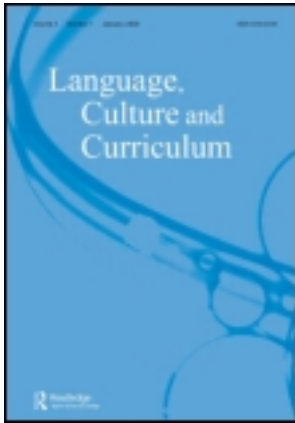


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Learning together: creating a community of practice to support English language learner literacy

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This qualitative case study examines an after-school, bilingual family literacy programme that brought together several groups to form a community of practice (CoP) that worked to support the literacy development of English language learners and their families. We explored the following question: How do parents, teachers, students, and other school personnel interact within an after-school family literacy programme and learn from each other as a CoP? Our findings show that family literacy nights offered opportunities for collaboration between different CoPs that did not exist during the regular school day. They suggest that participating in family literacy nights can be an important way to connect various school-based groups to one another and to linguistically diverse families, creating a CoP united by participants' shared interest in literacy development.

Keywords: community of practice; family literacy; English language learners; language minorities; bilingualism; teaching methods

Introduction

This qualitative case study examines an after-school, bilingual family literacy programme, 'Learning Together' (henceforth LT),¹ which brought together several groups to form a community of practice (CoP) that worked to support the literacy development of English language learners (ELLs) and their families. While research on family literacies has been growing over the past three decades (e.g. Purcell-Gates, 2000; Taylor, 1983), few studies explore the ways in which multiple participants – family members, teachers and school personnel, and children – benefit from the processes of coming together around literacy activities.

Instead, family literacy studies (see meta-analysis in Senéchal & Young, 2008) have tended to focus on *parent–child* interaction, seeking growth in children's vocabulary and comprehension due to participation in literacy activities by children and their parents, as scaffolded by school-based adults (e.g. Roberts, 2008; Thornburg, 1993) or between children and adults at home (Burgess, 1997; Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Peligrini 1995; Morrow, 1983; Teale, 1984). However, the effects of these programmes on the *school-based adults* (e.g. teachers and other school personnel) are rarely examined or mentioned (for an

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exception, see Thornburg, 1993). Few, if any, literacy studies have examined the effects of family literacy programmes on parents, children, *and* teachers. This study contributes to the work on family literacy because it explores and connects the experiences of all three of these participant groups in a family literacy programme, focusing especially on the experiences of school personnel as they participated in the LT programme. We contribute to the literature by exploring how the LT programme brought together previously separate communities into a CoP with a shared purpose.

We acknowledge that the design of the LT programme examined here reflected a functional or ‘adaptive’ approach (Edwards, 2003; Edwards & Turner, 2009) that focused on school-based literacies.² As researchers, we align ourselves with work that urges educators to critically examine the underlying assumptions of family literacy programmes that at times misinterpret home literacy practices through a deficit lens (e.g. Auerbach, 1995; Street, 1993; Taylor, 1997). As Purcell-Gates (2000) states:

Underlying this stance [of family literacy intervention programmes] is the belief that the targeted parents do not already practice... desirable behaviors [such as reading to children, helping with homework, and strategic communication with schools and teachers], or that the literacy practices that are present in the home are not facilitative of academic success. (p. 859)

However, it is not within the scope of this paper to critique the programme’s focus on school-based literacies. Instead, this study focuses on the interactional opportunities created through this family literacy programme for previously separate groups to come together as one CoP to support ELLs’ academic experiences in new ways.

We examined the following research question about the programme: How do parents, teachers, students, and other school personnel interact within an after-school family literacy programme and learn from each other as a CoP? To answer this research question, we explored the interactions of families, teachers and school personnel, and children in a year-long qualitative case study of LT, a bilingual family literacy programme in an elementary school in a busy metropolitan area in the Mid-Atlantic USA. We argue that a new CoP emerged from the LT programme, because it united stakeholders who did not have the opportunity to work together before engaging in a joint enterprise through LT.

Theoretical framework

To explore how the different groups in the LT programme came together to support the literacy development of ELLs and their families, we drew upon a CoP framework (Hansen-Thomas, 2009; Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sfard, 1998; Wenger, 1998) that focuses on the creation of community through three important criteria: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and negotiable resources (Hansen-Thomas, 2009; Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) has argued that within his CoP framework, there are ‘three dimensions of the relation by which practice is the source of coherence in a community ... : 1) mutual engagement, 2) a joint enterprise, [and] 3) a shared repertoire’ (pp. 72–73), and scholars such as Hansen-Thomas (2009) have applied this framework to studies within classrooms and schools.

