A Review of Research on Effective Community Programs for English Language Learners

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Abstract

This article synthesized current research on effective communities for English Language Learners (ELLs). The findings are discussed under the following categories: parents, community resources, and peers. The results of the review indicate that parenting programs are effective, but they must be carefully developed and often require specific resources that challenge a typical school. Furthermore, there is no single effective method to assist ELL families. Whereas the positive effects of well designed community programs are unequivocal, it is uncertain how such programs transfer to different communities or how participation directly affects school achievement. The benefits of peer interaction have been promoted as an especially effective tool for assisting ELLs, however, adequate preparation for such interaction is necessary. Finally, the paper addresses the role of the community in a historical context, inviting readers to consider the work of Jane Addams and other progressive educators whose efforts helped an earlier generation of immigrant children adjust to life in the United States.

Key Words: English learners, languages, teaching, after-school, programs, limited, proficient, effective, community, communities, ELLs, LEP, afterschool

Overview

In 1996, Hilary Rodham-Clinton touched off a surprisingly heated debate when she published her book, *It Takes a Village and Other Lessons Children Teach*

Us. While many progressive educators praised the book for drawing attention to the importance of communities in preparing children for school—and helping them to excel once there—more conservative voices attacked her work as "anti-family." For example, Fox-Genovese (1996) agreed with the book's premise but argued that "It takes a family—ideally a mother and a father—to raise a child, and the village's first responsibility is not to hamper them in doing so" (p. 63). Commentators such as Fox-Genovese suggested that the publication of Rodham-Clinton's book was both a political strategy designed to re-elect her husband and an attempt to increase the role—and budget—of the federal government, both goals that set her at odds with a more conservative agenda.

The political battle over the roles of the community and parents faded as the nation's policymakers turned their attention to international concerns, but educational researchers have continued to ask questions about the relative importance of community and family effects on school achievement (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Fan, 2001; Jeynes, 2003). Whereas the political debate on this issue may have muted, educators agree that the community must play a primary role in order to maximize a child's achievement in school. For instance, we have strong evidence that the children and youth of parents who hold high expectations for academic achievement will experience greater success in school than those students whose parents have poorly defined expectations (Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001). This finding, not surprisingly, mirrors the conclusions drawn by research on teacher expectations (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Good & Nichols, 2001). Similarly, parents who provide their children with the materials needed for school and an environment conducive to study will also realize higher achieving students (Downey, 1995). Healthy communities provide the parks, youth organizations, and law enforcement needed so that children and youth have places to play and learn and to feel safe while doing so (Coley & Hoffman, 1996).

The present research synthesis seeks to apply the body of research on effective communities for those children and youth who are English Language Learners (ELLs). Working to find ways to help ELLs be more successful in school is now paramount. The academic achievement scores of the 4.5 million "Limited English Proficient" students in U.S. K-12 schools—a figure that grows at an annual rate of about three percent (Kindler, 2002)—show that ELLs are struggling. Although the data supporting this differential achievement is less than complete (state and federal agencies tend to report on racial/ethnic differences rather than language status), studies show that ELLs are well below their native English-speaking counterparts on tests of literacy (Gándara, & Contreras, 2009; Kindler, 2002). Mexican American ELLs, who comprise

the largest group of ELLs, fare worst of all (Schmid, 2001), with dropout rates as high 40% in some regions (Gándara, & Contreras, 2009; Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998; Velez & Saenz, 2001).

In the present article, we focus on compiling research studies addressing the effects of the community on ELL academic achievement. As the children of immigrants or immigrants themselves, ELLs must learn English, whether in school or in the community. They must also learn a new culture and customs. Given that they have so much to learn, we might imagine that ELLs would gain the most from a free public education, and it is true that the success of many immigrant children is largely owing to their participation in the public school system. Yet in 1922, the progressive educator George Counts found that immigrant children, those who stand to gain the most from what schooling has to offer, were failing in great numbers. Counts found schools to be rigid institutions unwilling to compromise for the benefit of immigrant children, and he reported that a great many immigrant students simply dropped out of school. Sadly, Counts' finding sounds all too familiar (Gitlin, Buendia, Crosland, & Doumbia, 2003). Given the alarming data on school achievement and dropouts, it is no surprise that educators and policymakers are in search of the most effective and efficient practices for ELLs (Téllez & Waxman, 2006b).

