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BENEFITS AND MOTIVATORS FOR FAMILY LITERACY ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore why parents choose to engage both themselves and their children in family literacy programming. The objective is to analyze the perceived benefits and motivators of family literacy, and explore the ways parents seek personal gain from these programs. This study takes a close look at the lives and experiences of five parents involved in family literacy at Easton Heights Community Center, a family literacy program located in a large Northeastern city. The researcher interviewed five immigrant mothers, all who participate in the Easton Heights family literacy program, about their backgrounds, goals, and educations. This study used narrative inquiry as its lens to delve deeper into the lives of these women, and provide a look at their literacy journey. Results show that all five women were motivated by their families, community, and achieving their goals to stay involved in family literacy programming. They wanted to create better futures for their children, and many sought social benefits through the community center. Beyond these shared themes, differences existed in their personal aspirations and literacy levels. Overall, my research shows that parents choose to partake in family literacy, and pursue their own educations, for varying reasons. This study opens the door to further research questions in the field of family literacy. For example, future research could delve into the role of fathers in family literacy programming to try to explain the lack of paternal involvement within the five narrative inquiries of this study.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The home is a space of inherent learning, “an arena in which virtually the entire range of human experience can take place” (Taylor, 1997, page 19). Through versatile relationships and encounters, families foster “warfare, violence, love, tenderness, honesty, deceit, private property, communal sharing, power manipulation, informed consent, formal status hierarchies, egalitarian decision making” (Taylor, 1997, page 19). Real-world experiences play out through family units. The connection between parent and child within the home, what is perhaps humankind’s most primal relationship, nurtures meaningful emotions and lessons, thus formulating the basis of family literacy (Taylor, 1997). In its simplest form, family literacy describes the ways in which parents and children learn together. It includes oral and written communication, between the child and the parent. Family literacy ranges from deliberate efforts towards literacy exposure, such as a parent reading a bedtime story, to more mundane actions like looking up a number in a telephone book or discussing signs in the neighborhood (Heath, 2001; Taylor, 1997). Most parents engage their children in family literacy without making a conscious effort towards doing so. Family literacy is something that all families take part in it, albeit to varying degrees and effectiveness.

What Are Family Literacy Programs?

Family literacy programs are created to foster environments in which parents and children learn to work and study together in order to strengthen academic success for the child

and parent engagement in the school. These programs are designed to be safe places for families that seek additional assistance with varying aspects of literacy and parenting, from conversation skills to working with technology. Family Literacy programs build advocacy skills by teaching parents about the public school system and demonstrating how to effectively support their children's educations. While most family literacy programs incorporate early childhood education, adult education, parenting, and interactive literacy components, each program balances these components in varying ways; however and is far-reaching and enriching in its own right (Wasik, 2013). The specifications of each program are often determined by distinguishing factors of the communities they serve. Denny Taylor's work (1997) stressed the importance of individualization of family literacy programs to cater to the specific needs of a given neighborhood and its children. She warned against the creation of a narrow view of programming based on standardized norms to compare students. Teachers and administrators in American public schools frequently ask questions like: which child received the best test score, or who earned the highest GPA? However, not all children have the resources to excel in these arenas of competition. Family literacy programs can combat this uniformity by facilitating learning in a more intimate and specialized manner. Family literacy programs are a space wherein families can learn about mainstream education, build literacy skills that support academic success, and understand the marginalized context in which they exist. While often having standardized outcomes to meet, family literacy also has the capacity to include other issues that affect children and parents and offer support within the context of a unified family; often a much more appropriate cultural response for families that are not part of the middle class (Valdes, 1996).

Most family literacy programs account for the specific needs, local language, and social and economic conditions of their home neighborhoods. As Denny Taylor suggests, family literacy centers provide a safe environment for learning; however, the definition and specifications of each program are left to the communities themselves.

While family literacy programs aspire to support marginalized families, they should not simply be rubberstamped as “doing good.” Some family literacy practices and programs are criticized as fostering a deficit approach, meaning they, implicitly or explicitly, blame marginalized people for lacking the abilities of the mainstream, in this case middle white class educational ideologies. The deficit approach attributes literary underachievement with cultural, genetic, motivational or cognitive deficiencies, and claims that undereducated families fail to support children’s literary development (Auerbach, 1995). This school of thought frequently uses metaphors such as curing the disease of illiteracy or breaking the illiteracy cycle, which spread unfair stereotypes (Auerbach, 1995). A deficit approach to family literacy is critiqued for painting bleak and pessimistic pictures of undereducated families, like the following statement: “No one at home would read books, newspapers, or magazines. There were no library visits or books given as presents. No one even checked on whether the children had done their homework for school...I discovered an intergenerational disease – parents who passed illiteracy and poverty along to their children” (Mansbach, 1993, page 37). This approach focuses on everything that parents do *not* provide their children, rather than the resources parents do have to offer such as a sense of culture and tradition, close-knit family bonds, and informal literacy through religious study or storytelling. The deficit approach is extremely negative, and counterproductive, and as Auerbach (1995) points out, incorrect. The homes of the poor and undereducated are not literacy desolate environments (Heath, 2001). While ESL children may not be surrounded by English

texts in their home, they are immersed in cultural artifacts, narratives, experiences, and other forms of literacy such as art, magazines, news, etc. They may have access to books in other languages; cultural artifacts, such as photographs, posters; or oral traditions that enrich their home environment (Heath, 2001; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Taylor, 1997). Furthermore, immigrant families generally view education as the single most important factor for their children's futures. Although parents may not have strong literacy skills themselves, they are committed to their children's academics and still support education in many different ways (Auerbach, 1995). These counterarguments to the deficit approach show that programs that draw on this perspective of family literacy can create a hegemonic view of appropriate family life and parenting; strengths-based programming can support marginalized families to maintain pride in their culture and practices while building an understanding of the US school-based understandings of literacy and parent engagement.

Family Literacy Participants

The majority of family literacy participants is parents (or the primary adult caregiver) and children that live below the poverty line with at least one adult with limited English literacy (Wasik, 2013). Research has shown that adults who partake in family literacy usually enroll on their own accord, meaning most participants actively seek out these meaningful academic and parenting programs (Wasik, 2013). Often parents' motivation for involvement in family literacy comes from the importance of family itself. Taylor (1997) notes that "family literacy tapped into the power that connects generations, the power that comes from the dedication of one generation to the next, and the renewing quality of hope that accompanies this connection" (84). In other

words, parents want to foster academic excellence and English literacy success in their children. Participants have stated that they became involved in family literacy so that their children could have the chance to escape poverty through education (Wasik, 2013).

