# Supporting ELL Families
## through the School Library

## By Judi Paradis

Stop by our school library and you might see parents of English Language Learners (ELLs) shelving books, selecting bilingual texts for their kids, or participating in an after-school story hour. These involved parents ensure that students come ready to learn, understand school expectations, and support the school through a host of activities from classroom volunteering to fundraising. Research indicates that a high level of parental involvement correlates with higher academic achievement, and benefits children socially (Guerra and Nelson 2013; Marschall 2006; Benson and Martin 2003). It is thus worrying to notice that our ELL parent community is often missing from many of our schools.

The Plympton School in Waltham, Massachusetts, is a K-5 school where just over half the students come from a home where the first language is not English. Over 35% of our students live in poverty, and families struggle with issues ranging from trauma to undocumented status; volunteering in the classroom or baking for

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the bake sale is not always the top concern for these families.

As school librarian, I actively work to reach out to ELL families and welcome them into our building in a number of formal and informal ways. As the school's cultural and educational hub, the library is in a unique position to accommodate ELL families and help create a schoolwide culture of support.

## A Welcoming Space

Welcoming families to the library begins at the door. A sign on our door welcomes patrons in multiple languages, and smaller signs announce that "libraries are for everyone." Signage matters—and translating all your signs into the most commonly spoken languages at your school sends a strong message that ELL students and parents are welcome.

***Collection Development Matters:*** Books send a message. I've developed collections of books in the languages most commonly used in our ELL community, and I make sure that these books can be found effortlessly in an easily-seen bookcase at the front of the library. Students and their parents know that these are for family use, and I encourage parents to come and check out books to share with their children. This sends the important message

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that I value their culture and that the school supports reading to children in their home languages.

Foreign language books are great, but frequent displays of books that reflect multicultural issues, information books about specific countries, fiction that highlights diverse characters or multicultural folk tales also indicate that the library program supports the entire school community. Of course, in order to develop a collection that supports ELL families, it is important to continually add a wide range of books to match the needs and interests of your community. Books should be purchased in a range of reading levels, and heavily illustrated or wordless books can be useful for families with limited English proficiency. Having these books tells ELL parents that I am aware of their stories and value them. In order to build your collection and make connections with ELL families, it helps to develop an awareness of their history. Once ELL parents learned that I knew details about their history, I gained their trust in a new way and many more became regular library visitors.

Finally, the librarian who connects with ELL families is in an excellent position to help spread the message that, as research indicates, reading to children in the family's native language is important (Huennekens and Xu 2010; Lewis, et al 2016). Parents begin to see that reading aloud in their native language can help their child understand how a book works, and provides a springboard to good conversations that expand their children's horizons. Because we have a large Guatemalan population, I buy early readers in Spanish to encourage my bilingual students to read independently in their native language. I want my bilingual students to be bilingual speakers and readers, and parents appreciate this.

***Library as a Cultural Center:*** The cultural aspect of the library also means that the library can be a place to display educational materials about students' home cultures, as well as artifacts students and teachers bring in from their homes or travel experiences. Each month our library features an interview with a student from a different culture. The interview, a student photograph, and items the student chooses to share are displayed on the bulletin board directly next to the library entrance. The library is also a place where teachers and students can display cultural artifacts and photographs from interesting trips.

## Formal Family Outreach

While literacy events promote formal family involvement with the school, they also allow the librarian to make informal connections with families. As a specialist who knows all the children in a family and who follows each child for multiple years, the librarian can connect with parents and serve as a bridge between families and teachers.

In a special effort to reach our ELL families, I've become active in our school multicultural committee and reach out often to our ELL teachers. When the ELL teachers realized I strongly support

their students, that I see value to supporting family literacy, and that I have a space and resources to do this, we began to work together. My ELL staff uses the library for evening conversational English classes and parent education. I've helped provide childcare and homework help, and gathered resources for these events. Using iMovie, we created a video tour of our school in Spanish. An ELL teacher wrote a script with an immigrant mother. I then filmed the tour, edited it, and uploaded it on the school website. I made sure that the script included a big welcome from the library. These efforts help build our school's welcoming culture and help demonstrate to ELL families that the library is a place where they are welcome.

