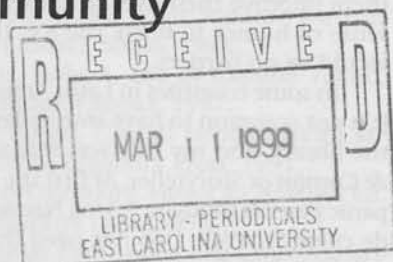


Charlotte Public Library Speaks Español:

Approaching the Hispanic Community through Storytelling

by Irania Macías Patterson



- In 1998, 12 million Hispanic children live in America, up from 9.8 million in 1990. That compares with 50.8 million non-Hispanic whites and 11.4 million non-Hispanic blacks.
- Hispanics are the second-largest group of U.S. children.
- Hispanic children are more likely than whites or blacks to lack health insurance, more than twice as likely as whites to drop out school, and more likely than blacks or whites to live in poverty when someone in the household works, federal statistics show.
- In North Carolina, public schools struggle to cope with a steady stream of Hispanic immigrants whose children speak little or no English.
- State officials say public school enrollment of Latinos grew 285 percent from 1990-91 to 1997-98, with Mecklenburg (jumping from 740 students to 2,813), Cumberland (from 1,328 to 2,454), and Onslow (from 457 to 822), the fastest growing counties.
- The 1990 Census showed that there were 6,061 Hispanics in the Charlotte Mecklenburg area; today there are approximately 60,000 Hispanics, a figure that still probably is underestimated.
- Hispanics are arriving in Charlotte at a rate of 12 per day.
- English as a Second Language Programs have 1,478 students speaking 48 different languages in ESL classes, with Spanish as one of the most common languages.

— *The Charlotte Observer*, July 2, 1996, 1A.

The increase in the Hispanic population, as seen in the above statistics, has been an unexpected factor in the economy of Charlotte, a city that offers Hispanics a welcoming environment. Recognizing the need to improve the literacy skills and the accessibility to bilingual materials to this community, the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County hired a bilingual children's specialist. In October 1997, the library began its Early Intervention Reading Program for Hispanic/Latino families funded in part by the Foundation of the Carolinas through their new Building A Better Future grant program. The library's Early Intervention program primarily provides low-income Hispanic children

(18 months through 4 years) and their families with reading readiness and language experiences in both Spanish and English. To achieve this goal, I was hired as a bilingual storyteller to serve as a liaison between the library and the Hispanic community. I worked closely with Pat Siegfried, director of Youth Services Department, in developing the program.

Objectives

I work with parents to achieve the following objectives:

- Provide strategies for sharing literature with their children and expand their children's pre-reading skills.
- Expose these parents to library

services and help them become self-sufficient.

- Teach adult family members computer search strategies as well as facilitate word processing, basic computer techniques, and Internet skills.
- Listen to family needs and refer the families to appropriate community services (Health Department, Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, Spanish language media, etc).
- Provide workshops for teachers and library staff to overcome the language barrier and help Latinos access resources.

The Program

My first question was how to begin. Al-

though we had searched for program models, our particular approach seemed to be unique. First, it was very important to understand the characteristics of the Hispanic population in Charlotte, which is composed primarily of new immigrants. I knew the majority of the community was Mexican and I thought that being a Venezuelan could be a barrier; however, I quickly learned that if I showed them my true desire to help them improve their lives, and used my sense of humor to break the ice, there would be no barriers.

In some countries in Latin America, it is not common to have storytellers in the library, and my title was *Narradora de Cuentos* or Storyteller. At first the Hispanic parents thought: "¿Una Narradora de cuentos? Well, I do not need that. I need a job first, or health assistance." They did not see the purpose of having a storyteller until I explained to them what it meant. For some low income families, education is not a need. For them, health services or job opportunities are their priorities. My job was to open their eyes and make them understand that education should be a *big* need in their lives.

I had to make parents and preschoolers fall in love with reading, but storytelling was a concept they did not understand. These parents were never read to before as children, so why are they going to read to their children now? It was like telling someone who has never tried a mango to eat one just because it tastes good! I knew that until they understood what I was talking about, they would neither get involved in the program nor come to the library. I took hundreds of flyers advertising the program to health fairs, festivals, schools, churches, and organizations that target Hispanics. I went on radio programs and wrote several articles in *La Noticia*, a local Hispanic newspaper. I found that personal contact was the best way to reach the population.