Before beginning the synthesis portion of the paper, it is important to provide some provisional definitions. First, we must consider the scope, limits, and misinterpretations of the term "community." One immediate objection to the term comes from educators who argue that to consider schools and the community as separate features in the educational process creates a false distinction (Morris, 2002). Schools, they argue, are a *part* of the community. Further, Strike (2004) argues that it is the job of a school to become a community within a community. Whereas we recognize various objections to the term, and agree that most are entirely justifiable, we wish to suggest that educators can define community not as something distinct from schools, but rather those features of a child's life not directly associated with the school; that is, those organizations and institutions whose choice of policies and activities do not reside under the administrative umbrella of the school or school district. For instance, an after-school program may be linked in many ways to a school or school district but is likely to be operated by an organization governed by a board not associated with the school district (e.g., a YWCA program). The community organization and the school may share board members or a long history of collaboration, but they are separate in mission and often rely on different sources of funding.

Similarly, law enforcement efforts, clearly related to the health of the school and community, are typically governed by a city or county charter. The mention

of law enforcement as an entity separate from school oversight immediately threatens our definition, because many large school districts operate their own police departments (Eriksen, 2005). If we were to find a case in which law enforcement were found to be a useful community resource, we would draw a distinction between municipal and school district police and include only the former in our research synthesis.

Parents, in our definition, are part of the community, a view likely shared by readers of this journal. Like many educators, we suggest that effective schools encourage parents to consider themselves part of the "school community." But parents are not strictly an extension of the school. Parents make decisions regarding their child's education and welfare independent of the school's oversight (with the possible exception of school attendance, which is mandated by law). For instance, if a school offers effective parent training, how can it be said that parents are part of the community rather than part of the "school community"? We might suggest that although the school's efforts here may have a clear impact on parents, the school is not in direct control of how and when parents use the information they have received (or even if they attend the program at all). Regardless of the category we use, the general research on parent involvement makes clear that they play a fundamental role in academic achievement, and schools and school systems are advised to do all they can to involve them.

Our definition of community is admittedly faulty, but our desire for conceptual clarity, as well as the need to synthesize research in areas not already covered by our earlier efforts (Téllez & Waxman, 2006a; Téllez & Waxman, 2006b) suggests that effective communities for ELLs is a legitimate topic of a research synthesis, capable of distilling dozens of studies for educators and others who wish to improve the academic performance of our nation's ELLs.

Search Strategies

We relied on five primary search source indexes or databases in preparing this metasynthesis: (a) Education Abstracts (used to find articles published in refereed journals), (b) Educational Resources Information Center (used for locating papers presented at conferences), (c) Google Scholar (for locating a wide range of research articles), (d) Social Science Citation Index-Web of Science (for locating works of a specific author and cited by common authors), and (e) Dissertation Abstracts (used for locating dissertations). Search terms used in the research synthesis were all combinations of the following terms: English, English Language Learner(s), ELL, ESL, ELD, second language learners, community, parents, after-school, programs, and several others designed to locate specific studies. We limited our search to research articles published between 1990 and 2005, but cited older papers to inform our theoretical framework.

Parents

The study of the role of parents and the community in the academic success of school-aged children and youth has its roots in the work of Johann Hienrich Pestalozzi (1726-1847), the Swiss educator and essayist whose educational reforms can still be seen in contemporary schools. His insistence on the cultivation of critical thinking skills, as well as an enduring attention to the emotional well-being of the child, foreshadowed the goals of American public schools. Whereas his work is most typically associated with the conduct of the schools, much of his writing is focused on the importance of the family in the development of a child's intellect and morality (Berger, 1995). In his most widely read book, *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*, Pestalozzi underscores the importance of parents in the preparation of children for school (Pestalozzi, 1898). Among the then-innovative methods he encouraged were the use of manipulatives to teach mathematical concepts and the development of interactive lessons, each sounding a familiar, modern tone.

