural awareness, (2) collaboration with families, (3) the use of interactive activities, and (4) the incorporation of home language. In addition to these elements, the use of self reflection as a tool for solidifying learning was also studied. Through the use of a qualitative approach, the experiences of seven Wagner College pre-service teachers were documented and used to assess the different components of the new program.

Inside the domain of cultural awareness, the participants received ample theoretical preparation through various coursework. Furthermore the participants also had practical preparation for working with families from diverse cultures during their fieldwork and student teaching experiences. However, an instrumentation aspect of language would have made the cultural awareness element of the program stronger. All participants noted a lack of the Spanish language component during some point in the interview process. The participants did not feel adequately prepared to work with the families without having some knowledge of the Spanish language. The families appreciated when the participants made an effort to communicate directly to them. Additionally, the participants felt closely collaborative with the families once there was a

connection formed between themselves and the family members. If the participants were able to communicate basic phrases in Spanish, they would be able to form these bonds earlier in the program, which would create a closer collaboration and therefore more effective sessions with the families. Another way to establish relationships earlier on in the program is to dedicate more time to getting to know the students and families participating. The present findings highlight the need for forming stronger relationships with the students and the families.

The findings also support that the participants were well prepared to use interactive and hands-on activities in their lessons. Due to the language barrier, it was easier for the participants to communicate through non-verbal methods such as modeling, the use of visual aides, and hands-on activities. For instance, during one of the initial observations of the program, the researcher witnessed a participant use modeling to communicate a reading skill. The participant modeled how to read a text while pointing to each word as she read it. Instead of telling the student and the parent that they should point to the words as they read them, she was able to show them. Modeling this skill allowed the participant to communicate an aspect of the lesson despite the strong language barrier. These types of activities helped the students and family members gain a better understanding of the content being taught.

In terms of the use of home language, the participants did not have sufficient preparation other than the knowledge that English was the students' second language. Observations of the students and their family members suggest that they used their home language to communicate socially. The students also used Spanish to translate minor directions for their parents during the sessions. However, there was no evidence to

support that the students and family members used their home language to discuss the curriculum of the sessions in a focused way. It would have been beneficial for the participants to know short phrases in Spanish to engage the families and to allow the families to use their home language during the lessons and activities. For example, after modeling an action, a common phrase that could have benefitted the participants would be "Now you try". Being able to communicate small phrases or directions to the families would have prepared the participants to incorporate the use of home language into the lessons that they planned and implemented.

Participants expressed the importance of self-reflection in a program, and the positive impact it had on their teaching practices. Findings suggest that reflection became automatic after each session in the program. Participants specifically benefitted from the structured reflection opportunities. The deeper purposes of each reflection assignment need to be clarified, as participants reported the assignments becoming repetitive. According to the researcher's field notes from observations, reflection assignments became predictable, and the participants began thinking about them as assignments and not about beneficial opportunities to learn. It would be helpful to emphasize the fact the reflections are meant to deepen and solidify the learning of the participants, and the sole purpose is not a graded assignment.

Finally, the findings suggest that more time for organization and preparation is needed each week throughout the program. Participants felt varying levels of stress due to time constraints. Specifically, there was not enough time during each session to achieve the lesson objectives, and to assess their students for the following week. It was reported that participants were required to plan lessons for a certain amount of time, yet

during the sessions did not have the specified amount of time to implement their lessons. A more structured timeframe for each session of this program would be beneficial for the pre-service teachers participating in the program, as well as the students and families. Another implication in regards to this finding is teacher preparation, specifically in terms of flexibility and adaptability. It is essential for teachers to be able to adjust their lessons depending on time and the responsiveness of their students. Findings from this study can provide helpful guidance to future members of this program in years to come.

### *Limitations*

By nature, an exploratory study of a small program is not performed in order to draw conclusions that can be generalized to broader populations. Several limitations should be noted when interpreting the findings. The first is the small sample size. A larger group of participants could be used to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences from this program. The fact that this is a new program is another limitation of the study. As with any new program, the beginning stages are important learning phases where adjustments should be made to improve the program. The final limitation of this study was that the researcher did not have any Spanish language knowledge. It would be very helpful for the researcher to be able to understand what the students and families were saying when they were speaking with one another. Also, it would have provided more insight into the effectiveness of the program from the families' point of view.

The goal of this study was to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences of some of the teacher participants involved in the afterschool program. Based on these

findings and limitations, necessary changes should be made in order to improve the

effectiveness of the English language and literacy program.

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**Appendix A**

Interview Questions

Research shows that effective language development programs use common features: cultural awareness, collaboration with the families, the use of interactive activities, and the development of home language in addition to the development of English. Please reflect on each of these questions and your experiences thus far.

1. What were some ways that you were prepared to work with families from diverse backgrounds?

2. Were there any gaps in your preparation? Could you have done something differently to create a more culturally responsive environment? If so, what?

3. Can you tell me a story about a time you felt you were closely collaborative with the family you were working with? What made it stand out?

4. Were there any aspects of working with the families that made the collaboration difficult?

5. How were the lessons designed to maximize interactive experiences and minimize teacher talk?

6. Which activities were most successful and why?

7. What opportunities were there for students to use expressive language with other students, adults, and teachers?

8. What role did home language play in the planning and implementing of each lesson?

9. What opportunity was there for students to talk in their home language?

As educators, we are taught the importance of reflection in solidifying and deepening learning. Take a minute to think about the role that reflection played in this program.

10. What opportunities did you have to reflect on your practices?

11. Can you describe any structured reflection opportunities? Have any of these been helpful? Can you explain what makes them stand out?

12. What impact did reflection have on your practice?

General program questions: think about your personal experience working in this program. As a graduate student, please respond to the following questions about your role in this program.

