# Implementing Family Literacy Programs for Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Populations: Key Elements to Consider

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## Abstract

Family literacy programs reflect a recent trend in educational reform that has proven to be a successful educational model for all members of the family unit. Based on the literature that links family involvement to student achievement, these initiatives focus on empowering parents of school children. These programs have been particularly beneficial for linguistically and culturally diverse families, since they provide opportunities for adult family members to acquire English language/literacy skills while gaining access to the sociocultural knowledge required for them to assume greater roles of involvement in their children's education. This article examines specific key elements considered essential in the effective implementation of family literacy programs. Insights from the authors' experiences with implementing family English literacy programs for over 20 years in the South Florida area include the role of needs assessments, recruitment and retention, curricular design and curricular materials, personnel selection and staff development, and interagency collaboration. Given the current emphasis on these types of programs, it is imperative that issues of implementation be addressed in order to maximize the success of these initiatives.

Key words: family literacy, parent involvement, program design, adult ESL, intergenerational programs

## Introduction

Family literacy programs reflect a recent trend in education that has gained momentum based on the growing research that shows that children achieve higher academic gains and have better behavior and attitudes toward school if their parents or caregivers are involved in their educational process (Henderson & Mapp, 2003; King & McMaster, 2001; Morrow, 1995; National Center for Family Literacy, 1997). This has become a cornerstone of educational reform efforts across educational levels that seek to address the needs of the whole family in order to make an impact on the academic endeavors of school-age children. It can be said that "all family-centered learning initiatives recognize the strong link between family members and children and thus include some form of intergenerational exercise or activity to reinforce this bond" (Garcia & Hasson, 1996a, p. 14).

The research in the growing field of family involvement and family literacy points to the success of these educational initiatives in several ways. For example, attendance on the part of adult family members tends to be higher and attrition lower in family-centered learning programs than regular adult education programs. The Families Learning at School & Home (FLASH) program implemented in the South Florida area during a twelve-year span reported a retention rate of over 60% for its 1,600 participants as opposed to a less than 40% completion rate in other adult ESL programs statewide (Garcia & Hasson, 1996b). Some family literacy programs report attendance rates as high as 74% (Paratore, 1993, as cited in Mulhern, Rodriguez-Brown, & Shanahan, 1994) in contrast with attrition rates of 50% in adult education programs (Mulhern et al.).

Specific outcomes in terms of academic gains and advancement on the part of all family members can be attributed to family-centered education initiatives as well. Achievement in terms of English language proficiency, school participation, and literacy practices on the part of the adults in family-oriented programs has been found to be greater than that of their counterparts in general adult education programs (Garcia & Hasson, 1996b; Garcia, Hasson, & Panizo, 2002; Mulhern et al., 1994). More importantly, though, is the academic achievement of children who participated in the programs with their parents/family members. On specific measures of reading and mathematics, these children have shown higher gains than children whose parents did not participate

in such initiatives (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Garcia & Hasson, 1996b; Garcia et al., 2002; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Mulhern et al.).

One central finding correlated to the effectiveness of these types of programs is the need to systematically plan, implement, and evaluate the various programmatic components that comprise the total educational process (Garcia & Hasson, 1996a; Holt, 1994; Lerche, 1985). Instituting a systems approach to program design and implementation implies looking at programs as a set of interrelated components which must be skillfully balanced to produce desired outcomes, following input from the community of clients and other related stakeholders. This process requires integrating, monitoring, and revising as needed such programmatic elements as needs assessments, recruitment and retention, instructional methods, curricular materials, participant assessment, and program evaluation at the formative and summative levels.

Successful family-centered learning initiatives should incorporate these crucial elements as part of their effective implementation, within a conceptual framework that reflects the philosophies of program developers with respect to education and learning (Garcia & Hasson, 1996a). This paper addresses specific elements considered essential in the implementation of family-centered learning programs from a theoretical and practical perspective. Included among these are needs assessment, recruitment and retention, curricular design and instructional materials, personnel selection and staff development, and interagency collaboration. Specific examples and relevant data from various family literacy initiatives, including the FLASH program (Garcia & Hasson, 1996b; Garcia et al., 2002) which is a federally-funded model of family English literacy implemented over a 15-year period, will be utilized to highlight each of these sections.

## Needs Assessment

The term *needs assessment* has received much attention during recent years as an important element throughout the implementation of adult education and family-centered learning projects. Conducting a needs assessment may be defined as the "ongoing process of gathering input from a community of learners in order to assess specific needs of families…includ[ing] personal goals, demographic background, individual knowledge base and related variables which affect the implementation of the program" (Garcia & Hasson, 1996b, p. 119). Numerous experts in adult learning (Auerbach, 1992; Lerche, 1985; Sork & Caffarella, 1990) have established the importance of involving the learner in the instructional process both as a motivational tool and as a means of satisfying the adults' need for self-direction and determination. As a result,

a variety of needs assessment formats, including surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and/or group discussions, have been formulated and field tested with different populations.