Our contemporary culture is even more convinced that parents should play a major role in their child's schooling. Determining the specifics of that role, however, leads to open and often contested questions (Lightfoot, 1978). For some educators, the proper role for parents is to support the activities and programs of the school and classroom. This role does not necessarily require parents to go beyond making sure that their child is ready to learn and has a place to do their homework. This traditional model of parental involvement has been described as insufficient. With the rise of site-based management in schools, a model often legislated at the state-level (e.g., Stevenson & Schiller, 1999), parents have become a structural part of the school administration. Indeed, in some school reform models such as Comer's School Development Program (a model designed for use in urban schools but now also widely implemented in many suburban and rural schools), parents are required to join in the everyday operations of the school (Comer, 1993). Somewhere between the traditional model and Comer's design is where most schools seek to locate their parents' involvement.

The general studies on parents and achievement uniformly reveal that parents, regardless of income, who have the time and energy to assist their children with school assignments and encourage their general effort in school make a fundamental difference in academic achievement (Englund et al., 2004). The comprehensive review of the literature on parent involvement conducted by Henderson and Mapp (2002) also provides evidence of the important role of parents in the academic success of their children. When parents take an active role in their child's education, homework completion rates improve (Balli,

Wedman, & Demo, 1997), school behavior problems decrease (Hill et al., 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002), students are more motivated to do well in school (Ratelle, Guay, Larose, & Senecal, 2004) and miss less school (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). The effects of parent expectations and assistance are found even as students complete high school (Fehrmann, Keith, & Reimers, 1987). Based on the research of the past 15 years or so, it seems there is almost no desirable school outcome that cannot be enhanced by parent involvement.

With this unequivocal finding in mind, we began our review of parental participation to discover if parents of ELLs would play as large a role in the academic achievement of their children. The good news with respect to studies of parent participation for ELLs is that the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Affairs (OBEMLA), for at least two decades, made available grants to implement schoolwide bilingual education programs or special alternative instruction programs for reforming, restructuring, and upgrading language teaching programs within an individual school. A primary component of many schoolwide projects was a parent education component; consequently, there are thousands of evaluation reports assessing the effects of these parent programs. The bad news is that few of these reports used any kind of comparison group. Because they were projects unique to a single school, they were at best single group, single assessment studies. At worst, they included only anecdotal findings. Nevertheless, the distinguishing feature of the majority of these reports is the attention to the parents' need to learn English.

McCollum and Russo (1993) made an effort to synthesize the results of high quality OBEMLA reports in their review of effective parent education programs in bilingual schools. They argue that four key components must be in place to create a high quality parent involvement program. First, the program must address the parents' need and desire to gain proficiency in English. And in contrast to typical adult English language course models, they found that quality parent literacy programs create opportunities to develop reading and writing skills in a natural context; that is, they provide genuine instructional tasks for both parent and child. Second, they attempt to address the long-term needs of the child by serving the short-term needs of the whole family. For instance, if parents were struggling with a rental contract or taxes, the program provided English exercises that addressed these pressing concerns. Third, these programs help parents understand the demands of U.S. schools and equip them with the skills to be their child's teacher and advocate. Fourth, they provide English language instruction and other services to the parents to enable them to participate more actively in their communities.

This research raises an important issue regarding English language instruction for ELL parents. Many educators believe that the most efficient way for ELL parents to help their children at school is to learn English. Learning a second language when one is already working many hours per week in a semi-skilled job with no opportunities to practice is very difficult (Gonzalez, 2000). Acquiring competency in a second language takes years of directed study, requiring time and resources most immigrant parents do not have.

Maruca's (2002) research aimed directly at improving ELLs academic achievement vis-à-vis parent involvement. This study invited parents to volunteer for a parent-training program based on the principles suggested by the Parent Institute for Quality Education (see Ochoa & Mardirosian, 1990 for a review). The results indicated no statistically significant gains in academic achievement or parenting skills (as measured by pre- and post-test surveys). However, Maruca did find gains in student attendance for those children whose parents attended the training. Furthermore, parents spoke highly of the program, especially the opportunity to share ideas and concerns with other parents, and many noted that discipline problems at home were reduced as a result of the program.