Furthermore family literacy centers allow parents a chance to “forget about their problems and to focus on their studies” (Wasik, 2013, page 170). Parents are inclined to enroll in family literacy to create their own personal friendships and emotional connections (Wasik, 2013). For women in particular, family literacy centers function as an arena to simultaneously advocate for their children’s educations and develop their own neighborhood network. Family literacy programs provide women with the much-needed opportunity to leave their homes and cultivate relationships within their communities (Prins, Toso, and Shafft, 2008). These programs help women “enjoy social contact and mutual support with peers, establish supportive relationships with teachers and pursue self-discovery and development” (Wasik, 2013, page 167). These improved connections can aid immigrant women in their movement into mainstream American society. Family literacy helps them better handle personal interactions with people beyond their cultural enclave, for example, communicating with a doctor, school principal’s, or store personnel (Toso, 2012). While parents clearly join family literacy to support their children’s educations, they also enroll to benefit from personal opportunities including self-identification, social engagement, and advanced English language and literacy skills.

Family Literacy Models

The Even Start four-component model, which drew on the Kenan model, has been the most recognized and structured model for family literacy. While Even Start is no longer a

federally-funded program it remains the model for many organizations that offer family literacy. This model involves four key facets: 1) parent literacy training; 2) parenting and parent education; 3) parent and child together time (PACT), also known as Parent and Child Interactive Literacy Activities (PACILA), a component that focuses on parents practicing the skills and activities they are learning in the parent education class, while children develop literacy skills as modeled by their parents; 4) early childhood education. The aim of this model is to unify families, to improve parental access to education, support parents' caregiving, and increase children's academic aptitude (Hayes, 1989). While this model is still considered the basis of a strong family literacy program, other family literacy programs have built on this model. For example, the state of Illinois requires programs to include a library component and the Toyota family Learning program includes Family Service-learning as a component (Hayes, 1989). Other programs may not include adult education or PACT activities. Family literacy has become a term used for a myriad of programming structures. For this paper and study, I will use the four-component model to mean family literacy.

Benefits of Family Literacy Programming

Family literacy can benefit children's language development and educational achievements. Improved written and oral communication, comprehension skills, vocabulary, and mathematics and scientific abilities are some of the many gains of family literacy programming (Padak, 2003). Family literacy has been shown to enhance social skills, self-esteem, and attitude towards school, which creates more positive and motivated students (Padak, 2003).

Consequently, research has shown that children who are involved in family literacy programs are

more likely to attend school on a daily basis, and eventually complete their education through high school (Padak, 2003). Overall, children involved in family literacy programming are healthier, and good health is correlated with higher achievement in the classroom (Padak, 2003). The skills and instructional practice that children learn at young ages can have significant and positive influences on the development of analytic and decoding skills later in life (Wasik, 2013). Family literacy can generate students who are prepared, excited to learn, and more equipped for the adult world.

Family literacy can also have a profound effect on the community. When family literacy integrates components that focus on developing advocacy, leadership, and neighborhood engagement activities, communal initiatives improve neighborhoods as members work together to make changes for the better. For example, embedding family service learning (Cramer & Toso, 2015) opportunities into programming allows community members to take on civic responsibility and leadership (Toso, 2015). As parents and children work together on project-based learning, they develop tangible personal skills such as communication, technology knowledge, and teamwork, while also advocating for an enhanced neighborhood (Toso, 2015). Family literacy appears to correlate with decreased community violence, high school dropout rates, number of teen pregnancies, and nutrition and health problems (Padak, 2003).

Family literacy programming can provide benefits to parents as well. Not only do they gain knowledge on child development to parent more effectively, they personally gain improved social-awareness, reading, writing, mathematics, and science skills (Padak, 2003). Family literacy programming can provide more extended and long-lasting environments in which to learn, especially through service learning events. While parents engage in community initiatives, and work with peers on group projects to communicate ideas, they unknowingly practice skills

used in the workforce. Through service learning opportunities, family literacy participants “experience increases in confidence, self-efficacy, and negotiation skills as they navigate educational contexts with their children and family members, they are also gaining valuable employability skills” (Toso, 2016, page 6). While future personal employment is not always a motive for parental engagement in family literacy, programming certainly help adults become better equipped for the workforce as many of these skills are applicable to a working environment. If parents do eventually acquire employment, they will be able to pass these labor skills on to their children, thus benefitting the futures of their families.

Family literacy initiatives can teach parents how to manage time and resources, learn how to negotiate and access local institutions and resources, work with technology, manage health issues via health literacy units, and lead projects and meetings. Family literacy activities also create valuable social outlets for mothers to meet one another. Women have the chance to mingle with peers, foster meaningful ties within their communities, pursue self-exploration, and seek counseling (Prins, Toso, and Shafft, 2008). The breadth of programming supports parents to boost their literacy skills both to meet personal goals as well as to support their children in school.

A Growing Need for Improved Literacy

The United States’ low adult literacy rates indicate the need for attention to improved literacy. Research reveals that 30 million American adults do not have the basic skills to perform everyday literary activities (Wasik, 2013). Sixty-three million Americans, who possess a rudimentary skillset, still cannot secure family sustaining employment given that stable and well-

paid employment generally requires advanced literacy, numeracy, and occupational skills (Wasik, 2013). The correlation between literacy and economic stability is clear. While these adults' lack of literacy can hinder their ability to provide a sufficient and stable income, it can also hurt their children's academic success. Parents have significant impact on their children's educations. In fact, a mother's literacy level is the main predictor of a child's academic success. In a study conducted by Sastry and Pebley, a mother's "reading scores and average neighborhood levels of income accounted for the largest proportion of inequity in children's achievement" (Wasik, 2013, page 11). Living in poverty and with parents that have low-literacy levels can have an effect on a child's academic achievement. Before going further, it should be addressed that these are not necessarily causative factors, rather they are outcomes of complicated social and racial inequities that influence where a person lives, how she is integrated into mainstream society, health, school opportunities and success, to name a few. In other words, a parent's ability to read should not be attributed to an individual's desire or innate abilities; rather it is an outcome of a variety of factors. Unfortunately, moving beyond the path that led to the outcome of low-parental literacy, if a parent has a low level of reading or education, he or she is less likely to read to their child. Statistics show that 73% of children whose mothers graduated from college read to them every day, as compared with only 30% of children whose mothers did not graduate from high school read to them every day (O'Donnell and Mulligan, 2008). Padak notes the importance stating that: "Reading aloud to children is the single most effective parent practice for enhancing language and literary development" (Padak, 2003, page 2). These findings address the influence of a parents' education on children's reading level. However, no single factor, like income or parental reading level, works as sole source of academic success. Income or social economic status are indicators for other factors that implicate educational achievement;

for example, poor neighborhood schools often lack the resources that middle and upper class neighborhood schools, these schools also experiencing teacher instability or have teachers with less experience- contributing factors to children's success rates. These are only a few of the factors that can also contribute to a child's educational advancement.