*Open House Community Fair:* It can be difficult to get parents to visit the library during Open House nights. To encourage purposeful traffic through the library, my library hosts a community fair. Through our multicultural committee, I reach out to the groups that "mainstream" parents know about, but ELL families may not: the PTO, the public library, the local recreation department, Boys' and Girls' Club, YMCA, scouting groups, a local bank savings program for children, and our after school program. During Open House night, we also find bilingual fifth grade students to act as "ambassador translators" for the night. Signage in multiple languages is put around the building inviting parents to come by and sign their child up for everything from a library card to swimming lessons. Of course, school library materials are also on display so parents can browse and borrow. This initial event signals that the library is welcoming and wants to connect ELL families to our school culture. Having student ambassadors lessens the anxiety for non-English speaking parents, and we've found that adding snacks and music can also increase traffic and instill a relaxed, friendly atmosphere.

*After School Literacy Events:* I've worked with our Title I and ELL teachers to offer after school drop-in story hours, literacy nights, and other formal events to bring parents to school. These, too, work best when translators are present and children accompany parents. Having a snack or craft also helps. These events provide a chance to model and underscore the value of reading. Literacy events also provide a chance to get books directly into the hands of parents and show them that they are welcome to come in and borrow books. While we've experimented with events that highlight one specific culture, we have also looked at cultural variations in common experiences such as what happens when you lose a tooth, celebrate a birthday, or visit grandparents. Parents love sharing how their culture differs from the mainstream U.S. culture and appreciate that we introduce this idea. I've also offered summer storytimes at the public library as a way to get families to see that our programs work in concert and complement one another.

*Sibling and Mentor Readers:* A reading tutor at my school pointed out that students who need literacy support often don't have strong home support. This led us to create a program where students in grades K-2, who receive remedial reading instruction and have younger siblings, are invited to participate in a sibling reader program. Students in this program get a kit each week that contains an information text and a story written for a preschooler. They also have a journal that they use to log what they read to their sibling. After the students finish reading five pairs of books

together, they receive a paperback book to keep forever. Many of the students who participate in this program are ELLs. When their younger siblings reach our kindergarten, it is satisfying to hear that they remember being read to and enjoyed it. Students who do not have a younger sibling can read to a younger student, cousin, or neighbor.

*Immigrant Expertise:* Inviting immigrant family members to share their stories with students and staff can be a powerful way to empower ELL families and build understanding in the school community. As part of our fourth-grade course on U.S. culture and geography, we do a research project on immigration and explore how immigrants benefit from coming to the U.S., and how Americans benefit from the cultural gifts they bring to us. We begin this project by asking immigrant family members to come to the school library and talk to students. Students work in small teams to interview our immigrant experts. Teachers always report that the opportunity to talk directly to immigrant families sparks remarkable conversations about bravery, opportunity, and perseverance. Students from places such as Guatemala, Uganda, and El Salvador have been recognized for the difficulties their families overcame to come here. Seeing students become respectful and proud of our schools' diverse cultural make up is not just satisfying, it builds a culture of welcome that brings families to school.

*Technology Outreach:* Having a page on your school library website translated into dominant languages is a great start in using technology to connect with families. However, it's just a start. The librarian can team up with ELL staff and instructional technology specialists for targeted workshops on how to navigate the school website, including subscription databases and eBook collections. These resources can be lifesavers for impoverished families. I always show families the translation tools on websites and databases to great appreciation. Finally, many ELL families come from backgrounds without strong technology experience. Any workshops on using technology, or even opening up the library to allow families to use library technology will draw parents in. Since students are often likely to be more technologically adept than parents, having students accompany parents helps with language issues, and parents get to see their children becoming technologically proficient.