In addition to these studies, programs designed to assist migrant families uniformly attend to issues of language and parent involvement. Lopez (2004) found that effective initiatives in migrant parent involvement are not defined as a set of practices or activities for parents to do, but rather as a form of outreach. Schools successful in promoting migrant parent education offered a parent education program that served its own purposes and improved migrant families' lives. Attention to developing English skills emerged as an important component.

In a paper based largely on anecdotal findings, Osterling, Violand-Sánchez, and von Vacano (1999) share the results of a parent program designed primarily to teach English to parents of ELLs. The goals for the program were ambitious: establish a collaborative partnership among parents, schools, and community organizations that acknowledges and respects parents' cultural values and fosters initiative and leadership. The program led to enhanced English skills and greater involvement, which led to improvements in reading, writing, and mathematics skills among the students.

Finally, in a study that assessed the effectiveness of a program designed to increase the involvement of parents of Latino students, Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, and Hernandez (2003) found that in place of helping teachers and other school personnel learn any specific strategy, they suggest, "Success with parents from these Latino immigrant communities is predicated on cross-cultural understanding and openness to hearing how parents want to participate" (p. 68).

This advice should be heeded whenever schools are engaging in parent partnering programs.

But parents are not the only resource beyond the school that can significantly enhance the academic opportunities of ELLs. As we mentioned, the line that divides parents as something distinct from the community is lightly drawn, but we have argued that they be considered different categories. We now explore the strategies the community can take to improve the achievement of ELLs.

Community Resources

All children and youth live within a social network designed to protect and educate them. In fact, no culture on earth is remiss in providing either formal organizations (e.g., schools) or social norms (e.g., parenting to a minimum age) that work to shelter children from the adult world. Every culture understands the need for children and youth to be organized by age into cohorts as they grow and learn their responsibilities as adults. Every culture has norms that guide the wider responsibility of child-rearing, that is, the role that adults other than the child's parents will play in raising children.

In spite of cultural norms that demand the care and development of children (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), specific societies can sometimes fail in providing basic needs for its children and youth. War, disease, or other disasters can temporarily allow norms and other traditions to fail. In addition, families displaced from their traditional culture can face incongruities between their home culture and a new one. More specifically, immigrant parents may not have the means or the proper understanding to provide their children with opportunities to become socialized in the customs of their new home. They may not understand the child-rearing strategies of their new culture and perhaps not offer their children an opportunity to take part in the community practices designed for socializing its youth.

This section of our synthesis shares research studies that address the features of effective communities and community programs for ELLs. Our review attempts to answer several questions regarding effective community programs for ELLs, among these: What community programs exist for low-income Latino children and youth? What programs specifically target ELLs, and why do they maintain such a focus? And which programs are effective, and why?

As we begin this section, we draw attention to those traditions in U.S. history that have provided community programs for assisting immigrant families. From land grants in the western U.S. to free ESL programs in large cities, during the period from about 1850-1929, the nation not only accepted many immigrants but also provided opportunities for more complete membership in

the country's social and economic life. This is not to say that immigrants did not face overwhelming economic hardships and brutal ethnic discrimination, but that with the vast numbers of immigrants arriving, policies and programs designed to integrate immigrant families into life in the U.S. were, in some ways, more common than they are today. In any case, immigration to the U.S., both sanctioned and unsanctioned, will remain a bitterly contested political issue (Suarez-Orozco, 2001), filled with myth and misinformation.

As we began our search for community programs, we found only a handful of studies focused directly on ELLs. A study of particular interest assessed the effects of community programs, especially after-school programs (Riggs & Greenberg, 2004), on Latino ELLs. The results suggest that academic improvements resulting from the after-school program were most pronounced for those students who already spoke English well and whose families were poorly functioning. These results make sense if the after-school program did not engage in developmentally appropriate English language teaching (i.e., did adjust the language to the level of the learners) or failed to conduct activities in Spanish.