I contacted three mothers who lived in the most concentrated Hispanic areas of the county. They were assigned to be the leaders of their apartment complex and spread the word, and they became known as the "Mom Leaders." We started in their homes with three children in each, and after a month, we had approximately eight per home. Then one mother told another mother in a different area of the city, and the phone began to ring. More and more parents were wondering what was going on in their friends' homes and were inviting me to start a new group in their

neighborhoods. I never said "No;" instead, I went to their houses and gathered the people in the surrounding homes to form bigger groups. Three months later, I had five regular programs being conducted in homes and two programs in libraries.

By the time I had 13 children in one of the Mom Leaders' homes and only three parents with transportation, I knew it was time to move them into the library. The home was small and did not offer the quality setting that a story time required—the telephone rang, a child wanted to pick up his toy under the sofa, the room was too cold or hot, a mother needed to cook because her husband was coming home soon. These were all problems I needed to resolve soon, but I was not sure how. Finally, I suggested that we all take the bus to the library and we did.

It was and still is very hard to tell a mother who does not speak English, depends on her husband for everything, and who has two or three babies to take a bus. It was an educational campaign that required a lot of psychology. Gradually, the mothers understood the significance of their children's educations and the little sacrifices they needed to make.

To help the communication between the staff and the Hispanic community, I translated into Spanish some library forms such as the application card, the library procedures and policies, the children's program listings, and other brochures. This still was not enough, so I prepared two workshops for the librarians titled "Excellence to Hispanics." This workshop covered some cultural issues as well as vocabulary necessary to use with Hispanic patrons in a library environment.

Evaluation

We developed several forms to evaluate children's progress, tours, and workshops. We also created a log to track requests from the public, referrals made, and sources of information about the program. Every three months we met with the families at their homes where we discussed their children's development in such areas as book and print awareness, word recognition, language comprehension in both languages, responses to text, social and personal skills, and knowledge of general concepts.

Computer Skills

In addition to storytelling, we began a program to help Hispanic families use computers to search for materials for themselves. I had found that many organizations that assist low income His-

panics are resolving their emergency problems, but forget that they also need to become self-sufficient. I taught them how to use library computers to find books of interest to them and gave them a bibliography of bilingual and Spanish books. I also recruited four volunteers to teach Microsoft Word and the Internet in Spanish to this community. At first we offered the computer classes to the families already involved in story time. In less than a month, however, demand was so great that we extended the classes to the community in general. After attending four consecutive classes, participants received a "diploma of participation" which gave them a sense of accomplishment. We also created a Spanish computer guide for this course.

Some Problems

Some English speaking parents want their children to learn Spanish through storytelling, but this is not our current objective. Also some Hispanic parents want their school-age children to attend the storytelling session and, although the program is designed for preschoolers, we have made it clear that everyone is welcome.

In some home day cares, I work with Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hispanic, Russian, or Chinese children. What language am I going to use if they do not speak English or Spanish? At these moments I feel frustrated, but I am always prepared with many books, ideas, and games. It is fascinating to see children who do not speak the same language participating and listening to the storytelling.

Teaching English

I use an ESL approach as part of my storytelling sessions. Storytelling is an excellent way to teach any language, especially when the story is highly predictable, includes vocabulary from the home and school environment, is repetitive, and makes use of patterns (like those found in *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*), and lends itself to the use of visuals to illustrate its content and progress. If the children do not speak English, I tell the story in Spanish first and, later, in English. Sometimes the visuals are so good that it is not necessary to use Spanish at all.

Results

Our program has grown significantly in seven months. The following are some indicators of our success:

- We have accumulated approximately 165 volunteers hours.

- Ninety percent of the families who were in the program for at least three months have library cards.
- At this point, 80% of the children who were in the program for 6 months showed improvement.
- Five groups of families have deposit collections of at least ten books in both languages.
- More than 18 library promotional and informational materials have been translated into Spanish.
- Fifteen percent of the families are using library materials and the computer system independently.
- At least ten families involved in the program have registered their children in the new preschool program, and they are ready to start school.
- Each week the library receives calls requesting programs for older children, not just Hispanics, but children in general.

A Final Thought: Who Am I?