Needs assessments serve a variety of purposes during the initial planning of a project and throughout its implementation.  Santoprieto and Peyton (1991) contend that needs assessments (a) provide information regarding the learners' experience and knowledge and establish the need for further learning, (b) promote flexibility in the curriculum by having learners identify specific topics of interest (content) and appropriateness of methodology, and (c) assist program staff in developing instructional approaches and materials.  In addition, needs assessments increase retention rates of participants by motivating them through their involvement in the planning, design, and implementation of the program.  Conducting a needs assessment of the community and/or potential clients should constitute the first step in planning an educational program.  Determining such needs provides the basis for the formulation of specific objectives and activities implemented throughout the duration of the program.

### Initial and Ongoing Assessment

Within the context of family-centered learning, an initial needs assessment may assist in the first stages of planning a proposal or in formulating a particular educational intervention.  Interacting with a particular community provides information about their meaning of literacy, their goals and aspirations, their needs for such specific services as transportation or child care, and the most convenient times and location for classes.  For example, the FLASH program (Garcia & Hasson, 1996b; Garcia et al., 2002) attached a needs assessment to initial letters sent to parents through their children's schools inviting them to participate in the program.  One of the important aspects of the initial assessment is the opportunity it affords program planners and participants to learn about each other and develop mutual trust and credibility.

Graham (1994) points out that initial participant assessment establishes the necessary baseline data required to measure the learners' growth during the instructional process.  The ongoing assessment helps to determine the degree to which proposed instructional services are meeting the learners' needs and guides the evaluation plan of the effort.  Additionally, ongoing assessment of participants' progress assists in the refinement of instructional approaches and/or curricular content utilized by project staff.  As such, the assessment of project participants' needs must be an initial and ongoing programmatic activity.

Inherent in the assessment of needs at the initial and ongoing phases is the necessity of having a systematic process of prioritization and selection.  Hence,

conducting a needs assessment of a particular community is ineffective if the needs are not clearly prioritized and corresponding objectives developed.  In effect, the interpretation of the needs assessed becomes the blueprint for identifying criteria by which to measure the success of the activities and the strategies implemented.  It also allows for a two-way interactive process between the program staff and the community it proposes to serve.  Thus, a system of negotiation is developed which aids in the effective delivery of services to the client group.

The proposed objectives resulting from the collection of data via the needs assessment may be of two types: (a) educational, focusing on the learning of the participants, and/or (b) organizational, relating to the operation and maintenance of the program (Sork & Caffarella, 1990).  A family-centered learning effort should establish specific and measurable educational and program objectives for the participating families in order to assess learners' growth and overall program success.  These objectives, however, should not solely measure acquisition of technical skills but should also address behavior-based and attitudinal changes.  An important aspect of the needs assessment and the related objectives is the concept of establishing performance standards by which to measure the progress made by learners resulting from the instructional component and process functions related to the operation of the program.

## Types of Needs Assessments

The experiences of many programs designed to work with linguistically and culturally diverse populations throughout the past three decades have contributed to the development of a rich source of needs assessment instruments (Garcia & Hasson, 1996a, 1996b; Holt, 1994; Shanahan, Mulhern & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995). These span areas dealing with cultural, linguistic, and demographic variables.  The following represents a sample of the types of needs assessments that may be employed to gather data from participants throughout the various phases of the project.

### Surveys

Surveys are one of the most commonly used tools to obtain information from an individual or community of learners regarding their needs, literacy levels, cultural values and practices, attitudes, and specific service needs (e.g., transportation and/or child care). The FLASH program (Garcia & Hasson, 1996b) used surveys that were administered in the form of written questionnaires or as part of individual/group interviews, with responses indicated on a checklist or a grid. Surveys should generally be conducted by someone

representative of the community being assessed and are usually most effective when presented in the potential participants' native language or in a bilingual format. It is important that the information collected be tabulated and the results prioritized in order to serve participants in a more effective manner.

*Interviews*

Interviews are a valuable strategy to gather necessary input from the community related to the specific needs and the design of the effort. Informal interviews conducted with community leaders and/or potential participants can serve to analyze the various factors which will affect the participation of the families and the manner in which services can be coordinated, for example, transportation, counseling, and social service agency referral. Informal and formal interviews with future participants and community leaders provide a framework for program planners to develop specific program objectives and activities. These are an effective means to continually measure a program's success in meeting the learners' needs throughout its implementation.

*Observations/Town Meetings/Focus Groups*

Attending town meetings and/or focus groups can help program leaders understand the community's needs and its cultural value system more clearly. Observations made at participants' homes and locales in the community that play major roles in the lives of its members can sensitize program staff to the realities of a particular language group which, in turn, helps to tailor the program to the particular constituency. The mere act of getting out into the community and openly asking for its input is a resource that yields a better picture for program staff and influences recruitment efforts, instructional practices, curricular content, and staff development.

## Implications for Program Implementation

Interpretation of initial and ongoing needs assessments should be a two-way process where program planners and staff interact with the learners in search of mutual understanding and benefits. Through this reciprocal process, all parties negotiate the meaning of the program in meeting the specific needs of participants. Oftentimes, program personnel have a particular vision for the program that may not be congruent with the goals or aspirations of the learners. This can result in the imposition of value judgments on participants, transmitted by the curricular content and activities that are at odds with learners' cultural views and what they wish to get out of the program. Negotiation thus becomes an integral part of the process.