However, other studies have found positive effects for after-school programs to be particularly effective for ELLs, especially those that had specific English Language Development (ELD) components (Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001). Cosden et al. (2001) found that after-school homework assistance programs serve a "protective" function for children at-risk for school failure (i.e., students who might normally do poorly in school are aided most by the program). These researchers also found that ELLs who lack structured after-school activities or whose parents do not speak English at home reported the highest gain scores.

Taken together, these studies suggest that after-school clubs that focus on the teaching of English can benefit ELLs most. Whereas this finding may seem quite obvious, it is complicated by several factors. First, programs designed for Latino students may choose to offer their programs in Spanish. Such a strategy may encourage native Spanish speaking students to attend the program. Second, there may be important cultural reasons for using Spanish. Third, in some parts of the country, it may be difficult to find after-school counselors who speak both English and Spanish well.

However, the research on second language learning is clear: the more time one spends hearing and speaking a second language, the better one learns it (Collier, 1989; Holm & Dodd, 1996). It is therefore not surprising that ELLs who are learning English at both school and in community programs will learn it more quickly. Of course, the benefits of English in after-school programs will be most beneficial to those also enrolled in ELD programs in school.

The results of the research on community programs for ELLs are roughly similar to the research in the general population. Regardless of one's native language, positive neighborhood environments have a dramatic impact on educational achievement (Ainsworth, 2002; Crowder & South, 2003; Fischer & Kmec, 2004). The research also suggests that collective socialization, in which many members of a community feel a responsibility towards the children and youth, encourages academic achievement. Simply put, healthy communities support learning.

The research suggests that community programs from Boys and Girls' clubs to sports teams enhance academic performance, although it is not always clear how such participation directly affects school achievement. For students who lack resources at home, community programs can deliver great benefits. For minority students from low-income households, community programs may make the difference between staying in school and dropping out. The few studies examining directly the effects of community programs on ELLs find that those engaging in teaching English, or at least those that conduct their programs in English, stand to help ELLs the most.

Peers

Children and youth rarely learn in isolation from a clearly defined peer group. Whether a group is defined by age (e.g., grouping students by grade level), academic preparation (e.g., grouping strategies in a secondary mathematics class), or English language achievement (e.g., a beginning English Language Development class), a student's peers constitute an important part of any learning experience.

Peer interaction has been promoted as an especially effective tool for assisting ELLs (Kagan, 1995). In a particularly applicable study, Klingner and Vaughn (2000) found that fourth grade bilingual (Spanish/English) students provided crucial assistance to their ELL counterparts in learning to understand word meanings, getting the main idea, asking and answering questions, and relating what they were learning to previous knowledge. They found that the ELL students' scores on English vocabulary tests improved significantly from pre- to post-testing. However, their results revealed that students' academic assistance was most effective when they were given specific instructions on how and when to help their peers. This tightly controlled research study suggests that more advanced peers can assist ELLs on a wide variety of learning tasks, but that adequate preparation is necessary.

Klingner and Vaughn (2000) underscore the role that peers can play in assisting ELLs, as well as offering the caveat that such assistance does not happen

without preparation. This important point is worth exploring. For many years, the general findings on cooperative learning suggested that the academic performance of less able students in heterogeneous groups would rise on the natural effects of the cooperative setting (Leighton, 1989). This study suggests that in order to realize gains in language learning, higher achieving peers must be prepared in the most effective ways to provide assistance. The results found in this study were corroborated results of an earlier study by the same authors (Klingner & Vaughn, 1999).

Other studies found that interaction with peers increased ELLs' capacity for oral language skills (Kobayashi, 2003). Even ELLs with learning disabilities benefit from peer assistance (Saenz, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005). Further evidence for the important role that peers play in helping ELLs acquire English comes from the studies of two-way bilingual immersion programs (TWBI). Students in TWBI programs are placed in classes in which half their peers speak their native language and the other half speaks the target language (Christian, 1994). In this increasingly popular model of language education, peers are considered a central and critical feature of the instructional program. Teachers group students so that they are required to teach one another language. In fact, some research evidence suggests that students enrolled in such programs learn the target language as a result of more contact with peers outside of the school setting (Téllez, Flinspach, & Waxman, 2005).