We utilised Wenger’s (1998) framework to examine how the LT programme created a space for teachers, students, parents, and other school personnel, who often participate in separate CoPs, to join together, learn more about one another’s roles in supporting ELLs, and create a stronger, more integrated academic experience for students. Wenger (1998) defines the first criterion for creating a CoP as the mutual engagement of participants in practice: ‘Practice resides in a community of people and the relations of the mutual

engagement by which they can do whatever they do. Membership in a community of practice is therefore a matter of mutual engagement' (p. 73). Hansen-Thomas (2009) adds that the group is coming together for a shared purpose. In this study, multiple groups within the school (teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages [ESOL], the ESOL department chair, classroom teachers, school specialists, the parent liaison, and school administrators) came together, along with the families of ELLs, to support ELLs' literacy through their engagement in the LT programme.

The second criterion for creating community, joint enterprise, is activity that members carry out when engaged in social practice with one another (Hansen-Thomas, 2009; Wenger, 1998). In this study, the joint enterprise of the participants was their participation together in the LT family literacy programme. While all of the participants already shared the joint enterprise of improving children's literacy abilities and skills, the LT programme brought them together explicitly to recognise and build upon one another's expertise towards this larger goal.

The third criterion for creating a community is a shared repertoire for negotiating meaning, which Wenger (1998) defines as a 'community's set of shared resources' (p. 83). He states:

The repertoire of a community of practice includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice. (p. 83)

Hansen-Thomas (2009) adopts Wenger's focus on resources and calls the third criterion for creating a community a shared repertoire of negotiable resources. Applying this to the present study, it can be seen that the family literacy sessions and materials associated with this programme made up an important part of the shared repertoire of resources that the CoP used to participate in and support the family literacy programme.

To summarise, LT brought together previously separate communities. We offer evidence of how each of these groups of parents, students, and school personnel interacted with each other in ways that illustrated their union in a larger CoP through mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and use of negotiable resources.

Methods

Participants and setting

The elementary school where this qualitative case study took place, Kennedy Elementary, received Title I funding, and 85% of the school population qualified for free and reduced price meals. Forty per cent of students were identified as Limited English Proficient, 53% of students were Hispanic, 44% were African-American, and the remaining 3% were Asian, White, or American Indian. The LT programme emerged at the initiative of ESOL teacher Kathleen Carl and second-grade teacher Gina Taylor. Kathleen and Gina's collaborative relationship began when they approached their principal and asked to be allowed to co-teach together. For six months prior to the data collection for this study, Kathleen had been plugging in to Gina's second-grade classroom to provide support to ELLs during the 90-minute reading block that occurred every morning (for further details and discussion about Kathleen and Gina's co-teaching, see Martin-Beltran & Peercy, 2012; Martin-Beltran, Peercy, & Selvi, 2012; Peercy & Martin-Beltrán, 2012).

Kathleen and Gina had a remarkable collaborative relationship and were also good friends. One outgrowth of their collaborative teaching and planning was their idea to

develop a family literacy programme for students in their school whom they noted were struggling to perform well on reading tests (also spurred on by Kathleen's application for National Board Certification in TESOL). They were frustrated by the lack of opportunities for communication between teachers and parents about what students actually did during literacy activities at school, how the schools measured students' development of school literacy, and what was expected at school. They also acknowledged how little time they had to support parents who wanted to help their children with literacy at home. These factors became foundational to the LT programme they eventually developed.

Kathleen and Gina, together with Kathleen's husband Matthew (who was a music teacher in the same school), generated a curriculum that included a workbook for parents and their children with exercises for letter identification, letter sounds, sight words, vocabulary, parents reading to children, and children reading to parents. The LT programme was created to guide parents to support their children who were emerging readers, and the curriculum was based on the school district's standards for emergent readers in kindergarten through second grade. According to the LT Parent Handbook, the mission of the programme was 'to empower parents in their child's education by providing them with standards and data-based information, tools, and strategies that will enable them to be key players in the literacy development of their child' (Home School Connections, 2008, p. 1). The workbook was accompanied by a DVD featuring the teachers, which students and their families could watch and practise activities with at home. On the DVD, the teachers explained concepts in the workbook and how to complete the workbook exercises. Gina and Kathleen created an English version, and with the help of Octavia, the Spanish-English bilingual parent liaison in their school, they also created a Spanish-English bilingual workbook and DVD for LT.

