

Working with Migrant Families in Colorado: How Denver Public Library is Supporting Parents in Early Literacy

"I don't think we can expect that they [migrant families] are already coming to our libraries so we have to seek them out."

– Children's Librarian

The SPELL blueprint was created to assist library staff in their effort to support caregivers in practicing early literacy techniques with their children. In November 2014, eight libraries in Colorado were selected to implement the blueprint in their communities. Each library created a programming prototype that guided the library in collaborating with community partners, and providing outreach to low income and high need communities.

Community

The Denver Metropolitan area consists of six central counties. Sixteen percent of the area's population is foreign-born. Denver Public Schools reported that 145 languages are spoken in their school system; English and Spanish (94%) are spoken most frequently, with others such as Burmese, Nepalese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Somali, Zuni, Norwegian, and Lakota. Denver County's population of 682,545 is comprised of 54% White, 30% Latino/a, 10% Black or African American, 4% Asian, and 3% two or more races. Twenty-three percent of households have children under the age of 18. With a median annual income of \$51,800, 16% of the county's residents live below the poverty line.

Prototype

Denver Public Library (DPL) staff partnered with the Metro Migrant Education Program (MMEP), an organization that identifies, recruits, and supports migrant and refugee families in achieving their educational goals. MMEP staff work with families and children in 15 school districts across the Front Range. MMEP staff conduct home visits which they believe are vital in reaching this target population.

Library staff worked with MMEP staff to organize supports, resources, trainings, and find reasonable, realistic ways to incorporate early literacy activities into the partner's already busy home visits.

It was determined that most migrant and refugee families live outside DPL's service area. Many of these families live in the City of Aurora. This led to a new partnership with Aurora Public Library (APL) which allowed families that work with MMEP in Aurora to have local library access.

The Director of MMEP provided training to DPL staff on the services they offer and included how to work with these populations. In turn, the library provided early literacy training to MMEP staff, specifically those who serve families with 0-5 year olds.

MMEP staff worked with preschool-aged children and their caregivers using materials and activity sheets designed by library staff. During these home visits, staff introduced the activity sheets, provided materials necessary to complete the activities, and included a container to house the materials. The families decorated the container together as one of the activities.

APL staff held two family events as part of the project. Families participated in early literacy activities which included a storytime (with modeled songs and movement), play activities, singing, and writing. They also had the opportunity to tour the library and many signed up for library cards.

DPL staff hosted two similar programs at two library branches in Aurora. Families enjoyed a storytime and then participated in simple early literacy play activities. Children received a book to take home, "Earlier is Easier" tip cards, and a paper bag puppet craft. Families were able to tour the library with library staff.

DPL staff participated in a "Summer Fun" park party hosted by MMEP staff, which was held in Aurora. APL staff also participated and signed families up for library cards and summer reading. The park party involved outdoor play activities and a storytime.

Resources

Financial resources for this project came from two sources: \$9,000 from a National Leadership Grant distributed by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and \$27,911 in matching funds.

With these funds, the library purchased markers, finger puppets, paint brushes, and dry erase markers as parent giveaways. Educational materials such as puppets, plastic vegetables, and shaker eggs were purchased for MMEP staff use. Approximately 1,200 books were purchased, including 325 picture dictionaries for families, 850 children's picture books, and 25 books for staff use.

Parent Survey Results

Only 14 families completed the parent survey.

Results from the survey included:

- 77% know how children learn to read, 15% don't know
- 93% are more confident helping their child to be ready to read in kindergarten
- 79% know what everyday activities to do with their child to help them to be ready to learn how to read in kindergarten
- 86% have a regular routine for reading books
- 25% read to their child several times a day, 50% once a day, and 17% report never
- 50% talk to their baby several times a day, with 8% once a day, 8% most days of the week, and 16% some days of the week and 16% reporting never talking

- 18% sing with their child several times a day, with 36% singing once a day
- 50% encourage their child to play with their hands several times a day, 7% once a day, 14% most days, 7% some days, and 14% once a week
- 43% play with their child in a way that helps them explore their surroundings several times a day, with 7% reporting once a day, 21% report most days
- 14% of parents had a library card
- 7% report having zero books at home, 64% report 1-2 books, 21% report 3-10 books, and 7% report 11-25 books at home

Success Stories

The program was considered successful by library staff and MMEP staff for two reasons: first, the targeted families were directly served and connected to local libraries, and second, MMEP staff was educated specifically on early literacy techniques. Home visits for the project involved the whole family, teaching older kids age-appropriate literacy strategies and ways to help their younger siblings. Families also loved the containers they decorated and filled with activities. Another major success was the creation of picture-based early literacy activities for families that speak little English. These activity sheets have very few words and contain activities broken down by age group to support multiple levels of literacy learning in the home. Library training sessions with MMEP staff were successful and gave them additional tools for their focus on early literacy.