Conclusions

It may not "take" a village to raise a child, but the village can certainly play an important role, especially when the child is an immigrant and learning English. Similarly, we know that parents are likely the most significant influence on a child's academic achievement, but how might their role interact with other community resources or programs? A student's peers play an increasingly important role in academic and social development, but how adults organize peer interactions holds great importance. As we have demonstrated, social science research has confirmed the importance of community, parents, and peers in the social, emotional, and the academic success of children and youth.

In a wide-ranging paper on building a school community, Redding (2001) suggests that educators seek to develop "a cohesive, unified curriculum and to employ teaching methods that are conducive to common experience" (p. 20). In our view, this would be the goal of any community program designed for ELLs. Learning a new language and culture requires deep connections between what is to be learned and what is already known, and the connection between the two may determine the success of any community program.

The question, therefore, is not whether communities make a difference, but rather who might benefit most from strategic and systematic interventions; how we can best design, implement, and assess such interventions; and, perhaps most important of all, who will pay for them?

We began our review by noting the academic underperformance of ELL students and can now suggest with some certainty that community resources, if properly leveraged, will improve their academic success. In spite of several studies that provide a clear direction for community programs who wish to serve Latinos, we were struck by how few studies addressed ELLs directly, making it difficult to distinguish between programs designed for Latino students and those specifically for ELLs. In any event, we were disappointed to find no studies of the community designed to improve the academic performance of ELLs whose native language was not Spanish (e.g., Vietnamese ELLs). We need additional studies of community programs for ELLs whose language is less commonly spoken.

Our synthesis also suggested other topics for future research. First, community programs that seek to develop English language skills should be assessed for their effectiveness. For instance, in states such as California and Arizona where bilingual education programs have been eliminated or severely curtailed, could an after-school Spanish language program augment or "bootstrap" English learning? The prevailing theory in support of bilingual education suggests that learning to read in one's native language will result in higher achievement in the target language. Could community programs take on the task of developing native language literacy for ELLs?

Second, can community programs influence a young person's socialization to their new country? As immigrants or the children of immigrants, most ELLs must contend with living in a country where no one in their family has the right to vote. Can community programs foster a sense of political agency when ELLs have no legal ties to the nation in which they now live? We are not advocating for the study of programs that would indoctrinate and uncritically encourage a blind patriotism, but nearly all immigrant families, especially those from Mexico and Vietnam, the two largest ELL groups, intend to stay once they arrive in the U.S. It is often shocking to those whose families have lived in the U.S. for generations to learn of Mexican American youth who choose to serve in the armed forces, risking their lives for a country in which their parents lack the basic rights of citizenship and may even be fearful of deportation. We wonder if community programs play a role in such a devotion to country.

Third, with the popularity of "informal" learning research growing, we need more research on effects of out-of-school learning. A claim among some researchers in psychology, anthropology, and other fields suggest that "formal"

learning (i.e., learning in schools) is secondary to "informal" learning (i.e., learning in homes, communities, or museums). A key paper in this tradition seems to argue that formal schooling actually reduces a child's capacity for logical and divergent thinking (Scribner & Cole, 1973). More recent writers in this area have suggested that learning outside of school is more genuine, long-lasting, and enjoyable. If such claims are true, are the effects the same for ELLs? Might it be advisable for communities to take on the education of the ELL? We are dubious about the claims of the advocates of informal learning, but we are interested in the prospects of how such learning might differentially influence the achievement of ELLs.

With policymakers now firmly positioned in the debate over the role of the community in raising academic achievement (e.g., Eccles, 1999), sound research will become even more important in deciding what programs are needed, how comprehensive such programs should be, and how we might fund them. As George Counts (1922) suggested, immigrant students should have the most to gain from public schooling. As Jane Addams proved, strong community programs can help to ease the transition to U.S. life for immigrant, ELL children and youth (Addams, 1899). These and other progressive thinkers were working at a time when the percentage of immigrant students in the U.S. was much greater than it is today, and yet the generations of Italian and Polish immigrants they served are now full participants in the economic, social, and political life in the U.S. Will the current wave of immigrant students, now largely from Mexico and Central America, fare as well? As our review suggests, the quality of community programs may make a difference.

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