Needs assessments also provide a basis for establishing benchmarks to measure learners' growth and the process of program implementation. For example, the initial assessment will determine variations in literacy levels among students. A project's leader will have to decide whether to have larger multilevel classrooms or establish multiple, smaller homogeneous groups. The results from the needs assessment will also have a major influence on personnel selection, staff development, and administrative decisions based on the allocation of resources. Furthermore, the data obtained will provide information on the specific services that can be provided to the community to promote recruitment and retention, such as providing instruction for participating children and their siblings, providing transportation services, and implementing innovative scheduling practices to satisfy parents' working schedules. It is also important to remember that these assessments are effective means for measuring learners' progress. Program staff can utilize the information provided through individual interviews for determining curriculum content while simultaneously monitoring the progress of literacy development according to negotiated benchmarks.

The practice of conducting needs assessments is a critical mechanism in the administration and implementation of a family-centered learning project. Linguistically and culturally diverse populations are inherently faced with a number of factors that often limit their participation in educational opportunities offered to them. Nevertheless, these communities can contribute valuable resources if involved at the initial planning and implementation phases of programs. These families "stand to benefit most from assuming greater control and responsibility over their own learning; over the structures, content and processes of their continuing education; and over the futures of their own social communities" (Brod, 1990, p. 2).

## Recruitment and Retention

Recruitment and retention of learners in family-centered learning projects constitutes a programmatic element that requires careful attention at all levels of planning, implementation, and evaluation. The strategies currently employed by programs are quite varied and incorporate such necessary characteristics as cultural sensitivity, innovation, learner-centeredness, and responsiveness to needs assessed. They are typically reflective of a conceptual framework that permeates and guides all aspects of program implementation and the delivery of services within a particular initiative (Garcia & Hasson, 1996a).

In many ways, it is difficult to ascertain whether a particular strategy targets recruitment, retention, or both. However, successful programs incorporate a

specific plan that includes detailed activities that will promote the program in an effort to attract participants and then work diligently to keep them interested and satisfied with the level of services provided. In the specific case of recruitment and retention with culturally and linguistically diverse populations, the focus must be on approaches that are culturally responsive, address the specific short and long term needs of families, and promote their self-concept and adjustment to a new society.

### Recruitment

One of the most important aspects of implementing a family-centered education initiative is drawing participants interested in the services the program has to offer. While it may seem like an obvious task, a recruitment plan must be crafted with careful thought and deliberation. Ultimately, the overall quality of a program will become its most powerful recruitment strategy through satisfied participants who spread the word throughout the community. This is possible, though, only through the creation of responsive educational programs which capitalize on the cultural values, interests, and aspirations of local minority communities (Moll, 1989). A strategy utilized by the FLASH program involves establishing a family advisory group at each of its sites that takes on the role of discussing specific recruitment (and retention) approaches that are location and population-specific. The following section offers selected techniques in recruitment and retention that have proven to be effective in the implementation of family-centered learning programs for linguistically and culturally diverse populations.

#### *Word of Mouth*

The use of former and current participants is perhaps the most powerful source of recruitment of new families. Individuals usually communicate with other family members and friends to promote their involvement. Potential participants will relate better to individuals like themselves rather than to staff members who may or may not understand the context of their lives. Consequently, they will be more apt to commit themselves to a program if they know that it has been beneficial to a family that shares their situation. These recruitment efforts should be acknowledged and rewarded. Additionally, the children can play an active role as messengers. If they see that their friends at school are attending classes with their parents and having a good time, it will entice them to urge their parents to join the fun as well.

### Techniques That Use Personal Contact

The use of community liaisons has traditionally been a successful approach to reach specific language groups. Going to prospective participants instead of waiting for them to inquire about the program is clearly a more effective means of recruiting families. Personal contact between program staff—administrators, teachers, volunteers—and the targeted families can yield positive results if the personnel involved in outreach efforts demonstrate cultural sensitivity to the target community and are perceived as having credibility among its members. Personnel can visit churches, PTA meetings, and community meetings to promote the project's services. Furthermore, when the message is conveyed by an authority figure, such as a pastor or a principal, it shows support and commitment on the part of these individuals and makes a powerful statement to prospective students.

### Collaboration Among Agencies

Due to fiscal realities, the provision of certain services such as transportation, child care, employment referral, and access to social service agencies cannot always be coordinated through one organization. Agencies must collaborate so that they can offer a number of services while maximizing cost effectiveness and minimizing the duplication of efforts. Coordination efforts among a network of entities that serve similar populations is a most effective recruitment and retention tool because the true beneficiaries are the families who can profit from a wider range of options offered to them.

### Techniques That Use Media (Print/Radio/Television)

Traditional means of advertising a program includes using brochures, flyers, and promotional letters about the program in the home language of the participants, although these are not always as effective as personal contact or word of mouth strategies. Articles in local and neighborhood newspapers about the program and its activities are further examples of how print can be utilized; this is an effective tool if the population is literate in the native language and/or English and has a tradition of using print media in the home culture. Public service announcements on the radio or television might represent a more effective recruitment strategy because they reach a wider audience. Some language groups rely on these media as their sole source of information and might be more apt to respond to advertisements about the program through these means. For example, over the years, FLASH staff members have been invited to participate as guests on local Spanish language programs dealing with educational issues and thus have been able to reach a wider audience of potential

program participants.  Presentations made by members of their own community or former students in a prospective participant's native language help to convey the importance of the program in a non-threatening and culturally sensitive manner and can be quite effective in reaching a wide audience.