Our research team first learned about the LT programme when teachers from Kennedy Elementary participated in a professional development series (led by the first two authors). The teachers explained to us that they welcomed all families who wanted to support their children's literacy development and offered the sessions free of charge, with materials provided. At the end of the school year, Gina moved to another state due to her husband's job, but Kathleen, Matthew, and Octavia pressed forward with offering another year of LT, this time with eight sessions. They approached our university research team to ask for funding and support.

Role of the researchers

During the second year of their LT programme, we partnered with Kathleen, Matthew, and Octavia to provide funding (through a small internal grant from the university) to make it possible to provide the workbooks and DVDs available to families for free (the previous year the district's ESOL office had paid for the materials, but due to budget cuts could not do so again), to help with the LT family literacy nights, and to learn more about how their programme functioned. We worked with the teachers as participant observers in these eight LT nights, during which we sat with families and helped them work with LT materials, translated as needed, helped hand out materials, interacted informally with families, and also collected data in vivo (described below in the section on data collection).

The LT sessions

The LT sessions met once a month after school for approximately one and a half to two hours, and adults with babies, toddlers, and school-age children participated alongside

school personnel. Two parent liaisons from neighbouring schools, the ESOL chair, and the physical education teacher attended the LT nights regularly, along with Kathleen, Matthew, and Octavia. Many teachers came frequently, but not every time, such as a kindergarten teacher, a first-grade teacher, an ESOL teacher, and the school guidance counsellor. Kathleen also emphasised to teachers that if they wanted to be involved, but could not commit to long-term involvement in the programme, they were welcome to come to one night, which several did. On any given night, at least two teachers were in each room, with parent-teacher liaisons also supporting families in the bilingual Spanish-English room.

Generally, approximately 60 people attended the LT sessions, and attendance varied depending upon the weather and families' schedules and other demands: some families attended all eight sessions, some only a few. Families usually sat together, with school-age children and an adult (sometimes with one parent, sometimes with two, sometimes with an older sibling, aunt, or uncle) seated with their LT workbook, and younger children ran around and played. During the year that we worked with the programme, they divided families into two rooms: the Spanish-speaking families met with Kathleen and Octavia in the school's cafeteria/multipurpose room, and the families that spoke a first language other than Spanish, or who were English dominant but seeking some additional reading instruction for their children, met with Matthew in the school's media centre.³

In the Spanish-speaking room, Kathleen usually led the sessions in English and Octavia translated this information in Spanish. In the latter part of the year, we observed Octavia taking the lead in facilitating sessions in the Spanish-speaking room, which reflected the ways that different school personnel developed their shared repertoire and negotiated their roles as the CoP emerged around the joint enterprise of the LT programme. Matthew covered the same topics with parents in the media centre, in English. Although the number of participants varied from night to night, the percentage of participants in each of the rooms remained fairly constant, with 80–90% of the participants in the bilingual Spanish-English room and 10–20% of participants, who spoke a range of languages, including French, Arabic, and English, in the English-speaking room (Table 1).

The LT team chose session topics based on what they viewed as the most critical components of emergent literacy: letter identification, letter sounds, sight words, vocabulary, and emergent reading strategies. They also used participants' feedback from the previous year to expand the programme from five to eight nights, including new sessions on letter sounds, more time devoted to vocabulary, and a second night about reading. During the

Table 1. Topics for monthly LT sessions.

Monthly meeting	Topic for LT session
October	Information on DRA scores and how to interpret your child's fall DRA reading test scores
November	Letter identification
December	Letter sounds
January	Sight words and revisiting DRA reading test scores
February	Vocabulary development
March	Strategies for reading to your child
April	Helping your child choose books they can read independently Having your child read aloud to you
May	Review of child's spring DRA reading test scores Closing party

first session, Kathleen, Octavia, and Matthew presented information about the district's Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA⁴; Pearson, 2012) and helped parents to interpret their child's DRA scores in comparison to expected grade-level reading scores and to those of other ELLs in the district. The teachers included this review of each student's DRA reading scores and benchmarks three times during the LT nights: after the students had taken their reading assessments in September and May, as well as once mid-programme. During the second session, the teachers walked attendees through the materials that presented letter identification concepts and activities in the workbook, first asking families if they had done their 'homework' (the letter identification activities in the workbook) from the previous session, then showing the DVD section that discussed letter identification, and asking families to do the letter identification activities together in the workbook, while they circulated and helped families.