There continues to be a need for improved and more equitable childhood literacy in this country. Over the past 17 years, between 33% and 41% of fourth grade children do not meet basic literary levels (Wasik, 2013). These same children that are not performing in elementary school, are those who are often not performing in high school; sixth grade marks are correlated with high school graduation rates (Balfanz, Herzog & MacIver, 2007). These trends show a need for early intervention. Children must receive help throughout preschool and elementary school to prevent illiteracy and drop-out rates later on. While Head Start and other early childhood education programming supports children's school readiness, it only addresses the child's needs and leaves the parents' literacy needs unaddressed. Given the research on the importance of a parent's education to the child's academic success programming that supports both adult and child literacy skill development is crucial. Family literacy programming can fill this apparent gap in academic achievement for both parents and children. Helping parents with their own reading, writing, and oral communication skills may help them to foster a home environment that promotes education and mainstream literacy skills, as well as build their academic skills that in turn allow them to understand and work with their children on their school tasks. Furthermore, family literacy helps parents to learn how to navigate a school system so that they can advocate for their children and communicate clearly with school personnel about issues that are important to them and not simply about issues that are important to the school. Simultaneously, family literacy tangibly gives children the tools to excel in the classroom and parent the tools to support

their children to excel in the classroom. Family literacy conceives of the family as a unit wherein individual members function as a whole.

A Primary Family Literacy Demographic: Latino Immigrant Families

U.S. demographics are shifting, and family literacy centers are adapting to meet the needs of the growing population of Latino families. The U.S. Census Bureau states that 96% of Latino immigrants, over the age of five, speak a language other than English at home (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008). Family literacy programs have a history of supporting immigrant families as they face a host of hurdles including language and economic obstacles. It can be difficult to surmount linguistic or literacy issues needed to understand K-12 content or to communicate with school personnel. Furthermore, cultural issues can interfere as well; school systems and perceptions of literacy and the role of education are culturally based. For example, in many Latin American countries, teachers are viewed as the educational authority. Parents do not interfere or challenge the authority of schools; this differs from the White middle-class custom wherein parents are expected to be actively involved in supporting school and academic activities. This cultural dissimilarity can be a barrier for immigrant parents; they may not understand that in the U.S. parental engagement in academics is accepted and promoted, in fact expected in fulfilling the role of a “good” parent.

Wasik believes that family literacy for immigrant families is most effective when it “embed[s] the literary practices in the participants’ daily lives; empower[s] families by acknowledging and valuing their literary practices; ...” (as cited in Rodrigues, 2006). Family literacy programs need to take cultural factors into consideration. Latino immigrants’ beliefs,

principles, and priorities differ from those held by many other Americans; these differences in value influence the way parents support their children's literacy. Parent-child educational engagement in immigrant families does not always coincide with mainstream American schooling system values. Family literacy should not attempt to conform immigrants to American standards as immigrant families may have a hard time utilizing all the resources family literacy makes available to them as they either do not resonate with their family values or they are unfamiliar as to how these tools will assist them in meeting their or the family's goals (Wasik, 2013). Family literacy programs, as opposed to trying to rid participants of their values, need to incorporate the culture of their participants into education and make explicit the embedded U.S. expectations and discourses. This can assist parents to better understand and effectively navigate the U.S. system so that they can make informed decisions about how they would like to best support their child. This allows parents to make choices about how to interact and advocate for their child at the school without sacrificing their identity or belief systems.

The Welcome Center: A Model for Engaging Immigrant Parents

The Welcome Center described in "Bridging Home and School Literacy Practice" offers an excellent example of the ways a family literacy program caters to the cultural specifications of participants (Iddings, 2009). The Welcome Center was specifically created to accommodate an exponentially increasing Spanish-speaking population. Teachers recognized that they needed to attend to the linguistic, cultural, and academic needs of ESL families, which were often different from those of English-native students. The center served as a place where recent immigrant families could foster learning and literacy, and "the goal was for families to become acquainted

with the U.S. educational system and with what their children were learning in school, and hopefully to become active agents in their learning trajectories” (Iddings, 2009, page 307). This family literacy program welcomed the customs of Latino American parents, and fostered an inclusive learning environment. While none of the teachers taking part in the Welcome Center had formal Spanish or ESL training, they improvised and collaborated to include the cultural and linguistic specifications of these new parents into the academic community.

Parental educational attainment is another factor that family literacy programs must take into consideration when planning. Many immigrant parents that enroll in family literacy have low levels of education, and nearly 40% of Latinos have not graduated from high school. Only 13.7% of Latino immigrants have attended college as compared with an average 29.3% of native-born citizens (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). Paralleling the previously cited correlation between a parent’s level of education and his or her child’s reading level, “adults’ prior experiences with schooling and/or formal opportunities for education may determine the value they place on such learning opportunities, as well as their willingness to participate” (Wasik, 2013, page 12). It may be that many of the Latino parents in family literacy may have little experience with U.S. schools. This lack of experience combined with limited English skills can make them less at ease in this environment; particularly as schools are not always warm and friendly settings. This in turn may cause parents to be less apt to sign up for programming that models a formal classroom or is located in a school setting.

How can family literacy overcome this boundary and recruit parents despite reluctance to join a structured Family Literacy classroom environment? Family literacy programs, like the Welcome Center described in Iddings “Bridging Home and School Literacy Practices,” can choose décor that has a hospitable and casual feeling. For example, Iddings explains how she

“bought two indoor picnic tables, a comfortable couch, a rocking chair, a hammock, a small refrigerator, bookshelves, and decorative planters. The classroom had undergone a radical makeover; it had been transformed into an informal space to socialize” (Iddings, 2009, page 308). By creating a space that was less formal, Iddings was able to break down perceived school barriers, and create a place to learn that felt welcoming and safe. Similarly, family literacy programs can include interactive activities such as library visits, hands-on projects, parent and child literacy activities and games, home visitations, and field trips that take place outside the classroom. This has the added benefit of expanding the concept of literacy as an academic skill to something that is associated with daily life, fun, and games. Many centers work closely with the enrolled families to determine the needs of their participants and incorporate the cultural context of Latino families.

Chapter 2

Researcher Narrative: My Journey to the Question

I am an upper middle class Caucasian female raised in the suburbs of New York City. I am currently a senior at Penn State University. As an English major in the Schreyer Honors College, I have had the opportunity to take countless literature and writing courses. My favorite and most inspiring class was focused on literacy. This six-credit honors class was nothing like courses I had previously taken. Instead of a standard lecture structure, it was mainly discussion based. As the semester progressed, my classmates and I read a number of works on childhood and adult literacy. While we grappled with the effects of literacy on the individual and larger society, I realized that this field of study is one in which I sought to delve deeper. The content resonated with me; I found myself thinking about class discussions and narratives for days afterward. I became convinced of my passion for literacy after reading the New York Times segment entitled “Invisible Child” (Elliot, 2013). This series documents the family life and educational strife of a homeless girl living in New York; it was the inspiration for this research project.