### Retention

Retention of participants has long been perceived as a complex problem in the area of adult education.  Adult learners have specific goals for participating in an instructional intervention, and program participants usually begin instructional cycles with a high level of interest and motivation.  However, as time passes, life may interfere in the form of illness, loss of transportation, schedule changes in jobs, moving to a new home, and other events that may interfere with a participant's completion of a training cycle.

Completion rates for adult education programs in general (including Adult Basic Education and ESL) at the national level range from 30% to 40% (Garcia & Hasson, 1996b; Kerka, 1995), which points to a significantly high level of attrition.  Most studies related to attrition (Brod, 1990; Davis, 1989; Kerka; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990) identify several factors as contributing to the lack of program completion:  elements associated with the student's personal reality; factors inherent in the specific program and/or service provider; and the lack of provision of specific services, such as child care or transportation, to the particular client group.

Evidence on family-centered learning programs, though, points to much lower rates of attrition.  The National Center for Family Literacy (1994) cites a national evaluation of adult education programs from 1993 that shows retention patterns in terms of number of weeks completed in adult-focused programs as opposed to family literacy programs.  The results are startling. After being in a program for sixteen weeks, half of the participants in regular adult programs dropped out, while 67% of family literacy program students remained; after twenty weeks, the adult programs retained only 40% of the original participants, whereas the family literacy programs kept 59% of their students.  These results can be attributed to the incorporation of such support mechanisms as intergenerational activities, literacy development instruction which enables adults to attain the necessary proficiency levels to meet individual/economic self-sufficiency goals, help with the educational needs of their children, and interagency collaboration networks which assist in the provision of specific services to the families.

Although attrition rates in family-centered learning programs are lower than in regular adult education programs, recruitment and retention are still viewed

as essential elements in the successful implementation of projects. These are considered part of a system of interrelated tasks that require monitoring and evaluation on an ongoing basis in order to measure their effectiveness. The most successful recruitment techniques will not guarantee the retention of clients, although the following factors will play a large role in its success.

### Quality of Program Design and Staff

The overall design of a project will greatly impact the success rate of the recruitment and retention efforts. As noted in the previous section, effective program designs combine multiple elements that meet the needs of the target community. Ongoing needs assessment of participants will serve to make any minor adjustments to the program, including curricula, methodology, delivery of services, or personnel. Program staff must show sensitivity to the community it will serve and knowledge of its various realities. Efforts must be made to incorporate personnel who are proficient in the home language of the participants in order to facilitate communication and interaction with the families. Selection of instructional personnel must be made keeping in mind the specific method of instruction espoused in the program (e.g., ESL, home language literacy, or bilingual education), and they should demonstrate flexibility, innovation, and creativity in their teaching styles.

### Innovative Learning Environment Sensitive to Participants' Needs

Developing a learning environment that is culturally responsive to the needs of the families is crucial to the retention of program participants. This includes utilizing instructional approaches and curriculum content that take into account the immediate realities of the students, personal knowledge, perceived problems, aspirations, and special interests (Brod, 1990; Garcia & Hasson, 1996b). Programs must be culturally centered (Shanahan et al., 1995) and should strive to focus on the realities confronted by the target participants. To integrate the learners themselves, it is essential that programs field test responsive approaches to program planning, implementation, and evaluation (Brod, 1990; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). Instructional approaches should incorporate the use of innovative methodologies, including cooperative learning, sheltered instruction, participatory/Freirean-based models, home language literacy, and intergenerational activities appropriate for adult learners and their families.

### Flexibility in Program Planning and Implementation

Program planners must be flexible enough to adapt the instructional cycles in various ways. Providing classes at times and locations convenient to

participants is a means of tailoring the program to the learners' needs. For example, some projects may hold instructional activities at local churches, labor camps, housing projects, and individual homes. Another example is creating innovative designs in the provision of instructional services for the families (e.g., conducting classes on Saturdays or Sundays while families are engaged in special social activities).

The frequency and duration of instructional cycles can affect attendance patterns. Some projects offer short, intensive instructional sessions several times throughout the year; others start the program at the beginning of the academic year and allow parents to enter and exit the program at their convenience. Students from other cultures may be embarrassed or ashamed to return to class if they have been absent for an extended period of time. Since most initiatives aim to provide a comfortable, flexible classroom atmosphere in which participants feel ownership of the class and the program, students are usually made to feel that it is acceptable to return, even after an extended absence. The open-entry/open-exit format makes this possible.

At many of its sites over the years, FLASH program staff has had to be flexible in terms of locations and days/times for providing its services. Although the original design of the project called for class meetings twice a week in the evenings, this was modified according to participants' needs at the particular sites. For example, in one setting, the participants were mostly mothers whose children were enrolled in a preschool program at an elementary school, so the classes for the adults were offered in the morning when the children were there. Another site pushed back classes so that participants whose workdays became longer due to Daylight Savings Time were accommodated. Finally, among the reasons for families' poor attendance at classes offered at a local high school was that the parents were intimidated by the institutional setting. Working with community leaders, arrangements were made to hold the classes at a nearby church where the participants felt more at home.