During the third session both rooms participated in activities focused on letter sounds. During the fourth session they practised activities with sight words and revisited information about the children's DRA reading levels and expected scores for being on grade level. During the fifth session, they focused on vocabulary development; during the sixth session, the Spanish-speaking room used Spanish and Spanish-English bilingual story books, and the English-speaking room used story books in English to practise strategies parents could use when reading to their child. In the seventh session, they provided several choices of Spanish, Spanish-English bilingual, and English storybooks and at different levels of difficulty and practised having children select books they could read independently as well as read aloud to their parent(s). The eighth session involved interpreting children's DRA reading test scores from the spring, and an end of programme celebration when children were allowed to choose a storybook to keep.

Data collection

During each of the sessions, at least one researcher from our research team was present, and we conducted participant observation by both assisting small groups of parents and children with the literacy activities being focused on that evening, and also taking field notes during and after the session. Furthermore, we video recorded the sessions. We also interviewed various participants in the programme, including Kathleen, Matthew, and Octavia, as well as 6 other teachers and school personnel who attended and assisted with some of the nights, and 10 parents or family members who participated in the programme (see Appendix 1 for sample interview questions). Specifically, between December and April we staggered formal, semi-structured interviews with teachers who were most involved in the programme, including one semi-structured interview each with a kindergarten teacher, a first-grade teacher, the physical education teacher, the school counsellor, an ESOL teacher who had been mentored by Kathleen while getting certified (and who had a child in ESOL classes at the school), and the ESOL chair. We conducted two formal, semi-structured interviews each with Kathleen and Matthew (the first interview occurred in December and the second occurred in April). We interviewed Octavia in March. Based on frequency of attendance, engagement, and willingness to participate in an interview, we engaged in a total of 10 formal, semi-structured interviews with parents; we interviewed two parents at each of the four LT nights between December and March, and one parent each at the April and May LT nights. We also frequently engaged in informal conversation and questions with school personnel and parents before, during, or after LT nights, and also at times when we spontaneously interacted with them at school during the day.

Additionally, we gave the parents a brief survey before each LT session to learn more about what they knew about what their child(ren) did at school related to the topic being discussed that night (e.g. sight words, vocabulary), what they already were doing at home to help support the topic that would be discussed that night, and what they wanted to learn about the topic (see Appendix 2 for example survey questions). The final survey we gave parents also enabled us to collect information about their opinions regarding how much the programme accomplished in relation to each of the following: improved their child's reading skills (e.g. letter identification, vocabulary growth, reading comprehension); helped them learn about their children's teachers; gave them insight about school teaching practices, expectations of children in each grade level, and their own child's reading level; and helped them feel more comfortable in assisting their children with reading at home.

Data analysis

To analyse field notes, videotapes, interview transcripts, and open-ended survey questions, we conducted thematic coding guided by our research question to develop conceptual categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Close-ended survey questions were tabulated to determine for how many minutes parents read to their child(ren) at home, at the beginning and end of the LT programme. Working from our research question, we began data analysis by asking ourselves what parents were learning from teachers and what teachers were learning from parents through their interactions together in LT nights, starting by examining field notes and teacher and parent interview transcripts. We initially worked individually to code data from interviews and field notes, and then discussed our initial coding and emerging themes as a research team. Initial codes included challenges to and supports for relationships between parents and teachers, as well as codes about learning that was occurring between parents and teachers through their interactions in LT.

Our individual coding and subsequent collective discussion revealed that we had begun to see interaction among not only parents and teachers, but a broader range of stakeholders as important in the LT interactions. After initial coding of interview transcripts and field notes, we reviewed video data from LT sessions as a way to triangulate insights about the interaction between parents, teachers, and students, as well as to augment our field notes from LT sessions. Furthermore, we analysed survey data to gauge parent knowledge about, interest in, and learning about the literacy topics discussed at each LT night. Surveys were also analysed for information about changes in any parent or child reading behaviours at home, and any changes in parents' confidence helping their children with reading. Survey data also helped us to generate questions for parent interviews about their learning and experiences with school-based literacy through their participation in LT.