*Volunteering:* Inviting ELL parents to volunteer in my program has been a huge win-win for my school library. I always attend our kindergarten welcome event and make a plea for all parents to volunteer, and make a point that speaking English is not necessary. I also allow parents to bring toddlers. While I have hit a few snags, I find that overall, ELL parents make terrific volunteers. I've now developed a good pipeline, and have had excellent luck getting existing bilingual parents to help newcomers learn the ropes. I've found that ELL parents are often eager to get involved in schools and appreciate having a place to come and help. It is wonderful to watch ELL parents gain an understanding of U.S. educational expectations and culture through their experiences in the library, and I know that they share their new understandings with their community. I've also found that when I've really needed help, my ELL parents are the first to bring a friend along to volunteer. I now have several ELL parents volunteering in the library, and they are wonderful ambassadors for the program.

Reaching out to ELL families is gratifying. They are delighted to be part of the school community and appreciate being included.

## Access to Books

Students need access to books to succeed, and while building responsibility around using shared materials is important, I am aware that book access is vital, even when things are sometimes lost. I make sure that students are clear on how the library works, and I send home bookmarks in multiple languages explaining our borrowing policies. I also understand that while our public library is terrific and nearby, parents may still have issues getting here. I am always happy to let parents borrow books from the school library, and have been surprised at how grateful they are for this opportunity. I also allow students who demonstrate responsible borrowing behavior to bring books home over the summer vacation.

Dear Parents:
Your child borrowed a book from the library today.  Books are borrowed from the library for one week.  Books should be returned to school on your child's "library day."  If your child wishes to keep a book for an additional week, it can be renewed at the library desk.  Children with very late books will not be allowed to borrow new books until the old books are returned, paid for, or replaced. Thank you.

Su hijo pidió prestado un libro de la biblioteca hoy. Los libros de la biblioteca se prestan por una semana. Los libros deben ser devueltos a la escuela en el "día de la biblioteca" de su hijo. Si su niño desea mantener un libro por una semana adicional, puede ser renovado en el escritorio con la biblioteca. A los niños con libros muy atrasados no se les permitirá tomar prestados nuevos libros hasta que los libros antiguos sean devueltos, pagados o reemplazados. Gracias.

Sincerely,
Judi Paradis
Library Teacher

Reaching out to ELL families is gratifying. They are delighted to be part of the school community and appreciate being included. More importantly, ELL students gain academically when their parents are involved and understand the expectations and norms in our schools. Using the library to bring ELL families into the school makes sense and is sure to gain the notice of administrators. It is another important way to demonstrate the value of a strong library program.
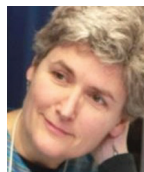


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# Hosting a Family Read-In

by LESLIE PREDDY

**F**AMILIES OFTEN SEEK ways to spend quality time together and administrators regularly seek ways for families to have positive interactions with the school. At the same time, school librarians seek new ways to encourage, promote, and motivate readers. Hosting a Family Read-In is a way to successfully combine all these needs, put the library on the community forefront, and have fun doing it. All it takes is a book, a committee of volunteers full of enthusiasm and ideas, and an evening date on the school calendar. Once started, it can become a tradition for families, and younger siblings in the family can eagerly anticipate the time when they are old enough to sign up.

## PLANNING

Throughout the Family Read-In adventure, a child and significant adult spend time together reading the same book and then register to attend a party themed around that title. A game plan should include a simple timeline and checklist of basic steps to take and tasks to complete. It is also important to recruit supporters and volunteers to ensure a winning program with longevity.

▶**Select a title.** Choose a recent publication that is available in paperback and meets the audience target age, interests, and reading level. Select potential titles based on recommendations from staff, professional reviews, and fellow school librarians, as well as personal readings. Narrow the selection to two titles and invite staff and students to help make the final choice. Once the final selection is made, collect as many copies as possible from the school library, used book stores, and paperback book vendors such as The Distributors (http://www.thedistributors.com/schools.html).