### Provision of Specific Services

Linguistically and culturally diverse immigrant families face numerous needs which limit their level of participation in educational programs. These individuals are struggling to meet their basic survival needs and consequently do not always possess transportation or child care in order to attend family literacy classes. In this case, it is imperative that efforts be made to ameliorate these conditions and meet some of these needs. Sometimes interagency coordination efforts result in the use of vans or mini-buses to transport students who have no way of getting to class, or classes are held in locations close to public transportation stops or stations. Projects can also provide referrals to

agencies that offer assistance to recent immigrants in such areas as immigration, employment and training opportunities, health care and clinics, housing, and counseling. Including representatives from these agencies as guest speakers is an effective way to generate interest in a program. Extracurricular family activities are also a way to motivate families' participation. In recent years, the FLASH model has expanded to incorporate such activities as family visits to the library, ballet, and zoo. These fieldtrips become the basis of literacy activities in the adult classes as well as intergenerational activities; for instance, families are given disposable cameras to record their experiences, then whole groups come together to create class books that are later used for instructional purposes.

### Participant Follow-Up

It is important to maintain contact with participants if absences are noticed. A systematic follow-up process should be an integral component of any family-centered learning effort. Contacting previous and current participants through telephone calls, letters, or other available means can assist in bringing back parents not presently attending. Using the students in this effort is often an effective strategy. In some cases, home visitations are built into the job descriptions of project coordinators and/or instructors. Families should be given ownership of a program so that they feel comfortable coming in and out as their schedules permit.

### Motivational Incentives

Adult immigrant populations tend to be transient, and this is reflected in the high attrition rates often experienced by adult education programs. Motivational incentives such as rewards or small prizes help to maintain students' attendance. For example, many family-centered learning programs offer parents books that they can take home and read with their children. School supplies, gift certificates to local grocery stores, and tickets to movies, cultural, or sporting events are also items that can be utilized as incentives for attendance. One of the most motivating rewards for participants is receiving a diploma or certificate of participation at the end of the training cycle. Holding a "graduation" ceremony at the end of the classes in which parents and children receive recognition for their participation and their efforts constitutes an effective mechanism to promote retention in the program. These events can be covered by the local media, which not only motivates current participants, but also serves as a recruitment tool to encourage new families to join the classes.

### Reporting Completion Rates

One aspect of attrition that cannot be overlooked is the process of discerning patterns of absence or non-completion.  Because a needs assessment will provide information about a participant's goals, these should be considered when documenting individuals who drop out. For example, an individual might have had learning English as a goal in order to obtain employment or a promotion.  When this occurs as a result of participating in the classes, the student should not be regarded in a negative light for leaving the program, but rather viewed as a success for having met his/her own objectives. Documentation on this individual should reflect positive results arising from the intervention, since the program contributed to developing skills required in the attainment of employment. Consequently, completion rates should be viewed within the context of whether the individual has met his/her specific goal for participation.  The initial and ongoing needs assessment of participants conducted periodically will corroborate the level of need satisfaction being obtained through the program.

Recruitment and retention of linguistically and culturally diverse populations requires an understanding of their needs and goals and the barriers they face.  All program staff must be committed to the process of recruitment and retention in order to achieve success.  The issue remains a complex and persistent one, surely surfacing in the future as a crucial element in the development and implementation of family-centered learning programs.

## Instructional Approaches and Curricular Materials

The main focus of any family-centered program is the emphasis on educational development for children and the family as a whole.  Family-centered learning or family literacy programs "share...a recognition that the relationships between children and adults are important, and that these relationships affect literacy use and development" (Weinstein-Shr, 1992, p. 1).  Stated another way,

> these programs operate on the stated or implicit belief that it is important for the parent or primary caregiver to place a high value on the acquisition of literacy skills and to take an active role in the child's education in order for that child to do his or her best at school.  Further, the more literate the parent or caregiver becomes, the more effective he or she will be in performing the necessary at-home and school-related tasks that support the child's educational development. (Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, 1989, p. 2)

Thus, these programs focus on the interaction between children and parents/family members and how they can learn with and from each other. Intergenerational activities play a significant role in the curriculum of most family-centered projects because "the reciprocal transfer of skills through [these] activities between children and caregivers places the focus on learning as a mutually supportive family endeavor" (Garcia & Hasson, 1996a, pp. 87-88). This is certainly the case for the FLASH program (Garcia & Hasson, 1996b), as the foundation of the program rests in the *Learning Together* activities designed to facilitate and encourage interaction among family members as they work on specific projects and literacy experiences.

In addition to the intergenerational aspect of family literacy programs, many projects offer additional opportunities for the parents to further their education, whether through parenting skills training or literacy improvement in the native language or learning English as a second language. Some projects provide employability training, citizenship preparation, nutrition education, and even computer literacy. In essence, these programs adapt themselves to the needs of the clientele and community they serve.