As a research team we compared themes across our different data sources, including observations of the literacy nights and interviews with different stakeholders. We triangulated our interpretations of the data across the research team until we reached consensus.

Findings

In this section of the paper, we share our findings regarding the CoP (which included parents, students, teachers, and other school staff) that formed to support ELL literacy through the LT programme at Kennedy Elementary.

The LT team unites

An important part of the CoP that formed in the school was that of the core LT team itself, which included Kathleen (ESOL teacher), Matthew (music teacher and Kathleen's husband), and Octavia (parent liaison). As a parent liaison, Octavia's job was to meet with Spanish-speaking parents or guardians of students who attended Kennedy Elementary and to assist them in Spanish about their school-related questions and concerns. Kathleen began putting together the LT programme as part of the parent involvement component of her National Board Certification. In response to her frustration that parent-teacher conferences left parents with little practical direction to help their children achieve grade-level reading, she decided to make a workbook and DVD as the initial components of the LT programme.

Kathleen drew on her experiences in her previous work as a television programmer to design the DVD, assisted by other members of the LT team. Gina and Octavia explained and acted out activities on the DVD, and the school reading specialist assisted with graphic design. Octavia translated the workbook into Spanish, enabling the LT team to provide parents with workbooks in both Spanish and English. Once Kathleen began planning the nights, she asked Octavia if she would help present and interpret at LT sessions. Octavia thus took on a role that was broader than her liaison role of interacting with parents about school. In doing this work with LT, rather than interacting only or primarily with parents about activities during school, Octavia began to interact in more regular and sustained ways with Kathleen and Matthew, as well as with other teachers who volunteered at LT nights. Octavia stated that this gave her a better understanding of the kindergarten through second-grade curriculum, because LT was a programme for K-2 students and its activities and focus drew on the Reading/Language Arts components of the K-2 curriculum. She felt that this deeper understanding of the K-2 curriculum helped her in her parent liaison role, because it allowed her to explain the kindergarten, first-, and second-grade curricula to parents with more depth and detail. Octavia also stated that her work in the LT programme connected her more with teachers, helped her build relationships with them, and gave her more insights into their instruction and expectations, which in turn helped her communicate with parents about classroom expectations.

Octavia commented:

I understand more of the curriculum and what it asks of students, especially in K to second grade ... A lot of times, it's very complicated to explain to parents the DRA [Developmental Reading Assessment] level, the reading level and how is it that the school measures the students' abilities in reading and writing. Learning that from the [LT] program allows me to actually explain it in a better way to the parents and keep them informed.

Together, Octavia, Kathleen, and Matthew formed part of the new CoP around the LT programme that strengthened their communication with each other both during and after school, and enhanced their communication with parents about reading activities that could be done at home to support the school curriculum.

Cohesion of school staff across grades and specialties

Similarly, teachers and other school staff who participated in the LT programme got to know teachers at different grade levels and with different specialties better. The development of this part of the CoP around the LT programme allowed different teachers and school staff to learn more about strategies for teaching ELLs in their classrooms. For

instance, a kindergarten teacher explained that by participating in the LT nights, she learned how to provide more hands-on activities and she gained new insight into the importance of modelling for ESOL students. The physical education teacher shared that participating in the LT programme reminded her that translating words in her warm-ups and translating letters to parents could help her bilingual students. Octavia also learned how busy the classroom teachers were with checking students' progress in reading and vocabulary development on a regular basis. Participating in the LT nights enabled a first-grade teacher to better understand the 'struggles that ESOL students can have with comprehension', and after participating in LT, she reported that she incorporated more graphics and more attention to vocabulary in her lessons. Thus, the LT programme provided a venue and purpose for teachers from different grade levels and specialisations, who would not necessarily attend the same grade-level meetings about student achievement, to work together around the joint enterprise of improving the reading achievement of ELLs at Kennedy.

Positive impact of LT programme on literacy

Participation in LT had a positive impact on the amount of time children and parents spent reading together at home, including parents reading to children and children reading to parents. The surveys after the first LT session indicated that 63% of parents read to their children for 10–30 minutes daily, but by the last session, 94% of parents were reading to their children for such periods. Kathleen and the other LT facilitators also emphasised the importance of children reading to parents both in their presentations at LT nights and in our interviews with them. We view parents' responses on surveys and teachers' comments in our interview and observational data as evidence of strengthened mutual engagement around literacy development, which was recognised by both parents and teachers as a joint enterprise of parents, teachers, and students (Wenger, 1998). We also noted increases in the numbers of parents who reported on the surveys that they felt comfortable helping their children with reading skills at home. The increase in overall amounts of time that children read with their parents at home may continue to have profound effects on children's reading abilities even beyond the year of the programme, as several researchers have found that the amount of time children spend reading can enhance reading proficiency (e.g. Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988).