Like many other works covered in this class, “Invisible Child” intrigued me because it detailed a real person’s experiences. The article is neither fictional nor created for dramatic effect; the agonizing poverty and dire situations are authentic. As I saw the article’s corresponding photographs of Dasani, the young girl who is the subject of the series, and learned the intricacies of her family’s struggle to ensure her education, I began to feel like I was part of her story.

The rawness and intimacy of Dasani's tale struck a chord with me. Perhaps this is because my upbringing and education have little in common with her experiences. I attended the same school district from kindergarten through twelfth grade, and I always had enough food in my belly and backpack. My father was employed, and I was not worried about the complications of living in a homeless shelter. Despite the fact that Dasani and I grew up in very close proximity to one another, our lives could not be more different. I was unaware of how other people's lives are so determined by poverty; these vast differences between my own and Dasani's experiences drew me into family literacy. I was particularly intrigued in by the connection between Dasani and her parents; Elliot wrote, "Dasani's circumstances are largely the outcome of parental dysfunction. While nearly one-third of New York's homeless children are supported by a working adult, her mother and father are unemployed, have a history of arrests and are battling drug addiction" (Elliot, 2013, paragraph 22). Many aspects of Dasani's home life served to hinder her academic life. For example, she was constantly changing schools, and attended class hungry due to lack of food at home. The ways her mother, Chanel, and the other members of her family contributed, both positively and negatively, to her educational experience struck me.

In contrast to the conditions of her home life that may have hampered her educational, journey there were key ways that Dasani's mother, Chanel, helped her academically, such as Chanel's choice to start volunteering at Dasani's school. Throughout Elliot's piece, Dasani and her sisters had both a teacher and an administrator as mentors and role models to guide them. I wanted to learn more about the influence all of these women had on Dasani by exploring the literacy relationship between key adults and children. In thinking about the role of parents, I began to research and read about family literacy – an intervention to support parents in understanding their role as their child's first teacher. Although Dasani's family did not partake in

family literacy programs, I learned more about families that do take advantage of this resource. I sought to understand why parents choose to engage in family literacy programs or activities. In my suburban world, school expectations were understood and undertaken as part of the norm; I sought to understand more about different approaches to literacy and how families that do not have the advantage of being part of the middle class norms, economically, socially, and culturally. What motivates them to sign up for events? Is family literacy a community movement, and do people attend programs with neighbors, friends, mothers, sisters, or alone? What are participant's goals for their children and themselves?

Another contributing factor to my interest in family literacy stems from my experience tutoring an adult learner. The honors English class I previously discussed required students to conduct weekly tutoring sessions with adult learners. I worked with a native Spanish speaker who immigrated to the United States from Peru about ten years ago. She and I studied conversation, reading, and writing skills, and I helped her prepare for the social studies and science sections of the GED® test. Over the course of the semester, I enjoyed building a strong and trusting relationship with her. Much of our efforts centered on improving her conversational English; we spent many hours talking about her life, interests, and passions. She shared a lot about her childhood and day-to-day life in Peru, her experience adapting to United States customs, and her aspirations for her two teenage children. On numerous occasions, she expressed a desire to partake in her children's education here in State College, but feared that her language barrier posed a problem. When she would talk with her children on the phone, she spoke to them in Spanish and they would answer in English. They did not want her to use Spanish. Her fifteen-year-old daughter would sternly correct her English pronunciation and grammar, which I now

understand to be a hindrance to their family dynamics, wherein the roles of parent and child are reversed through an imbalance of language and literacy skills in English.

As I finished up the semester “project” of working with my adult tutee, I wrote a final case paper detailing my experiences with her. I reflected on our time together, and realized that although I did not interact with both my tutee and her children, I had learned a lot about immigrant family dynamics through our discussions and her willingness to share about her household and her struggles raising children in State College. Her difficulties reminded me of Dasani’s story and the readings on family literacy that I had explored. While I was just beginning to dip my toes in the family literacy pool, I recognized that many of the familial factors I observed with my tutee were central to the study of family literacy. By the end of my course on literacy and my time with my adult learner, I was sure that family literacy called my name, thus I decided to pursue it as the topic for my senior thesis.

I intended to direct my thesis studies around literacy relationships between parents and children, specifically the impact of parents on children’s educations. When initially choosing this topic, I did not recognize that my view of family literacy was so one-dimensional. I was unaware of the versatile relationship between family literacy and parents. I did not know of the many services that programming provides to parents, nor did I understand what parents contribute to the program and other participants. My literature review and preliminary research led me to explore family literacy on a broad scale. I eventually shifted my study to focus on parents’ motivations for enrolling in family literacy programs and their perception of programming benefits.

I began my thesis work with a strong interest in learning about immigrant family literacy. After working with a Peruvian native, I wanted to understand the ways English as second

language (ESL) parents navigate literacy in both the American school system and their own homes. My literature review on the obstacles immigrant parents face in the United States confirmed many of the hardships I witnessed with my adult learner. This research shed light on my initial interest in literacy for immigrant families and revealed the way family literacy programs can serve as an educational catalyst or access for ESL parents. Conducting research at Easton Heights, which serves a predominately Latino American immigrant population, allowed me first-hand insight into family literacy for immigrant parents and children.

Chapter 3

Methods and Background

I chose to use a narrative inquiry approach to study the adult learners and their motivations and expectations for enrolling in family literacy through their remaking of themselves and their positioning in those stories. My research explores the participant's motives for enrollment, and their perceptions of the benefits the program provides their children, family, community, and their futures. I used the following research questions to guide my study:

1. What are the educational and cultural backgrounds of parents engaged in family literacy?
2. Why do parents choose to enroll in family literacy programs?
3. What are the perceived benefits of family literacy involvement?
4. What goals do parents hope to achieve through family literacy? Do parents have personal aspirations, and if yes, what are they?

To answer these questions, I spent time observing a parent education component of a family literacy class to gain a better understanding of the context and background of the participants and the program. Next I interviewed selected the participants.

Narrative Inquiry Approach

I selected a narrative inquiry lens because of the immersion that this theoretical perspective allows into the lives of research participants. Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding people's perception of their own lives and the world around them (Riessman,

2007). Human life is a series of stories; from birth onward, everyone has his or her own string of joys, hardships, and experiences. Tapping into the natural human ability to tell these stories, narrative inquiry provides a honed-in and relatable research perspective (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Furthermore, because of its detailed nature, narrative inquiry has been frequently used in the study of educational experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Given that my research explores education through family literacy programming, I felt that following a precedent of narrative inquiry would be fitting, particularly as I was guided by my own experience wherein Dasani's narrative compelled me to understand and explore the topic of family and education further.

Narrative inquiry provides perspective into cultural and social norms of participants (Patton, 2002). Given that my research is based on immigrant mothers, living in the United States, without fluent English literacy skills, a close look into their perceptions of culture and society was crucial. Overall, narrative inquiry allowed me to attend to all of my research questions. I sought to discern individuals' purpose for family literacy involvement—what they hope to gain for themselves and for their children by attending an adult education class that centers on the family as a place of learning; detailing their backgrounds and histories in the form of stories fosters a different way to understand their hopes and desires.