## Learning Together Through Intergenerational Activities

Since the focus of family-centered literacy programs is the *family*, initiatives of this nature do everything possible to provide opportunities for parents and other family members to participate in activities with their children. Programs differ in terms of the logistics of parent-child time. Some projects are set up so that all family members are together at all times; other programs that meet twice a week may have the adults meet alone on one day and with the children on the other day; still others may designate a specific portion of each class for a special intergenerational activity.

The parent-child activities, or learning together time, form the crux of most family literacy programs. They are diverse in nature and in scope and will ultimately be a reflection of the interests and goals of the population that is being served. The format and philosophy of the program itself will play a significant role in the type of intergenerational activity as well. If the focus of the intervention is aimed at preschoolers, activities will differ significantly than if at-risk fourth and fifth graders are the target.

Examples of parent-child activities include creating, writing, illustrating, and performing stories together; reading to each other in either the home language or English; working with computers on different activities, including language exercises, reading comprehension activities, and journal writing; playing games; and working on projects, posters, and big books. Parents and

children may make puppets of story characters so they can act out stories and poems, or they might participate in an arts and crafts session that involves events in their family history or culture. Family field trips to the library, zoo, or even the grocery store become the impetus for learning during the event and beyond by using a language experience approach, as families create stories as a culminating activity.

Bingo games are also a non-threatening way of bringing families together and are available in a wide variety of topics, from numbers and alphabet to colors and shapes to basic sight words and punctuation. Using a blank grid, instructors and families can make up their own bingo games as well. The important thing is that the family members spend time together in ways that will be of mutual benefit to all.

### Adult Learning

When dealing with parents and adult family members, whether they have limited schooling or not, it is important to remember that they are adults. Family English literacy programs typically direct intervention at the adult component of the family and take into consideration adult learning characteristics in their program designs. "Adults' orientation to learning is experience centered....they begin by learning for and from situations in which they find themselves" (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1983, p. 7). Program designers should look at the adult as someone who has a range of knowledge and experiences and as a resource that can help shape the program and its outcomes. If "adult" is substituted for "children" in the following observation by Goodman, Goodman, and Flores (1984), it is an accurate description of what family literacy educators should keep as an underlying premise of their programs.

> When we ignore what children [adults] come to school with, when we don't try to discover children's [adult's] own ideas, notions, fears and beliefs, we can confuse them easily, as we try to present the forms of written language in an abstract way which has little relevance to its function in the real world in which the child [adult] has tried to cope successfully. (p. 29)

In the last decade, commercial materials for adult ESL and literacy have improved tremendously, both in content and in scope. Many programs, however, opt to design their own curricular materials that are tailored to their participants' needs and contexts. An example of this is the multi-level *School-Based Life Skills Curriculum* developed by the FLASH program. This curriculum for adults integrates the areas of ESL/literacy and school involvement, addressing

topics related to children's educational process. Thus, topics include understanding a report card, having a parent-teacher conference, assisting students in home learning activities, and advocating on behalf of their children. However obtained, instructional materials should be relevant, topical, and not demeaning to the parents in any way. In addition, activities that are practical and hands-on are essential to maintain the parents' interest and motivation.

### ESL/Literacy Instruction for Adult Family Members

Before embarking on the quest for the "perfect" curriculum, if such a thing exists, careful thought must be given to the goals of the program and the educational philosophy of program personnel. The underlying theoretical framework and vision of the project will establish the criteria for the method or methods utilized in the classroom, as well as the activities and materials used. Knowing what participants expect from the program and what they are interested in learning enables program planners to meet their needs more effectively. The curriculum then becomes the vehicle through which participants are empowered to accomplish their goals.

Instructional approaches in the family-centered learning programs for language minority parents are as varied as the projects themselves. The majority of programs provide second language instruction, with curricular models encompassing the most recent trends in ESL/literacy methodology. Some programs include a native language literacy or bilingual literacy strand in which participants are given the opportunity to learn how to read and write or improve their literacy skills in the native language. Other programs have participants work on English oral language development while literacy instruction takes place simultaneously. Whatever the design, the common idea is that programs should be tailored to the specific needs of their participants.

Because literacy means different things to different people and institutions, it is imperative that program personnel share a vision that incorporates students' goals. The literature on literacy encompasses a variety of contexts and definitions, and within the framework of family literacy programs, literacy is often broadly and diversely defined. The narrowest sense, what Snow and Dickinson (1991) call the "traditional, limited, etymologically pure meaning for *literacy*—the reading and writing of graphic representations of language" (p. 181), strips it down to its barest meaning. While most adult literacy and family English literacy programs incorporate instruction at this level, the majority see literacy as more than just reading and writing, assuming, as Perez (1998) does, "a view of literacy acquisition that can be characterized as constructive within a sociocultural context" (p. ix).

Regardless of the languages or methods used for literacy instruction, it is important that parents learning to read utilize materials that are designed for adults, incorporate adult themes and issues of concern, reflect cultural sensitivity, and relate their prior knowledge and experiences to the task at hand. Since parents with little or no schooling may not feel comfortable in a school setting, the classroom atmosphere should be non-threatening. Sometimes these classes can attract more participants if they are held in a library, a community center, or even in the dining room of someone's apartment, rather than in a school. The key is that programs be flexible and adapt to the needs and desires of the participants.