Growth in parent–parent and parent–teacher relationships

Another dimension of the CoP that emerged was that of parents coming together and getting to know one another through their participation in the programme. Although most parents were very focused on working with their children during the hands-on reading activities in the LT nights, our field notes and video analysis showed that they took advantage of opportunities to interact with other parents before and after the presentation and activities. The ESOL chair in the school suggested that in the future perhaps 'some parents could serve as mentors for the newly arrived parents'. One mother, who joined LT to help her son learn to read, emphasised, 'The networking that you can do between parent and teacher and other parents that this program offers is tremendous. Networking is very important, especially with a child with special needs.' Parents often interacted briefly to exchange pleasantries before or after each night's programme, and sometimes they came together to work on the activities. The first-grade teacher who volunteered at the LT nights thought the programme was valuable because it was:

instituted as a regular program where every month the parents know that they can come in and be with other parents who want to help their children, and they know that people will be there to help answer their questions.

When interviewed in April, Matthew described his observation that the parents in the English-speaking room had taken on more responsibility with self-guidance and guiding one another, while he gradually shifted from leader to facilitator. He shared, 'I would say, by the third session, for people who come, they're kind of helping the other parents more.'

Mutual engagement in the LT programme also led to growing relationships between parents and school personnel. Many teachers who participated in the LT programme, whether once or multiple times, commented that they were impressed at the enthusiasm and dedication of families about the programme and their interest in working together to improve reading skills in English. The school guidance counsellor noted that her participation in the LT programme helped her to see how 'invested [the parents of ELLs] are in their children's education', and she stated that a major benefit of the programme was that it was another model of the collaboration and togetherness that she also tried to foster at Kennedy:

[In the LT program,] the school population gets a chance to come together and participate in the activities with the parents, to collaborate together. ... in my counseling program, ... I really try to collaborate a lot with everybody, outside the school, inside the school, parents, teachers.

Parents also commented that the LT programme taught them about teachers' expectations and showed that teachers valued the families. When asked to describe the benefits of the LT programme nights, one parent shared, 'We get to know that the Spanish [speaking] community is special. They have an important role here.' Another mother appreciated the opportunity to learn about school practices, and she said that materials sent home from school were usually not clearly explained, but the LT programme sought to build understanding between the school and parents:

They [the facilitators in the LT programme] broke it down and explained it to us, ... and said, 'This is how we test, this is what your child should know, this is what level your child should be on.' If they're below this, this book can break it down so that you're able to build your child up to their level, or if your child is on level, you can expand and go to the next level ... I learned how the school trains my child in school and how I can help him at home.

Through their participation in LT, parents thus became more comfortable with the school community and gained more access to discourses about school literacy, which helped them to gain access to the codes, conventions, and skills that are highly valued in schools (Edwards & Turner, 2009).

Matthew stated that LT made the parents feel that they had a voice at the school. Matthew emphasised that teachers learned that parents were supporting their children's learning at home, and parents learned that the teachers were invested in helping children to read, thereby creating what Matthew described as a 'mutual admiration society'. He stated that he felt that the LT programme strengthened the relationship between teachers and parents:

The teachers realize they're not doing it by themselves. That's a comfort to the teacher to know that 'I'm teaching these children, and they're [also] going home and being supported'. There truly is support at home, and the parents know they're getting support at school. It's really this mutual admiration society, which is, you know, what a school really at the end of the day should be. It really should be a team effort. ... The parents are really taking an active role in the

education, and that is powerful, and it's powerful for the whole school community, and we're all benefiting from it.

Matthew added that the CoP between teachers and parents was broader than just teachers and parents, however, and really created a CoP between the teachers and the whole family, not only the parents: 'And the students, ... it's letting them see that it's important to everybody around them, that it's important to their peers, it's important to their parents, to their teachers, their school.' Matthew's comments resonate with Wenger's (1998) argument that a CoP, 'creates among participants relations of mutual accountability that become an integral part of the practice' (p. 78).