Lessons learned

Understanding the needs of migrant and refugee populations is important for libraries. This population often has a higher than average reliance on community resources; therefore libraries can become one of these resources in helping them to become successful in this country. Modeling early literacy activities and strategies with the families was vital to their understanding of how these can help in the development of their children.

Working with migrant and refugee communities may take a great deal of effort without showing immediate results. A children's librarian addresses this challenge: "In order for the partnership to pay off in terms of attracting people back to the libraries, libraries and the partner need to put in a huge effort. Don't assume there's already a library connection. We started actively working on this in November 2014, and we are now seeing, in March 2016, migrant workers and refugees coming to the library!"

Travel barriers can hinder the mobility of migrant and refugee populations living in the Denver metro area; it is often difficult to schedule library/MMEP events in a location that will be easily accessible to all participating families. Families have a hard time traveling long distances and using public transportation is difficult with young children. It is important for neighborhood libraries to identify nearby migrant and refugee groups and invite them personally to the library and/or bring library programming to these groups - outreach is vital.

Program participants worked with migrants, immigrants, refugees, Latino cultures, and Native American cultures based in the Front Range region. This encompasses quite a large area, so these groups were often difficult to reach because they are spread out across multiple library jurisdictions. A children's librarian found some solutions to this difficulty during her time working on the project: "I would say that partnerships with any organization that works with this community are vital for finding out where parents are living. I don't think we can expect that they're already coming to our libraries so we have to seek them out. Organizations already working with the families are a trusted network. If we can partner with them, they will help us gain access to the families. Working through already trusted networks is a proven way to reach families not already coming to the library. Families unfamiliar with the U.S. Public Library system cannot be expected to find us on their own - but if another organization that they know and trust - a church group, support organization, community group, etc. - endorses the library and helps us get our resources out to them, it's more likely to lead to library visits. If we learn that they are not within reasonable travel distance from the library, then services must be brought to them - through the organization we partner with, through outreach events closer to the families, or through places where the families already gather."

Migrant and refugee families also face language barriers when going to their local libraries. Most of MMEP employees are bilingual, but more than five languages could be spoken at any given event, so interpreters were still necessary. Librarians found that many parents in the migrant and refugee communities they worked with were illiterate, so written translations to other languages did not prove helpful.

Traditional surveys were impractical tools to evaluate programming for many of these families because of language barriers, survey length, and the general mistrust that migrant/refugees often have for filling out questionnaires.

Libraries need to be open to the needs of potential partners and find ways to streamline communication to make it easier to initiate these partnerships. A MMEP staff member was surprised at how easy it was to ask the libraries for space and resources, but still feels hesitant to ask. They had a difficult time determining how to partner with local libraries and ended up cold calling most libraries. Libraries can better facilitate partnerships with local organizations by reaching out directly to them, rather than waiting for calls.

What's next?

In April 2016, DPL staff and MMEP staff wrapped up their joint project by hosting four well-attended "play and learn together" workshops. Each event focused on an early literacy practice (Read/Talk, Write, Sing, and Play), included a mini storytime (with tips for parents), and activities related to building the taught skills. At each event, attendees were given a bag with a book to keep and snacks provided by MMEP. At the last event, every family received a certificate for participating in the program and a small celebration was held with cake and fruit. APL's Youth Services Manager attended the last event and met with DPL staff prior to the event to recap what was learned through the course of the grant project and reviewed what was successful. APL staff has agreed

to continue early literacy workshops with the families and will maintain a connection with MMEP staff to assist the library in welcoming families that have started attending their Wednesday morning storytimes.

APL staff is interested in continuing to engage with the migrant and refugee community and will work with MMEP staff to make sure their strategies are effective. MMEP staff invited APL staff to participate in their "Fun in the Sun" event. MMEP will be hosting a conference for Denver Metro area migrant families and DPL staff will be in attendance with a resource table to connect families with the library, as well as some short hands-on workshops to learn early literacy skills. MMEP staff will continue to use the co-created early literacy activity sheets during home visits with families and will incorporate the supplies purchased with grant funds into early literacy activities with the families. In short, both DPL and APL will continue to work with MMEP to bring library services to the underserved Denver Metro migrant and refugee populations.