## Personnel Selection and Staff Development

Staffing a project with qualified personnel is one of the most crucial aspects of the program implementation. This process consists of recruiting, inducting, and retaining good personnel (Smith & Offerman, 1990). Family-centered learning programs include teachers and related personnel from a variety of disciplines and settings that may include ESL, elementary/secondary education, adult education, social work, and counseling. Program staff comprise both paid and non-paid practitioners who work full- or part-time, may include professionals and/or paraprofessionals, and incorporate individuals who practice their craft in formal and informal settings (Galbraith & Zelenak, 1990). As a result, the need to encourage articulation and build consensus among staff members regarding vision for the program in terms of delivery, methodologies, and evaluation design, all supporting program objectives, is of paramount importance.

A family-centered learning effort must pay special attention to personnel patterns, along with staff qualifications and development. Systematic planning and implementation of staff development activities is a requirement in the field of family literacy (Garcia & Hasson, 1996a; Wrigley, 1993). The nature of the adult community context, the scarcity of available funds, and the pressing needs of a growing minority population force program leaders to adopt multiple staffing patterns in order to maximize the delivery of services. This signifies an over-reliance on hourly paid personnel—often adult educators or elementary/secondary teachers who work in day programs—and the use of community volunteers to deliver services to families.

Unfortunately, hourly paid personnel are not always able to devote time to such tasks as planning lessons, incorporating recent trends in methodology, selecting appropriate materials and instructional activities, and incorporating intergenerational strategies. The resulting situation is a cadre of instructors

who prefer to utilize familiar and traditional instructional approaches and who de-emphasize working within the context of the family unit. The same situation is true of volunteers who provide instructional and supportive services. These individuals, although often knowledgeable of the particular community and its needs, are not always credentialed. In the case of family literacy initiatives, staff selection should be based on the specific needs of the program and not solely be concerned with meeting specific credentialing requirements (Crandall, 1993; Garcia & Hasson, 1996a,1996b; Ilsley, 1990; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). As Auerbach (1992) argues:

> It is important not to exclude candidates with strong backgrounds solely on the basis of lack of formal credentials and recognize ways of gaining knowledge other than formal education. As adult educators, we must advocate broadening the definition of qualifications to include practical experience and relevant cultural background. (p. 28)

Such individuals represent an important source of assistance in meeting the needs of families and in building trust and credibility between the participants and the program.

In staffing family literacy programs, it is important that congruence between the communities' needs and the proposed personnel be achieved. In the case of instructors, it is important to remember the specific responsibilities of each position. An ESL instructor working solely with the adults does not need to be bilingual in order to be effective. Yet an individual who will work on intergenerational activities should possess knowledge of and value the parents' native language in order to convey the subject while lowering their affective filter and validating their culture. One possible staffing combination to address potential issues of language dominance or lack of experience in one area is to combine a bilingual person with a monolingual one or a certified instructor with a non-credentialed one.

The reality of the field is that most initiatives reflect an eclectic approach to staff development. Programs combine single-day workshops, attendance at conferences, ongoing institutes, mentoring/peer coaching, and other formats (Garcia & Hasson, 1996a). Both the literature and the experience of family-centered learning programs make it clear that inservice programs consisting of one single session are largely ineffective. Instructors need to be given the content of training in small chunks and over time in order to address issues as they arise and to allow techniques enough time to take hold (Auerbach, 1992; McKeon, 1985). An additional element of personnel development that is often overlooked is the weekly staff meeting. Building a system of regular meetings into the implementation of a project constitutes an effective managerial

practice, since it provides an opportunity for staff members to discuss issues related to instructional practices, curricular concerns, recruitment and retention, assessment, and other important elements affecting program success.

### Role of Volunteers and Community Liaisons

Volunteers play a major role in the implementation of family-centered learning programs. Volunteers often are representative of the community being served and consequently possess a direct link to the people and their needs. Volunteers are a rich source of assistance for programs in all aspects ranging from recruitment efforts to instructional services and support mechanisms for the clients. Efforts must be made to professionalize volunteer action and create new visions for organizing and structuring volunteers (Ilsley, 1990).

One of the common realities faced by program leaders when working with volunteers in their programs is the issue of duration of services and commitment. Volunteer action is oftentimes short-term and lacks continuity. Organizations must develop guidelines to define the volunteers' role (Ilsley, 1990) and address such issues as these: volunteer-staff relations; recruitment, training, and supervision of volunteers; appropriateness of roles (instructional and counseling); and cost effectiveness (Imel, 1991).

By carefully reaching consensus on these issues, volunteers constitute an important component for adult literacy and family-centered learning programs. This is increasingly true when the volunteers have themselves recently developed literacy skills, since "they are also likely to be more sensitized to the hopes, fears and other experiences of the learners with whom they are working" (Crandall, 1993, p. 503) and thus able to focus on truly culturally relevant and appropriate literacy practices.

Community liaisons constitute crucial positions in the personnel structures of a family-centered learning project. These are usually individuals who are hired to establish and promote linkages between schools/projects and the home. They fulfill such roles as visiting the parents' homes, maintaining close contact with the community, and assisting in recruitment efforts. Community liaisons build trust among the learners for the program and effectively assess learners' needs periodically.