The LT nights provided a unique opportunity for parents, children, and teachers to come to the table to work together on improving the children's literacy. When asked how LT nights differed from other opportunities for parent-teacher interaction, an ESOL teacher, parent of an ELL in kindergarten at Kennedy, and participant in the LT nights responded, 'because it involves the presence of the children', which she argued was more effective than parent-teacher conferences. The ESOL chair felt that it was significant that the programme drew parents, teachers, and students together, and that their extended time together during LT was more meaningful than other times she met with parents, such as parent-teacher conferences. She explained:

During a conference, you can tell them in general – your child needs to learn this ... but ... they still don't know how to help them do all those things at home. What [LT] does is show them concretely real, practical ways of supporting their students. It's very hands-on, that's the big difference. You can't do that in a parent-teacher conference because of the time.

Matthew expressed how this collaboration can motivate students when he said:

When the kids see that support from their teachers and from their parents and from their peers ... that 'it must be cool, because my friend's doing it, too', on top of giving them the tools, it's setting them up for success because it's something they're going to *want* to do.

The ESOL chair also thought that everyone coming together showed children that 'education is important to their parents, so they want to do well'. When asked how she thought children were responding to the activities during the LT nights, Kathleen said, 'The kids, I feel ... really like doing them because mommy's sitting next to them, and that's not happened ever before.'

Not only did parents, children, and teachers coming together seem to increase students' motivation and interest, but it also gave teachers an opportunity to learn more about their students. The ESOL chair said:

When you see the whole family, you find out a lot of things about their lives, which are very important, because they tell you a lot about their background. You can tap into that background when they are in the classroom.

Discussion

In this study, we examined how parents, students, teachers, and other school personnel interacted within the LT family literacy programme as they engaged in the joint enterprise of supporting ELLs' literacy development, and working to increase student achievement in reading. Wenger (1998) explains that the second criterion for creating CoPs, joint

enterprise, is something that participants pursue together in response to their situation. We found that several previously separate communities came together to form a new CoP around the LT programme. One of the most exciting findings was that the programme brought together a variety of adults, who otherwise did not get time to interact with each other in sustained and meaningful ways, to support the literacy achievement of ELLs at Kennedy Elementary School. Furthermore, these adults came to understand and appreciate each other more, *both during LT* (after school) and in their activities *during school*, through their mutual engagement and joint enterprise in the LT programme. For instance, teachers who were not ESOL specialists gained understanding from the LT sessions about techniques to use to better support ELLs in their classes; they also had an opportunity to see parents working hard to support student learning, and parents had an opportunity to begin to feel more comfortable around them. This development was particularly significant because the benefits of the mutual engagement and joint enterprise of the LT programme did not just stay within the sphere of the once-monthly after-school LT programme, but instead spilled over into the *daily* teaching and learning activities that occurred *during school* hours.

Wenger (1998) argues that in a CoP, 'a shared practice thus connects participants to each other in ways that are diverse and complex. The resulting relations reflect the full complexity of doing things together' (p. 77). In our study, the relationships and commitments that teachers, staff, parents, and students developed during the LT programme carried over into school activities, strengthening the support and interactions that ELLs and their families participated in during school.

One way that participation in the LT programme resulted in greater support for ELLs and their parents for in-school activities was that Octavia, the parent liaison, gained a much more in-depth understanding of the kindergarten, first- and second-grade curricula, and was able to communicate with parents about student performance and ways that parents could work with their children to support their literacy in English. Similarly, the school guidance counsellor gained a better understanding of the ELL families in her school and felt that the LT programme was a good model for how to promote collaboration and togetherness to support Kennedy students and their families. Other teachers in the school who were not ESOL specialists reported that they were starting to incorporate more instructional techniques that supported ELLs in their teaching during the school day. Additionally, parents reported that they felt more comfortable in the school and interacting with teachers, and teachers and other school staff felt more connected to parents and knew more about their students' families. The work of the LT team spilled over to activities during school, and Kathleen and other classroom teachers often sought help from Octavia to translate not only LT activities, but also classroom activities, so that they could present certain concepts and information with Spanish–English bilingual support.

