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Reaching the Hispanic Community through Bilingual Storytime Outreach

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Abstract

Though the Hispanic population is one of the largest in the United States, the average public library user is a native English-speaker. This is a conceptual paper about increasing awareness to the Hispanic and Latino members of the community through their children, using bilingual storytime in an elementary school setting to increase awareness of library services. By partnering with local schools for regular classroom visits, librarians have a captive audience at their disposal. Showcasing books and reading stories in both Spanish and English, librarians are able to market their Spanish-language collection, promote library services designed for Hispanics, and reach entire families by extension.

Article Type: Conceptual paper

Introduction

It is no secret that Hispanics make up the largest minority group in the United States. According to the Pew Research center, Hispanics account for 18 percent of the nation's population, with a reported 58 million as of 2016 (Flores, 2017). Libraries around the country have noticed, and have responded with acquiring Spanish Language literature and providing services for that particular audience. However, without promotion and marketing, those items will mostly go unnoticed.

Children's services have used story hours, crafts, and other entertaining literacy related activities as a way to bring families into the library. So a seemingly natural solution would be to use the storytime format and offer a bilingual, or if possible, a Spanish-language only storytime for our non-native English speaking members of the community. However, if your target audience is not in the habit of coming into the library, how

will they know about such programs available to them?

Just having a bilingual program on its own is unlikely to be enough to bring in families without a strong foundation of outreach (Naidoo & Scherrer, 2016). By leaving the walls of the library and stepping into the community, previously unreached residents are introduced to library staff and educated on the library services and opportunities available to them. This paper seeks to combine all of these problems facing public libraries today regarding the lack of awareness by the Hispanic community through a very specific form of outreach. By collaborating with the local school system and scheduling regular bilingual storytime programming in the classroom, it gives librarians an instant target audience. A bilingual storytime outreach program would allow librarians to share items from their Spanish-language collection, promote any Spanish language services, and help reinforce literacy skills for native Spanish and English speakers alike.

Literature Review

Creating a Foundation for Literacy

For children growing up speaking a language other than English at home, early literacy experiences in their home language support what is known as home language acquisition, an integral part of cultural identity and key to successful family communication (Naidoo & Sherrer, 2016). Home language acquisition involves fully forming an early literacy foundation in the language spoken at home. According to an analysis by the American Library Association, story time programming was reported by public libraries as one of the most effective types of programming service developed for non-English speakers (2007). However, just like all children, they are dependent on an older relative to attend such programs since they are unable to transport themselves to the library.

Even though children born into and living in a Spanish-speaking home have come to speak the language, at times their literacy training stops there. Some families believe doing so will make it easier on the child to learn English, but in fact doing so fails to lay the foundation needed to establish reading skills necessary for academic success. Moller (2001) explains in *Library Service to Spanish Speaking Patrons* that “once one has learned the basics of speaking, reading, and writing in any language, those skills are readily transferable to any other language. Learning one’s first language is really about literacy. Otherwise, children may end up illiterate in two languages.”

Learning Through Language Immersion

Some schools have taken to this by establishing bilingual instruction and promoting dual-literacy. A study of a dual language/two-way immersion third-grade classroom in a public elementary school in Florida tested both English and Spanish-dominant speaking students through a reading fluency test in their non-dominant language before and after 4 months of dual language instruction (Taub, Sivo & Puyana, 2017). The results of the study and being regularly exposed in both a child’s primary and

secondary language showed improved literacy for both native English and Spanish speaking students. Of the Spanish dominant students, 96 percent showed positive reading fluency, proving that bilingual instruction does reinforce language development in both the native and secondary languages.

Displaying the Library as a Safe Space

With over 41 million native Spanish speakers and 11 million who are bilingual, there are still those who are underserved. Though they have a positive opinion of public libraries, many do not even realize they are beneficiaries of educational institutions like libraries (Rosales, 2017). Because of this, making contact through outreach programming is what Rosales states is the answer to connecting to the Hispanic community, especially with immigrants that have mixed feelings about entering a public building for services. According to Rosales, “the immigration topic and fear of deportation has many immigrant Hispanics fearful of approaching a library’s reference and circulation desk.” Their worries of being questioned about their citizenship status may keep them from obtaining the information they need. By going to a neutral location, it shows that not only is the public library aware of the local Hispanic community, but that they see their importance and that the library is doing what it can to address and meet their needs.

If librarians want the Spanish-speaking population to be a part of the library community, the library must be willing to make itself part of the Hispanic community. The service of a bilingual storytime and the use of Spanish reinforces the perception that the library values the language and supports the cognitive and social development of Spanish-speaking children. *In Once Upon A Cuento*, Naidoo writes that Spanish-language stories, or *cuentos*, along with rhymes, poems, and songs “affirm and validate the language and culture of these children and their families.”

The young minds of children, however, do not usually concern themselves with such matters. What a child who is in a foreign place does

concern themselves with is searching for something familiar to identify with. Just like all children, they have a need to see themselves reflected in a story or adventure and see others who are different represented equally (Krueger & Lee, 2016.) This is a desire that any children or youth services librarian can fulfill, and making storytimes racially diverse and inclusive should be a priority. In Moller's (2001) text, she states that it is the responsibility for teachers and librarians to show children how to adapt to a new culture and a new set of expectations without abandoning or devaluing Hispanic family standards. She even goes so far as to claim that not exposing children to diverse programming would be seen to some as "a form of oppression, denying children the opportunity to develop their first language since much of one's identity is wrapped up in their language."