In summary, staff development in family literacy programs must address all personnel and be ongoing in nature. It should strive to develop a sensitivity and an awareness of the lives of culturally and linguistically diverse learners as well as the most effective ways of meeting their needs. The particular formats and frameworks which guide the effort may be varied, but it is important to remember that, as Crandall (1993) points out, "professional

development is most beneficial when it builds on teacher/learner strengths, views teacher education as shared learning rather than training, and considers [staff] development a lifelong process of questioning, reflection, discussion and collaboration" (p. 513).

## Interagency Collaboration

Interagency collaboration can be described as the process of establishing linkages between entities for the purpose of sharing and interchanging services for particular clienteles. Another manner of defining interagency collaboration is when two or more organizations agree to pool their authority, resources, and energies in order to achieve a goal that they could not have successfully achieved independently (Hord, 1986). The objective of the collaboration among agencies serving similar populations is the maximum provision of services in the most cost effective manner.

This practice is increasingly being adopted by organizations as a means of meeting the needs of particular client groups in a more comprehensive manner. It is a known fact that many agencies are often limited by their funding source in the types of services they can provide. For example, some programs can offer adult literacy classes to parents but cannot provide services to children. In other cases, the reverse might be true. Through interagency collaboration initiatives projects can work together to provide independent services to the same population. The result of this collaboration is an enhancement in the provision of services to the population in a way that meets their needs more effectively.

The establishment of effective linkages with other entities is a process that requires careful assessment of both the clients' needs as well as the intended outcomes of the proposed partnership. It is important that practitioners identify the specific needs of the agency in relation to its clients and establish a list of priority services it will need to coordinate with other entities. The initial and ongoing needs assessment it conducts of its participants will assist in the planning phase. It is important to remember that linking mechanisms will be most effective when both parties involved see mutual benefits by the collaboration. If one party does not see a benefit by the linkage, it will not devote as much effort or as many resources to the process.

Collaboration implies a greater intensity level in the linkage process than mere coordination. The literature identifies specific differences between both terms and processes, clearly advocating for collaboration as being the more formal of the two, characterized by long term relationships among agencies, and including the sharing of resources and rewards (Winer & Ray, 1994). Thus, it

is essential that family-centered learning projects strive to achieve collaboration levels in its interorganizational linkages. This entails joining with other agencies and developing comprehensive plans with clearly defined communication channels, decision making processes, and ongoing evaluation. It is not enough to contact an agency that can provide transportation services to one's clients and obtain their services on a short-term basis. Both entities must collaborate in the implementation of the program and share in its mission and goals.

True collaboration is not always an easy process and it requires time and energy from all parties. It also necessitates the sharing of power and decision making among organizations. This oftentimes presents barriers when we deal with differing institutional structures, such as a large school district working with a community-based organization or a university collaborating with both to serve a particular group. The inherent systems of these organizations create different decision making processes which limit and affect the collaboration effort. Nevertheless, the potential benefits warrant the energy invested.

Collaboration is currently being promoted by all levels of government as an effective means of maximizing the provision of services as well as reducing duplication. Service providers can no longer afford to carry on turf wars; they must learn to share knowledge, expertise, and resources in order to better serve the needs of a growing linguistically and culturally diverse population.

Interagency collaboration is a process which requires planning and role clarification among the parties involved. The context of family-centered learning efforts lends itself to the adoption of this organizational principle, since it provides an effective means of addressing such issues as scarcity of resources, the need for comprehensive services, differing cultural realities/contexts, the multidisciplinary nature of instruction and delivery of services, distinct organizational structures, and multiple funding sources with monitoring guidelines. These variables have forced programs to develop mechanisms by which to respond effectively to clients' needs. Interagency collaboration efforts require a new vision for the manner in which we normally make decisions and promote change in organizations. Most of all, it forces us to redefine and realign our existing service delivery modes from an existing multi-layered approach to an integrated perspective.

An effective way of monitoring the collaboration between agencies is through the use of specific instruments/forms designed to record the various aspects of the process. Areas to be considered are summaries of meetings, follow up of progress made toward achieving pre-established goals/objectives, time lines, communication channels, areas of conflict, and so forth.

## Conclusion

The interrelated elements described in this paper constitute the most relevant and significant components of effective family literacy programs. Derived from almost two decades of practice and research in this growing field, they offer a basis on which to design and create new programs without having to reinvent the wheel. Certainly, linguistically and culturally diverse populations and contexts differ across the country, but the foundation of what makes a successful program remains unchanged: obtaining a clear picture of what participants want through a needs assessment that is continually updated, employing culturally sensitive recruitment and retention strategies, having a an open-minded and flexible staff that is willing to serve the participant community with curricula and materials that are meaningful and pertinent to students' lives, while collaborating with different entities that can be of assistance to the program's families. It is not an endeavor that can or should be undertaken lightly. Many programs struggle to achieve a balance among the elements, but having an outcome that involves making a difference in improving families' lives makes these difficulties seem like an insignificant sacrifice to those with the deep commitment that family education programs require.

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