▶**Ask for volunteers.** Send out a plea to staff for vol-



During the Family Read-In for Shelley Pearsall's *All Shook Up* (Knopf Books, 2008), a local Elvis Impersonator taught participants how to dance like Elvis. The school administrators even got into the act with their own Elvis sideburns and sunglasses.

unteers to help with the Family Read-In Committee. It is also possible to include parents and students. Allow for people to help with any phase of the planning, set-up/clean-up, party events, donating snacks, even advising and proof-reading. Give all committee members a copy of the book, a pad of sticky notes, and a pen. Provide a deadline for reading the book and ask readers to look for powerful quotes, themes, characters, foods, and events in the story that might lend themselves to silly or serious activities for home or the party.

▶**Create publicity.** As with any big event, a registration process is needed in order to plan properly (see Figure 1). This will require advance sign-up and advertising to promote the program. Create a registration form, signs, posters, and videos. Consider developing a commercial to post on the school/library website, use as a screensaver or in digital photo frames, and to use during school events and student news productions. Easy-to-use, free programs are available to educators, like Animoto (http://www.animoto.com/Education) or Microsoft Photo Story or Moviemaker (http://www.microsoft.com/education). Check out sites like Tech4Learning (http://www.pics4learning.com) for a copyright-friendly library of images.

▶**Develop enriching home activities.** Students thrive on social interaction and families want to spend positive time with their young person. Help create such an opportunity by working with the committee to develop sugges-

tions for activities to do at home related to events, themes, and characters of the book. A few items included in every home packet should be a cover/welcome letter, anticipation guide bookmark, finding a favorite quote, and bookmark design form for both the adult and child. These bookmarks can later be published and distributed through the library. The home packet works double duty as a reminder of the upcoming celebration.

▶**Customize a party.** Plan a party to last one and one-half to two hours. The party attendance is like a wedding; expect 70-80% of registrants to attend, so plan supplies and activities accordingly. Create a check-in desk with name tags and an agenda. Break the party into four parts: craft, activity, book discussion, and a snack to conclude the evening. If the group is large, break the large group into three smaller groups and have the groups rotate amongst the craft, activity, and discussion. Work together as a committee to create an activity and craft that is fun and uses the talents and resources of the school and committee. For example, for Wendelyn Van Draanen's *Flipped*, a papier-mâché egg ornament was decorated with markers, feathers, glitter paint, and other small craft baubles. During Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games*, participants competed at six "training" stations, including stamina (jump rope), balance (one-legged, arms-out balancing), problem solving (puzzles), and others. Book-related snacks for *After Ever After,* by Jordan Sonnenblick, were oranges, oatmeal cookies, candy hearts, and "cheesy" foods. Book conversation happens throughout the evening, with the guidance of volunteers and also at a dedicated time with a discussion leader. Guided questions, developed in advance, can help get the conversation started.

▶**Evaluate and plan for the future.** If doing a Family Read-In every semester, have the fall registration form ready for spring at the fall party. It is powerful for attendees to have so much fun together and then want to sign up for the next one before they leave the first party. Ask attendees to complete a simple, short survey before leaving or email it out to participants afterward using a free online survey tool like SurveyMonkey. Find out what was successful and what could be improved related to the registration process, home activity kit, the actual party events, and suggestions for future Family Read-In titles.◀

Fig. 1. Registration



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# Revising a School Librarianship Curriculum to Be Culturally Relevant: Lessons Learned

**Deborah Rinio**

In 2020, the library media certificate (LMC) program at Montana State University (MSU) received an IMLS grant to revise the online 21-credit certificate program to include culturally responsive curriculum and Indigenous perspectives, as well as to offer thirty scholarships to two cohorts of teachers in Alaska and Montana. The curriculum revision is being undertaken by the LMC faculty with support from two Indigenous education consultants and an advisory board of ten Indigenous experts, school librarians, and e-learning specialists.