I often ask myself: am I a librarian or a social worker? Am I a storyteller or a teacher? Am I a Venezuelan or a Hispanic in the US? Am I an executive or an actress? Am I a referral agency or a translator? In order to be successful in this exciting and challenging role, I have had to be prepared for every contingency. This program is a result of collaborative work between Pat Siegfried and me. Our communication about the progress and limitations of the program, as well as our genuine desire to serve this community, have been important factors for this project as it continues to grow and challenge us.

Favorite books to build English vocabulary:

(In general Tana Hoban books are good to teach concepts).

Carle, Eric. *Do You Want To Be My Friend?*

Crowell, 1971
 Carle, Eric. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Philomel Books, 1987
 Charles, N.N. *What Am I?* Blue Sky Press, 1994.
 Ehler, Lois. *Color Farm*. Lippincott, 1990.
 Fox, Men. *Hattie and the Fox*. Bradbury Press, 1987.
 Martin, Bill. *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See?* Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1983.
 Morgan, Pier. *The Turnip*. Philomel Books, 1990.
 Shaw, Charles. *It Looked Like Spilt Milk*. Harper Row, 1947.
 Walter, Virginia. *Hi, Pizza Man!* Goemmel, Ponder, 1995.
 Wise Brown, Margaret. *Good Night, Moon*. Harper Trophy, 1947/1997.

Some Spanish and bilingual books parents like to use for pre-school children:

Ada, Alma Flor. *The Christmas Tree*. Hyperion Books For Children, 1997.
 Bang, Molly. *Diez Nueve, Ocho*. Greenwillow Books, 1997.

Barbot, Daniel. *Rosaura En Bicicleta*. Ediciones Ekare, 1997.
 Carlson, Nancy. *Me Gusto Como Soy*. Viking, 1997.
 Freeman, Don. *Corduroy*. Puffin Books, 1990.
 González/Delacre. *The Bossy Gallito/El Gallo de Bodas*. Scholastic, 1994.
 Guarino, Deborah. *Tu Mamá Es Una Llama*. Scholastic, 1993.
 Haggerty, Mary Elizabeth. *Una Grieta En La Pared*. Lee & Low Books, Inc, 1993.
 Kleven, Elisa. *Viva Piñata*. Dutton Children's Books, 1996.
 Kraus, Robert. *Leo El Capullo Tardío*. Windmill Books, 1997.
 Roe, Eileen. *Con Mi Hermano/With My Brother*. Bradbury Press, 1991.
 Rosen/Oxenbury. *Vamos A Cazar un Oso*. Ediciones Ekare, 1993.
 "Tortillas Para Mamá and Other Nursery Rhymes. Holt/Rinehart/Winston, 1981.
 Wells, Rosemary. *"Nora La Revoltosa*. Dial Books for Young Readers, 1997.

Note: Wordless picture books are good for parents who do not read English because they can create the words.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS ...

Mel Burton

Education: B.A., Central Methodist College; M.A.L.S. University of Missouri-Columbia

Position: Children's Information Specialist, North County Regional Library, Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County

Jill E. Buie

Education: M.L.I.S., University of South Carolina

Position: Media Specialist, Grover Elementary School, Grover, NC

Patricia E. Freehan

Education: M.L.S., Western Michigan University; Ph.D., UNC-Chapel Hill

Position: Associate Professor, College of Library and Information Science, University of South Carolina

Trilby Meeks

Education: B.A., University of Delaware; M.L.I.S., University of South Carolina

Position: Information Services Manager, Mint Hill Library.

Hannah Owen

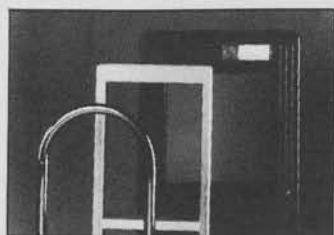
Education: B.A., University of Maryland; M.L.S., UNC-Greensboro

Position: Youth Services Librarian, Hickory Public Library

Irania Macías Patterson

Education: B.A., Universidad Catolica Andres Bello, Caracas

Position: Bilingual Children Specialist, Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County



Checkpoint®

Tired of making "permanent loans?"

Ralph M. Davis, Sales Representative

P.O. Box 144

Rockingham, NC 28379

1-800-545-2714

Tomorrow's Technology for Today's Libraries™

550 Grove Road • P.O. Box 188 • Thorofare, New Jersey 08086

(800) 257-5540 • TELEX: 84-5396 • FAX: (609) 848-0937