A challenge with narrative analysis lies in how to analyze individuals' stories (Patton, 2002). Much of narrative inquiry is based on the context of the interview: the setting in which the interviewees and I were in, and the information the women told me at that moment in time. Thoughts, experiences, and memories are all fluid, and as a researcher I had to provide accurate descriptions of the interviews to place them in the appropriate context (Clandinin, 2007). Interpretation is the key to successful narrative; how can a researcher ensure that he or she is

evaluating themes and findings effectively? Patton suggests five approaches to dissecting inquiries, which are all relevant to this study: unique case orientation; inductive analysis and creative synthesis; holistic perspective; context sensitivity; and voice, perspective, and reflexivity. Unique case orientation ensures that each case is viewed as an individual; a narrative inquiry cannot apply statements from one story to another, but rather must be viewed as a distinctive narrative. Inductive analysis and creative synthesis calls for immersion in the specifics of the data to help important patterns, themes, and relationships become clear. Holistic perspective looks at the narrative as a conglomerate beyond its separate facts, and allows for the immersion of complex themes. Context sensitivity provides a social, political, or economic background; this is important because it places the narratives in an appropriate framework. Finally, voice, perspective, and reflexivity create a trustworthy and authentic narrative (Patton, 2002). These four criteria laid a solid framework for me to base my investigations, narrative write-ups, and concluding themes.

Narrative inquiry encourages researchers to have participants share their personal goals and intentions, guiding the researcher and the participant to gain a shared perspective of their own identity. While the core of my study is to report on participants' experiences, perhaps an added bonus of narrative inquiry is that discussing the past helps women reevaluate their present educational goals. Lastly, narrative inquiry allows a participant to represent oneself to the researcher; this allows participants some control over how the world might see them—an appropriate strategy to use when studying marginalized participants.

Site and Participants

My thesis advisor connected me with Daniela Martinez, the Director for Community and Family Engagement at Easton Heights Community Center, a family literacy program in a northeastern urban city. We spoke by phone, and decided that Easton Heights matched my research needs. The site Easton Heights was appropriate as a research site as it offered a four-component family literacy program that enrolled a high number of immigrant parents, was easily accessible to me, and the program was amenable to my research project. Furthermore, I intentionally chose Easton Heights because it is a representative case of family literacy program. It provided a convenience sample that did not have any qualities that make it an outlier. Daniela allowed me to recruit participants for my study at her center; as part of this I agreed to make all names and locations fictional for privacy considerations. Daniela helped me recruit participants by guiding me to those who had been in the program for more than three months and who were likely to be comfortable talking to me. Five women agreed to be interviewed by me. All participants, including Daniela, were assured that their names and the center's name and location would be kept anonymous when reporting findings; pseudonyms have been used for all names in this paper.

I selected participants based on the following criteria: 1) primary caregiver of child enrolled in the family literacy program; 2) Latina immigrant; 3) spoke a language other than English; 4) enrolled in the program for at least three months; and 5) willingness to participate in the study. These criteria helped narrow the focus of my study to my interest in immigrant parents enrolled in a family literacy program. I chose to focus on Latina immigrants as they are a prevalent population in family literacy and allowed me to use a generalized cultural framework. This does not mean that all Latina immigrants have the same experience or that they are

culturally the same; Latina is not used here as a monolithic category; however, in the limited time for this study it does reduce the larger presupposed difference between a Somali immigrant background and a Mexican immigrant. Facilitated by the program director, I recruited participants from a family literacy program, Easton Heights, in a large urban city; five women met the criteria and consented to participate in my study.

Method and Analysis

I conducted interviews with the women that served as the data for the narratives I constructed to represent their experiences. The interviews sought to understand these women's backgrounds and experiences in family literacy, their motivations for enrolling, their experiences in the program, and why they continued to attend classes. I interviewed each participant individually using an open-ended interview protocol. The interview included questions about her background, personal educational experiences, children, and time with Easton Heights. Some of the women used a translator to answer the questions. I did not record the interviews; I took notes as they spoke and wrote up reflections as soon as I left the center while the interviews and respondents were fresh in my mind. These notes filled in blanks and supported my interview notes. For the analysis, I repeatedly read my notes and found themes and created the women's stories as representative work of their responses. The findings are their narratives composed to address my research questions. I then discussed my findings, themes, and constructed narratives with my thesis advisor who has experience in Narrative Inquiry for input and consensus on my narratives as a method of checking my findings. Unfortunately, given the time frame and travel

costs, I was not able to conduct the valuable step of member-checking. If time had permitted, I would have returned to the participants to ask for their response to my narratives.

I analyzed my findings by drawing parallels between the different interview conversations allowing themes to rise to the surface. As I reviewed my notes and narrative write ups, I noticed that particular themes ran constant through all of the interviews. Some questions, such as background and motives for family literacy engagement, were answered virtually the same by all five participants. On the other hand, certain topics were broached by only one or two women. The frequency, or lack thereof, of similarity in answers spoke to me. I was able to cross reference recurring themes and lasting takeaways with family literacy literature and sources.

Chapter 4

Findings: Observation

The Context: Easton Heights Community Center

Easton Heights Community Center is located in an urban neighborhood that is part of the poorest congressional district in the United States (Easton Heights Community Center Report, 2017). Based on indicators including high school graduation rate, unemployment, homelessness, median income and teen births the community ranks amongst the most vulnerable in its city (Easton Heights Community Center Report, 2017). Most neighborhood residents are native Spanish speakers from Mexico, but the community also has a growing West African population. Living in the United States can constrain immigrant parents' ability to support their children's academic activities; Easton Heights provides parents with programming to learn about resources and strategies to support their children as well as build their own English language skills.

The community center's program meeting room looked like an elementary school cafeteria, with a large stage in the front and lunchroom-style tables lined up throughout the middle. The room was decorated with vibrantly colored bulletin boards, sporting both English and Spanish messages. Spanish music blared as about 30 parents and their young children filed in and took their seats at the cafeteria tables, which served as desks. All of the parents were Latino, other than one West African mother; she and one of the fathers were the only participants who did not speak Spanish. The parent to child ratio was approximately 1:1; a young infant or toddler accompanied their parent or caregiver. The majority of participants were mothers, under

the age of thirty, who did not come with a spouse. There were four couples present as four men had joined their girlfriends or wives. These demographics appear to be consistent for Easton Heights programs and the community. Since starting to work with Easton Heights in 2011, the program director Daniela said she had seen only five fathers consistently involved in the family literacy program. The biggest barrier to attracting fathers, she noted, was schedule conflicts; most of the parent meetings and classes occurred during regular working hours.