In communities that serve Indigenous students, like those in Alaska and Montana, access to quality education requires "a stable, well prepared, and culturally responsive teacher workforce that is integrated into the community life" (Burton, Brown, and Johnson 2013). To encourage retention, researchers suggest that educators, including school librarians, need support to understand and engage with the cultural context of their schools and be prepared for the specific demands of teaching in schools that serve Indigenous learners (Kaden et al. 2016); yet many such teachers are resistant to adopting and applying culturally relevant education due to the "absence of a range of practical know-how, usable pedagogical models, and high-quality resources" (Neri, Lozano, and Gomez 2019, p. 211).

Learning to become a culturally relevant educator involves more than just sitting through a lecture series or reading a book—although delivery of content is certainly important. Educators must be willing and able to have conversations around culture and inclusion, and to have space to challenge their existing assumptions and explore new ideas. Indigenous Perspectives in School Librarianship (IPSL) seeks to provide this space through its revised curriculum, which challenges school librarian candidates to discuss deeper issues of inclusion, apply content and pedagogical knowledge to their educational practice, and focus on a growth model of learning.

At the time of writing, the first cohort of IPSL students have just completed their first semester; and a draft revision of most of the courses is complete. After teaching each course, IPSL plans to examine intended candidate outcomes and performance, as well as candidate feedback, and make a subsequent round of revisions. A second cohort of students will engage with the revised curriculum during the 2022-2023 academic year before a final round of revisions. At the conclusion of the project, the curriculum will be made freely available via MSU's Scholar Works portal in the hopes that other school

librarian educators will be able to adapt the curriculum to their local contexts and learn from our experience.

There is still much to do and much to learn, but we wanted to take this opportunity to share some of the hard-learned lessons from our first year of grant work.

## Be Intentional and Integrated

Most of the candidates in the LMC program at MSU are full-time educators with family and community responsibilities. It is important that coursework is rigorous and meets standards yet also can be completed without becoming overwhelming. MSU's library media courses, except for the practicum, are a half-semester (six to eight weeks) in length. With such a short time frame, each assignment must be meaningful and useful. There is no time to waste with "busy work" or material that candidates cannot apply to their professional contexts.

The IPSL curriculum was written so that each piece of content in a course—readings, videos, course discussions, assignments—would add value and have meaning for the candidates' development as school librarians AND build their knowledge of inclusion and diversity. For example, in the ethics and advocacy course there is a unit on copyright wherein candidates read about copyright with a focus on cultural appropriation.

By integrating these two goals and being intentional about course material, each candidate acquires information that is relevant to their job as a future school librarian in a way that is culturally relevant and responsive.

## Focus on Pedagogy

Content is certainly important; we need articles and books and stories about and by BIPOC individuals. Equally important is pedagogy. Culturally responsive education is not just about infusing the curriculum with content about and by diverse individuals and groups, but also about utilizing diverse pedagogies and ways of knowing. Within the IPSL program, an effort was made to design curriculum that offered a variety of approaches and many ways for candidates to acquire and demonstrate their knowledge. Whenever personalization was possible, it was incorporated. For example, in the collection development course, one of the assignments asks candidates to develop a curated collection of resources to be utilized by themselves or a fellow educator. The grade level, topic, format, specific materials, and method of presentation are all up to the school librarian candidate, offering them flexibility to utilize ways of learning and knowing that are culturally appropriate for them and their learners.

Within the assignment, the candidate must consider the needs of their learners from both a developmentally appropriate perspective and a culturally responsive perspective. In some communities that may mean utilizing a collective approach to learning. In

others, it may mean incorporating music, dance, or theater as forms of storytelling. One learner shared that in their community, a predominant Indigenous pedagogy was the telling of riddles; as a result, they incorporated riddles into their instruction. Thus, the curriculum for the LMCP utilizes culturally responsive pedagogies, while providing candidates with the opportunity to do the same for their learners.

## Collaboration Is Key

Collaboration is one of the most important, but challenging, parts of any project. As with teacher and librarian collaboration in the K-12 environment, it is important that collaboration in higher education involves scheduled meetings, impromptu discussions, administrative support, clearly defined roles, proactive team leaders, a shared vision, open communication, mutual trust and respect, and participant self-efficacy (Brown 2004). Unfortunately, during our first year, we lacked several of these components.