Implications and conclusions

In this paper, we argue that a strong CoP emerged between stakeholders in Kennedy Elementary School through their shared engagement in the joint enterprise of the LT programme, which created a shared network of resources and improved student achievement. A central implication of this study for supporting ELLs' academic success in schools is that teachers, other school staff, parents, and students need more opportunities to engage in sustained, meaningful interaction together. Although school personnel often mention that communication with parents occurs through parent–teacher conferences, these are often too brief and infrequent for parents and teachers to get to know one another and feel comfortable interacting, and certainly do not allow enough time to discuss student progress and

co-construct ways to support language learners, who need extra scaffolding to gain grade-appropriate language skills *and* content knowledge. These brief meetings do not offer the same opportunities to build networks or CoPs that involve the multidimensional support from school and home that we observed in the LT programme.

Furthermore, when people within schools (such as classroom teachers, ESOL teachers, parent liaisons, school counsellors, and administrators) come together to foster the academic success of students, they are afforded the opportunity to provide more holistic and purposefully integrated support for students. Parents also benefit from opportunities to interact and network with one another, which helps them to form a support network among themselves. Our data show that stakeholders who were part of the CoP that emerged from their participation in the LT programme felt that LT positively impacted the community in Kennedy Elementary School, which supports Wenger's (1998) argument that CoPs 'hold the key to real transformation – the kind that has real effects on people's lives' (p. 85). Finally, this study has implications for teacher education as we consider better ways to prepare teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. By involving teacher candidates in such CoPs early in their training, teacher-learners will have opportunities to see examples of how to connect with, support, and learn from families outside of traditional classrooms or parent-teacher conferences.

In conclusion, this study contributes to research on family literacy programmes by shedding light on the opportunities within one programme to create a new CoP and networks of resources in schools to support ELLs. This study suggests new directions for future research to focus on the quality of interactions between parents, children, teachers, and other school staff. Further research is needed to examine how the CoPs that emerge from programmes such as LT may transform literacy practices in classrooms and ultimately improve literacy outcomes for students. Additional research is also needed on family literacy programmes that incorporate both home-based and school-based literacy practices, to determine how further involvement from parents and more incorporation of home literacy practices would affect the development and success of CoPs striving to improve students' literacy abilities.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. That is, LT did not utilise a critical approach (or what Edwards [2003] and Edwards and Turner [2009] would call an 'incorporation' approach) that also acknowledged, celebrated, and incorporated home-based literacies (Rodriguez-Brown, 2009).
3. The previous year Kathleen, Octavia, Matthew, and Gina had met with all families together in one bilingual room and had decided it might be more effective to provide bilingual assistance to Spanish-speaking families in one room and to run the session for the remaining families (who spoke a first language other than Spanish or who were English-dominant) in English in another room.
4. DRAs were a reading test used in the district to measure students' instructional levels in reading. DRA levels indicated students' reading levels along a developmental reading continuum and showed how their levels corresponded with grade level benchmarks for the beginning and end of grades 1–3. The DRA was administered in September and May, to track students' progress during the year.

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Appendix 1. Interview questions for teachers

- 1 How would you describe the purpose of the LT nights?
- 2 What have you learned from your experiences participating in LT?
- 3 What are the opportunities for collaborative efforts between teachers and parents working together to support ESOL students?
- 4 What are the challenges to collaborative efforts between teachers and parents working together to support ESOL students?
- 5 What are the benefits of parents connecting with school?
- 6 How often do you talk to parents aside from LT nights?
- 7 Is LT different from other opportunities for parents and teachers to talk? (If yes, how?)
- 8 What do teachers learn from parents during LT nights?
- 9 What do teachers learn about parents, families, and students during LT nights?
- 10 Is there anything you would add or change about the programme?

Appendix 2. Survey questions for parents/guardians

Before each session, adult participants filled out a brief survey about the topic for that night, such as this survey about letter sounds.

1. Do you know what your child does at school to learn the letter sounds?

No
 Yes

- a) If yes, how do you know? (check one)

helping with homework
 teacher conferences
 my child tells me
 other (please indicate) _____

2. Do you do anything at home to help your child learn letter sounds?

No
 Yes

- a) If yes how many times per week? (1, 2, 3, 4, 5)

3. What would you like to learn more about today?

At the beginning and end of the LT programme, adult participants filled out a survey that included the following questions:

1. How comfortable do you feel helping your child with reading skills at home?

a. Very comfortable b. Somewhat comfortable c. I am unsure of how to help my child with reading skills at home

2. How many minutes per day do you spend reading to your child?

a. 0–9 min b. 10–29 min c. 30–49 min d. 50 min+

3. How many minutes per day do you spend having your child read to you?

a. 0–9 min b. 10–29 min c. 30–49 min d. 50 min+