Although many of the parents at the meeting were new to the program, they all said good morning to each other and introduced themselves. Those who did know each other chatted, while their children hugged and played on the floor. Throughout the class there was a strong sense of familiarity and family. All behaviors and distractions were accepted unflinchingly – babies cried, mothers breast fed, and some of the toddlers ran up and down the stage steps. Daniela was unfazed when a little boy grabbed her by the legs while she was speaking to the group, indicating her sense of ease in the setting. Easton Heights promotes a friendly and warm environment.

Observation: Early Childhood Development

I observed an orientation parent meeting. The parenting component is a core element of their family literacy programming; I observed an introductory events that introduces new participants to the available programming and the program requirements. While I was there, parents and their young children met with Daniela and her colleague Amy. They were introduced to other parents, and became acquainted with the program's available services and classes.

Many parents with very young children become involved in their children's educations before the child starts school. Because the children are so young, parenting classes in the Easton

Heights program focus on early childhood development. These classes are usually a parent's initial introduction to family literacy and the place where they learn about their child's language and literacy development. Similar to most family literacy programs, Diana reported that this program has led to a parent's long-standing relationship with the program and the community center.

Daniela and Amy were extremely engaging and demonstrated an interest in the backgrounds and goals or concerns of each parent at the meeting. Amy went around the room and asked every individual to introduce him or herself, share the age of his or her child, and explain the motivation for becoming involved in family literacy. Throughout the introductions, many of the parents voiced the desire to support their children and provide educational support. The parents also identified topics regarding their children, the community or just daily life, in which they were interested in learning about. Daniela appealed to English and Spanish speakers by writing these statements in both languages on a large note pad. Examples of the topics were understanding children's developmental stages and how to discipline children in age-appropriate ways. Many participants also discussed the stresses of parenthood and running a household; consequently, they were interested in learning about stress management skills. They felt that learning how to take care of their own anxiety and burdens will allow them to better support their children. A few parents wanted to improve practical literacy or functional skills like reading maps and asking for directions. Another mother wanted to find out more information about how to diagnose and care for a special needs child, and inquire about available services. Finally, a number of parents, as ESL adults, expressed an interest in learning how to help their children succeed academically despite the language barrier. They anticipate their children reaching elementary age and bringing home homework solely in English. These parents want to plan for

this challenge. Their interests and concerns demonstrate the wide range of issues that the Easton Heights parents encounter. Ultimately, what I observed were that parental interests revolved primarily around improving the lives and futures of their children.

The next activity was an overview of Easton Heights Center programming. Through a bright and colorful PowerPoint, with text in both English and Spanish, Daniela and Amy went through the three main components of Easton Heights: Parent Time, Parent and Child Together Time, and Family Service Learning. The addition of service learning and absence of adult basic skills development differentiates this program from the Kenan Model. Parent Time involves lessons for parents only. During this portion of programming, parents come together in a classroom and begin by discussing familial and community affairs, such as what they did in the first portion of the meeting. If it were a usual class, they explained, after the parent discussion, there would be a lesson, where they would practice the skills they were learning, and prepare for Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time. The parents then review and ask questions.

PACT Time fosters enhanced interactions between parents and children. Unlike Parent Time that is limited to the classroom, PACT Time can take place in the home, school, or community. PACT Time emphasizes formal and informal literacy development through family activities such as reading, games, or chores. Family literacy employees facilitate these times of interplay by teaching parents techniques to better communicate and work with their children, for example showing parents how to get down on eye level with a child when speaking. These skills are applicable to all environments. An example of a PACT event that Easton Heights Center planned was a field trip to Barnes & Noble. This heightened excitement around reading and allowed many children to experience a large bookstore for the first time. Parents and children had the opportunity to collectively forge an appreciation for reading. After discussing this event,

one woman who had been involved in Easton Heights programming in previous years raised her hand and expressed praise for these events that focus on literacy development and expose families to experiences and places that they may not experience without the family literacy staff to introduce or support them. She said that her children have been able to excel in math, science, history, and all subjects in school because of their comfort with reading made possible by Easton Heights PACT Time. She spoke to the fact that by third grade all areas of study require reading; for example, math word problems utilize long paragraphs of text. This first-hand account was an inspiring story. From her own children's experience, this woman emphatically urged children to learn the value reading at a young age. It was interesting to hear first-hand the benefits of family literacy programming.

The third and final aspect of Easton Heights Programming is Family Service Learning. This is not a typical component for most family literacy programs. NCFL added this component in hopes of building civic involvement among family literacy participants. Family Service Learning events or projects give parents and children the opportunity to get involved in their community. Service learning integrates education and literacy to teach civic and social engagement, and enhances knowing about local community resources and institutions. Daniela and Amy spoke about last year's service learning initiative the Safety Walk; they used this example to detail the expansive and impressive outcomes of this programming.

Diana and Amy said that in 2015, Easton Heights' family literacy participants recognized the need for cleaner, healthier, safer streets. Participants believed that people in their city walk around with a tough demeanor, and they questioned why this rough exterior should be spread to children and the future of the community. They stated that bullying in the schools is a translation of this negative disposition, and they wanted to direct their efforts towards creating a positive

community feel. Through this lens, they researched the issues of safety and community enhancement. They spread their desire for a stronger more unified, happier community to their peers and neighbors by putting on the Safety Walk. They walked the streets and spread messages of kindness by passing out free water bottles to which caring notes such as “smile to everyone you see” and “hold the door for others” attached. The Safety Walk was conducted on the National Day of Kindness to further drive home the need for change.

Chapter 5

Five Women's Narratives

Guadeloupe

Guadeloupe is a Mexican immigrant who has raised her four children in Easton Heights. She speaks little to no English, so she used the translator for her interview. As a mother of four, Guadeloupe is one of Easton Heights's most experienced participants; she has been involved in the program for over ten years. She initially heard about family literacy through a promotion at the local public elementary school. Upon reflecting on her three high-school aged children's educational experiences, she is thrilled with the way Easton Heights has supported them. Due to the success of her older children, she keeps her youngest child, who is currently learning to read and write, involved in the family literacy programming. She says she is very grateful for the services Easton Heights has provided to her family.

Guadeloupe attended the Early Childhood Development meeting, even though her children are not part of that age group, which speaks to her commitment to literacy, the program and to supporting other families. She moved around from table to table, introducing herself to new parents and playing with their babies. Guadeloupe chatted with them about her own experience with Easton Heights and praised them for taking the step to getting involved in their children's education. She remains present at Easton Heights not only to learn new skills and information, but also to improve the community as a whole. This view of community as an extension of her own family is a strong motivator for Guadeloupe.

Guadeloupe also is involved in other educational arenas; she attributes this involvement to her experiences in family literacy. She has served as PTA president for her children's elementary school, and remains active in the public school system. Guadeloupe enjoys fostering community connections and feels the more involved she is in the neighborhood, the more change she can cultivate. She has enjoyed working with both family literacy professionals and teachers in the public schools. Guadeloupe has worked to motivate parents and teachers alike to improve immigrant children's educational experiences.