13. What are your thoughts about this type of practice being used in a general education setting?

14. How does this model of learning parallel or differ from other learning experiences in your graduate program? Specifically, what were its strengths, weaknesses, and what has helped you grow as an educator?

15. A key component in this program is collaboration. What role did collaboration play in the planning and delivery of the interventions?

    d. Collaboration with professors

    e. Collaboration with other students

    f. Collaboration with the families

16. How has collaboration helped or hindered your practices?

17. How has it affected your impact on the students participating in the program?

## Appendix B

December 17, 2013

Dear Ms. McGrath & Dr. DeMoss:

Your research proposal submitted to the Human Experimentation Review Board (HERB) on December 2, 2013 entitled "Learning to engage families in language development" (HERB #F13-13) was considered under the expedited review procedure (as defined in the HERB Policies & Procedures) and approved.

As described in the proposal, the project complies with all of the requirements of HERB for the protection of human participants in research. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after the approval date.

1. A project status report (available on the HERB website as Part C of application packet) must be returned to HERB within one year.

2. Any significant change in the experimental procedure must be reported to HERB immediately prior to altering the project.

3. Any injury to a participant because of the research procedure must be reported to HERB immediately.

4. The investigator must keep all signed consent forms on file for 3 years past completion of the project.

5. HERB must be informed of the addition of new investigators not named in the original application.

All future correspondence regarding this project should display the HERB identifying number.

Best wishes,

Laurence Nolan

Chair, Human Experimentation Review Board.

<center>**Appendix C**</center>

**Informed Consent Form:**

As part of my master's degree requirements at Wagner College, I am conducting research to learn how a person outside of the family can learn to promote language development within a family. You are invited to participate in this research project, and this document will provide you with information that will help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Your participation is solicited, yet strictly voluntary.

For this study, I will be using an "action research" model, where participants are co-learners with me around an issue of practice. During the course of this project, I would ask you to allow me to observe your work during the intervention sessions with the families in the program. If you were to participate, you would also be asked to sit down for an interview. All information you provide during the project will remain confidential and will not be associated with your name. My final thesis will also be cleared of any possible identifying information in order to ensure your confidentiality.

This project does not carry any foreseeable risks. If for any reason you felt uncomfortable, you could leave the study at any time, with no penalty, and any information you may have provided will be destroyed.

If you have any questions concerning this study please feel free to contact me at Deirdre.McGrath@Wagner.edu, or Dr. DeMoss at Karen.DeMossA@wagner.edu. Thank you for considering being a part of a study related to my research for a master's degree in Education at Wagner College.

*Please sign below to indicate your understanding of the project and your consent to participate. I have provided two copies so that you may keep one for your records.*


_____        _____
Signature of Participant        Date        Deirdre McGrath, Investigator

**Parent Consent Form**

# WAGNER COLLEGE

## DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

## Consentimiento para la participación en la evaluación del Proyecto de

## Promotores

El Proyecto de Promotores es financiado por el Banco Deutsche para mejorar la alfabetización en la escuela 20 y sus alrededores. El Banco Deutsche requiere evaluaciones para aprender cómo podemos servirle a usted y sus hijos más exitosamente. Siguiendo con las reglas de la Universidad de Wagner queremos que todos los participantes comprendan la evaluación. Esta carta describe la evaluación y pide su participación

Algunas actividades le invitaran a que participe activamente. En otras observaremos actividades para que podamos mejorar cosas que se necesitan cambiar. Toda participación es estrictamente voluntaria. Usted puede cambiar de opinión en cualquier momento sin multa y removeremos sus respuestas de la evaluación. Todas las actividades y observaciones son confidenciales.

Las actividades de la evaluación están detalladas aquí. Algunas están escritas como investigaciones o reportes. Nunca se identificara a individuos; solo compartiremos temas en los resultados y lecciones aprendidas.

- Se le ofrecerá la oportunidad de dar comentarios anónimos acerca de las actividades y si han sido de ayuda. Tambien podrá compartir sujerencias para actividades en el futuro.
- Se le invitara a compartir sus ideas en conversaciones informales o entrevistas. Toda perspectiva que usted comparta será confidencial. No se asociaran nombres ni otra información que le identifique con los comentarios que usted comparta.
- Observaremos y tomaremos nota de nuestras actividades, en particular enfocándonos como los estudiantes de la Universidad de Wagner puedan mejorar su servicio a la comunidad. Aunque usted sea parte de algunos de los grupos que estaremos observando, nuestro enfoque será el los estudiantes de la Universidad de Wagner y no en sus niños o su familia.
- Trabajaremos con profesores y personal de la escuela para examinar el resultado de los estudiantes para ver si el proyecto le está ayudando en las clases. Seguiremos el reglamento del Departamento de Educación de la ciudad de Nueva York para asegurar la confidencialidad de la información e los estudiantes.

Todas las actividades del proyecto y su evaluación son consideradas prácticas normales y efectivas. Su participación no le traerá ningún riesgo. El participar le beneficiará ya que podrá compartir con nosotros como podremos hacer un mejor trabajo ayudando a que sus hijos sean exitosos en la escuela.

Si usted tiene cualquier pregunta acerca de este proyecto o de su participación, por favor contacte a cualquiera de los que coordinan este esfuerzo: Proyecto Hospitalidad, El Centro del Inmigrante, Se Hace Camino NY o la Universidad de Wagner. El teléfono de cada organización esta abajo

**Anhelamos trabajar con usted para mejorar el aprendizaje de sus hijos!**

*Favor de firmar debajo indicando que usted comprende la evaluación y su consentimiento de participar. Hemos proporcionado dos copias para que usted se quede con un duplicado para sus archivos*

_____          _____

Firma del Familiar/Tutor          Fecha

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