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As an online team with staff in multiple locations, we did not have the initial relationships necessary to develop mutual trust and respect, a shared vision, and open communication; and online work does not easily foster impromptu discussions. With so many other tasks to complete—developing scholarship criteria and applications, recruiting candidates, onboarding new mentors, and revising curriculum—the important work of building a team of faculty that could work effectively together was unfortunately overlooked.

As a result, each faculty member worked independently, missing the opportunity for our social capital to inform the work. To resolve this, we plan to schedule bimonthly meetings with faculty and our Indigenous education consultants to build on existing relationships. Our consultants will provide short readings or videos to help spark discussion around a relevant topic, supplemented by time for general conversation around teaching in the program. We hope this will not only provide meaningful and relevant professional development but establish relationships among faculty to help build social capital for future course development and instructional work, as well as a network of support and encouragement for better collaboration.

## Model Growth

As with any project, it is important to remember that change does not happen overnight. Although we have had many successes, we have also had challenges and failures, and there is always opportunity for growth. Throughout the curriculum revision, a growth mindset has guided our work with our candidates, particularly for the practicum portion of the program. Within the practicum, candidates are asked to identify a professional area of growth and then plan, implement, and self-evaluate an activity that allows them

to develop and demonstrate AASL Framework for School Librarian standards and develop their skills and abilities as a school librarian. Mentors are assigned to each candidate for the length of the program to support them in this process.

> Growth is not just for candidates, however, but also for IPSL staff and all the LMC faculty.

Growth is not just for candidates, however, but also for IPSL staff and all the LMC faculty. In addition to standard course evaluations, candidates are encouraged to share what is working and what isn't with their professors at any time. Earlier this semester, when a faculty member introduced a resource in a way that a candidate thought reflected a cultural stereotype, they brought it to their advisor who encouraged them to speak with the faculty member directly. Although we always hope to prevent these types of situations, no one is perfect. What's important is that learners feel as if they have a safe space to share concerns, and faculty sees concerns as opportunities for growth.

Candidates are further encouraged to model a growth mindset with their own learners, in alignment with the National School Library Standards. Thus, fostering a growth mindset extends from faculty, to candidate, to learner and back again in a cycle that we hope will result in a library media certificate program curriculum that others can learn from and adapt to their own circumstances.

**Conclusion**

When we started this project, we knew that these ideas—integration, pedagogy, collaboration, and growth—would inform our work; but in the day-to-day engagement with the grant and each other, we sometimes lost sight of that vision. Weekly IPSL leadership teams meetings were critical; they helped us stay on track, adjust as needed, and support each other in remembering to have a growth mindset. Additionally, our librarian candidates and their learners were always there to help remind us of the importance of our goal.

As one candidate shared, "I also really appreciate how culturally relevant your classes and teaching are. It's been wonderful for me as a student of color, and so I can see how it's done. We were talking in one of our seminars how education in general, but the higher you go, especially high school and for sure college, erodes students' home cultures away. And students from especially small villages with collectivist values will send their youth away to college and that youth comes back and no longer knows how to fit into the village. And they usually end up leaving the village for a big city where they can apply what they learned in college. Most of my college experience falls right in that category: I've had to step away from especially my [ethnic identity] side in many classes to do well. But in your classes I honestly feel like I can embrace that side of me and still

succeed and excel. You were the first professor I thought of that goes against that grain. Thank you."

This project is still ongoing and there will be more challenges and more revisions to make in support of our goal of designing a culturally responsive curriculum for school librarian candidates. We hope that you can learn from our experiences, and like us, remember that there will always be room for growth. Developing a curriculum that helps learners feel safe, welcomed, and supported will always be worth the effort.

For more information on Indigenous Perspectives in School Librarianship (IPSL), please visit our website at https://www.montana.edu/education/grad/librarymedia/ipsl.html.

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