Guadeloupe's primary focus is on community, and while she hopes for an improved education for her children, her main desire is for them to be part of the larger community picture – they are a family within a community. She hopes her children will take an active role in their neighborhood, as she has done and has continued to model. In her role as mother and individual she works toward improving the greater good. Her motives for staying involved are for the benefit of others rather than herself; she is not seeking future employment. A kindhearted and soft-spoken woman, her years of experience as a mother and family literacy participant have given her wisdom and knowledge. While some of the younger women seemed unsure of their goals or motives, Guadeloupe was confident in the time she had spent working to improve her community.

Pilar

Pilar is an immigrant mother of two who arrived in the United States from Mexico when she was twelve years old. Her excellent English allowed her to share her story with me without an interpreter. She grew up in Easton Heights where she attended public middle school and some

high school. As a teenager and new immigrant, her parents only spoke Spanish at home, and she had a very hard time learning English. Her mother and father both worked long hours, and did not have time to practice English themselves. Reflecting a protective home culture and possibly a fear of the local community, Pilar's mother was reluctant to permit her out of the house to socialize with friends. She told Pilar to mature on her own and assimilate to American culture without help from others. Consequently, Pilar led a very isolated and secluded adolescence. Her parents did not provide any encouragement towards her education, and without the necessary English skills, she struggled in the classroom. The strong and seemingly impermeable language barrier caused Pilar to drop out of high school, which has remained one of her biggest regrets.

Pilar's sister, Elena, filled the gap in parental support. At the time of our interview, Pilar continued to receive inspiration from her sister, who introduced her to the Easton Heights family literacy program. When her sister's children were born, Elena started bringing them to Easton Heights, and Pilar attended some events with her nieces and nephews. When Pilar had her daughter five years ago, she knew that Easton Heights center was an excellent resource. Pilar has been involved in Easton Heights since her daughter's birth; she now has a second child. The programming has helped her take better care of both her children and herself. She is proud that her five-year-old daughter speaks perfect American English. Her daughter says that Pilar does not say English words correctly, and helps her mother pronounce letters with an American accent. This assists Pilar in her work on oral communication skills. Pilar loves the way her daughter's education through Easton Heights programming has helped her younger child, Pablo. Her son is learning from his older sister about letters and numbers; this shared learning between siblings is the epitome of family literacy itself.

Pilar has definite and pertinent personal aspirations. She has already passed the social studies and math sections of the GED® exam and is studying for the science and reading components. Pilar was attending classes at a local center that provides ESL, GED®, and other workshops, which help her prepare for the next portions of the GED® assessment. While she is frustrated with the test's difficulty – she failed the science section by only one point – her determination, however, is palpable. Passing the GED® Test, which confers a high school equivalency degree, will allow her to seek employment. She looks forward to making economic and educational gains in the upcoming chapter of life. A mother working to balance her children and personal studies, Pilar shows incredible grit and resilience. She is a textbook example of someone who has used family literacy services, for herself and her children, to their fullest capacity to achieve academic success and work towards meeting personal goals such as employment.

Mariana

Mariana is a mother of three, and spoke some English but mostly Spanish through the translator. Raised in Mexico, she was educated through middle school. Eight years ago she immigrated to the United States when she was in her late teens. Mariana believes in the power of family literacy because it brings her entire family together. In her mind, literacy should engage the immediate and extended family. She became involved in family literacy to acquire parenting strategies. For example, she learned to read with her child, show him or her the pictures and the words, and ask questions that focused and talked about what they were reading or looking at. Now when she reads her daughter a bedtime story it is an activity they share, rather than Mariana

simply reading aloud. Mariana praised family literacy's ability to make each family member more aware of reading. Additionally, Mariana is thrilled that her children had been involved in the Safety Walk because it taught them valuable and applicable lessons. One of the goals for this service-learning project was to promote cleaner streets and encourage people to pick up after their dogs. This message resonated with Mariana's children, and now they always bring plastic bags whenever they take their dog for a walk.

Mariana's mother has also taken part in Easton Heights programming events, and Mariana credits her as a strong support system. When she was younger, Mariana used to tell her mother that she would never have children because she feared the responsibility. As a mother of three who has taken such an active role in her children's educations, Mariana has now surprised herself with her own accomplishments as a mother. Her mother is also very proud of Mariana's dedication to her children and investment in their literacy.

Despite her earlier ideas that she would not have children, Mariana values motherhood greatly, and continues to enjoy the role she plays as a parent in family literacy. However, she wants to carve a future for herself and find an occupation, besides motherhood, that she is passionate about. She said that her son recently asked her, "Mommy, what do you want to be when you grow up?" Reflecting on this question, she realized that she is grown up, and it is time that she considers her own future. Her son reminded her that she enjoys working with children, thus she is considering work in the education field. Since she is seeking employment in the future, she is interested in pursuing her GED®. While still in the beginning stages of studying, she has enrolled in GED® Test preparation classes.

Mariana balances supporting her children, herself, and her community. As she conducted this interview with me, her toddler daughter climbed her body like a jungle gym. She tried to

speak to Mariana in Spanish multiple times throughout the conversation, at which Mariana quietly calmed her. She manages life's obstacles while also considering her own future.

Camila

Camila immigrated to the United States from Mexico when she was fifteen years old. She spoke little English and used the interpreter for the entire interview. She is mother to a five-years-old daughter and, and a one-year-old son. Camila learned about Easton Heights family literacy programming through her friend Mariana, who encouraged and continues to encourage her to attend weekly events.

Camila's kindergarten-aged daughter has been working with Easton Heights for two years, and Camila is very happy with her daughter's progress. While Camila herself knows little English, they speak only Spanish at home, Camila's daughter has learned a lot of English. Easton Heights classes have taught them both words and expressions to practice in their house. These language tools have allowed Camila's daughter to read at an impressive first-grade reading level, an accomplishment for which Camila is very proud.

Camila cares immensely about her children's education. Camila was involved in a program that organizes field trips for children under the age of five. While her daughter is in school, she brings her son to the library and parks throughout the city to further expose him to a variety of environments. Camila engages her son in age-appropriate activities so that he can get the most out of life. One of her goals upon initially joining family literacy was to be able to expose her daughter to experiences outside the home. She accomplished this aspiration with her

daughter, and is now applying the skills and taking advantage of the experiences she learned about at Easton Heights in raising her son.

Camila hopes that family literacy will help her improve household routines, such as helping her daughter go to sleep earlier. Family literacy has assisted her in establishing a more regimented schedule, which includes the literacy practice of reading to her children every night. Camila aspires to take classes to improve her English as her son grows up and she begins to have more personal time. She thought that she would want to stay home with her children and not work on her own education. However, engaging in the field trip program has exposed her to other mothers, and they have helped her realize that she has great learning potential.