Outreach in Action

In Lexington, South Carolina, the Bilingual Parent Program began in 1998 as part of Lexington School District One's efforts to connect with Spanish speaking families as well as prepare their children for academic success (Naidoo, 2011). Consisting of daily home visits, parent educators would bring bilingual books to share with families, go through curriculum from Parents As Teachers and Parent-Child Home Program groups, serving children up to age three. Over the past 10 years, the program has grown from three Spanish-speaking mothers and their children to a whole community and services ranging from a rolling library (*Libros sobre Ruedas*), an online newsletter and blog, *El Recado*, to collaborative bilingual, bicultural events at the Lexington Public Library. These actions have brought families into the library and prompted parents and children to bond over books and reading in a way that benefits the school system, the county library, and the Spanish-speaking community.

Discussion

Starting a Program

In many ways the mechanics of a bilingual storytime outreach program are secondary to to

its purpose, which can vary from cultural awareness to language learning. The purchasing of bilingual books that have the entire text in Spanish and English would benefit both English and Spanish-dominant participants. Research suggests that it may be better to read a bilingual book completely in the home language first, then read the book through again, emphasizing key words and actions (Naidoo & Scherrer, 2016).

The advantage of bilingual storytime outreach is that it gives librarians the opportunity to show off bilingual and Spanish titles in their library's collection, as well as demonstrates the language skills of library staff involved. Naidoo and Scherrer recommend that anyone offering a bilingual storytime be comfortable enough to speak conversational Spanish sufficient for common library transactions. State libraries usually contain language learning resources at no cost, and REFORMA also provides literature on Spanish for librarians as well as other resources to better assist staff members with non-English speaking patrons. Any librarian not used to speaking a secondary language is going to be uncomfortable, and if unable to find a bilingual or Spanish speaking person to partner with, use body language, music, or act out your story to compensate. It will help the story come alive and make any language barriers understandable for all language groups, as well as reinforce print recognition and motivation.

Collaborate with Schools and Educators

Establishing a partnership with a school would be a natural course of collaboration for many children's library programs. Since both have the focus of childhood literacy and lifelong learning, most schools are very receptive in librarians coming to read and participating in joint programming ventures. It is best to meet with school administrators and ESL coordinators at least one semester prior so they can collaborate with their teaching staff to see if such a program will fit their established curriculum. Once interest has been gained, it will be easier to plan. Each school varies in their ESL programming. Some have entire classrooms dedicated to non-English speaking students while others are a mixture of English and Spanish-language dominant

children. The one disadvantage of having a bilingual program in a classroom setting is that the presenter is unable to determine the success of the program based on attendance.

Fortunately, young children are more forthcoming to share their opinions and give recommendations on what they would like to do and what stories they would enjoy reading together. This provides librarians with insight on patron needs as well as helps develop ideas for future programming.

It is important to remember that librarians are at the mercy of the teacher or administrator in determining the amount of time their curriculum can allow for a bilingual storytime. What normally would be a 30 minute program with books, games and crafts may be reduced to 15 to 20 minutes, which can be a challenge if reading the story twice in both languages.

Selecting Books that Educate and Entertain

Another crucial component of bilingual storytime planning is in book selection. Since students will be hearing a language that may seem somewhat unfamiliar to them, it is best to choose an item that is at a lower reading level than their average grade level. Short picture books consisting of no more than three lines of text per page generally work best for young children, according to Naidoo (2016). One bilingual author recommended is Xavier Garza, who provides both vivid illustrations for younger children and also fully bilingual chapter books for older students that are more reading proficient. Children are not going to give their attention or listen to someone who does not like what they are reading, so a book that both the reader and audience enjoy is important.

While the program focus for this paper is primarily about Spanish language programming, it is beneficial to acquire a selection that displays all aspects of Hispanic and Latino countries and cultures. Libraries can accomplish this by finding books about tales and folklore of various Spanish-speaking countries, choosing titles showing illustrations with characters of color, and getting students involved by asking them to share a song they may know will help spark their

curiosity about their own culture. It sends a resounding message that the library cares about Latino and Spanish-speaking families and values the contributions of their cultures to society (Naidoo & Scherrer, 2016).

Conclusion

While going out and promoting dual literacy through a bilingual storytime may seem daunting, it is possible for children and outreach service librarians of all language proficiencies. By simply acknowledging the Hispanic community through library services such as bilingual storytime, it is the first step in bringing more Hispanics in to utilize the library. While the thought of being “the face” of bilingual or Spanish-language services can appear to be intimidating, usually that is what non-library users need. There are some Hispanic homes that usually have one Spanish-speaker who prefers not to use English unless absolutely necessary. Hearing about someone at the library reading books in Spanish instead of just coming to talk to them about their Spanish collection will provide a sense of relief or reassurance that there is someone for them. It might be the motivation needed for first-generation immigrant Hispanics to visit a library for the first time in their lives.

Bilingual storytime outreach has the potential to bring in whole families from a variety of countries to the library. A successful program outside of the library can lead to more interest from teachers to partner with and collaborate on future endeavors. It could even lead to bilingual services being moved to the library on a regular basis, which would give librarians the flexibility to add new components without having to adhere to a limited timeframe.

Finally an important thing to remember, especially for librarians that are not fluent in Spanish, is that Spanish speakers are nervous too. One never knows what it took to bring someone to the library. Even the smallest of phrases in their home language will put a smile on their face that even the best of Spanish-language materials cannot provide.

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