While Camila was not currently working on her English and does not see herself becoming employed in the near future, she has high hopes for herself and her children. Camila's son and daughter are very young, and she is still at a stage in life in which taking care of them is of primary importance. She is extremely family-oriented, rather than community based, and is focused on improving her children's life experiences.

Isabela

Isabela is a Mexican immigrant with excellent English skills. She is highly educated in her native Spanish language since she graduated from high school and attended two years of college in Mexico. A self-proclaimed ambitious, go-getter, Isabela's spunky and spirited personality shone through. Growing up, she always strove to be at the top of her class in school and loved to participate in various activities. Isabela also identifies strongly with the fact that she was adopted as a baby. She feels as if her adoptive mother chose her, and wanted her in a way

that her birth mother did not. In Isabela's mind, her adoption represents the immense love that her adoptive mother has for her.

Isabela learned about Easton Heights programming from other mothers in the community, and credits Guadeloupe for motivating her to attend events. She was interested in family literacy because she wanted to get involved in something unique and play an active role in her daughter's education. Isabela's daughter has been involved in family literacy for two years and is currently in preschool. Isabela is happy that her daughter has become more independent, confident, and socially active through family literacy.

Isabela's main goal for involvement in family literacy is her daughter's education. She said that she loves including her daughter in adult experiences, such as cooking and baking. She is able to share this interest with her daughter by explaining the recipes, buying and combining the ingredients, and enjoying the finished product. Isabella has many personal motives for enrolling in Easton Heights events. She drew upon contrasts between Mexican and American cultural norms. In Mexico there were no opportunities for women to relate to their peers. Mexican social structure focused on tradition, and women were expected to remain in the home. Isabela appreciates the innovative nature of Easton Heights Center, and the ways family literacy allows her to connect with other women as mothers, immigrants, and friends. She has found a strong sense of family within her larger neighborhood. Isabela likes the academic advancement that goes on within the Easton Heights center, and how the staff provides her tools with which to be a better mother and woman.

As far as personal literacy or employment goals, Isabela does not have any specific aims. She is open to learning whatever comes her way. Isabela is focused on the abstract and was very comfortable talking about different facets of her personality and life. She dropped out of college

in Mexico because she became bored with studying, but now she feels differently about learning. She recognizes her flaws and knows she has much to absorb from the world around her. She was expecting her second child in the next few months, so she said she was focused on expanding and raising her family. She plans on bringing her newborn son to Easton Heights programming events as soon as possible.

Isabela provided an interesting perspective on family literacy, one that was dually focused on the parent and child. Unlike many of the other mothers who spoke mostly of their children's educations, Isabela named many positive attributes Easton Heights provides for mothers. While Isabela clearly values her daughter's education, she identified herself and her own social enjoyment as a motive for involvement. Her high level of education in Mexico was evident as she spoke with me about topics, such as her own psyche, life's disappointments, and the cultural difference between America and Mexico.

Chapter 6

Findings and Discussion

These women's stories and the way they responded to me also framed the way I was able to recount their experiences and goals. I used my interviews to create representative narratives for each woman. My notes and observations helped me construct individual stories that reflect the lives and experiences of the women I interviewed. I then analyzed the different narratives to locate common themes and areas of interest.

The most prominent theme was the women's dedication to their children and families. Each spoke about taking the necessary steps to support their children's educational journey; they felt that this would improve their futures in America. Despite immigrant parents' lack of personal educational qualifications, many are highly committed to their children's schooling (Aeurbach, 1995). All of the women had very high aspirations for their children, whether they were infants or high school teens. They were actively trying to enhance their children's educations. For example, Camila spoke about taking her one-year-old son on field trips to different locations around the city to expose him to enriching sites. She wanted to start engaging him in literacy-rich and stimulating activities at a young age to make sure he had enough opportunity for learning. All of the women expressed sentiments of how proud they were of their children for reading, writing, and excelling in school, whether their child was in kindergarten like Pilar's daughter or in high school like Guadeloupe's children. At every stage in the academic ladder, their children's academic successes were a source of great honor and joy. While these mothers may not have spoken or written fluent English, they were without a doubt literacy

conscious, and had much to offer their children. Easton Heights family literacy staff has listened and catered to the needs of these immigrant women to foster an environment in which they can recognize their literacy potentials (Iddings, 2009).

Another recurring theme was the importance of community. While most joined the Easton Heights program to help their individual families, all of the women discussed the value of larger neighborhood unity. Guadeloupe explained most explicitly her stress on the community, and the way her immediate family plays a role in the larger neighborhood unit. Furthermore, a few women mentioned each other as key motivators for attending events and staying involved. Additionally, two of the women discussed the service learning activities as their favorite part of family literacy. These events, such as the annual Safety Walk to promote safer streets and initiative to clean up local parks, have allowed families to become more involved in the community. The women enjoy the way Easton Heights has helped them engage in their neighborhood, displaying a perceived benefit of programming.

An additional overarching theme that my research exposed is mothers as the key supporters of literacy. Each of the women have their own histories and rationales as to why they value the role they play in their children's educations, but ultimately they all share the same sentiment: mothers are crucial advocates in children's literacy development. Pilar's story displays perhaps the clearest example of this understanding. Her difficult home life as an immigrant teenager in the United States, and the ways her parents did not support her education, offers insights to her current role as a mother and student. She described her parent's inability to help her with English as native Spanish speakers, and the cultural barriers they faced in a foreign educational system. Her description of the obstacles faced by Latino America families evidences the linguistic and cultural barriers immigrants experience when trying to navigate the U.S. school

system and expectations (Wasik, 2013). Furthermore, her narrative responds to my research questions about parental background and perceived personal gains from family literacy. She used her own dissatisfaction with her parents' lack of involvement in academics as motivation to engage in her children's educations. The sense of her as a driven woman and mother permeated her discussion of GED® studies and her time with Easton Heights programming. Her upbringing has served as a foil for the way she is raising her children today. She does everything she can to pursue her children's literacy experiences.

Pilar has created a warm and nurturing environment that fosters language and educational experiences. Since she started speaking English and Spanish in her home with her children, she feels that there are two ways of life: one in English and one in Spanish. She wants her children to experience both, and will not limit them to a Spanish-only household. From first-hand experience, she knows how this can negatively impact them as students. Immigrant parents are often advised to speak and work with their children in English. However, this serves as a limitation on quality of conversation and communication. Since many parents do not speak fluent English, they are forced to converse in broken and unsophisticated English, with basic vocabulary and grammar. This practice is counterproductive because restricted language does not always allow for complex ideas to be communicated. Furthermore, an understanding of concepts in their parent's native language will transfer over to children's understanding in English and Spanish. Furthermore, using the home language can help keep the balance of power (i.e., parents as parents) and can communicate the rich heritage of their ethnic origins. Easton Heights supports parents like Pilar to maintain the importance of Spanish while they and their children also focus on developing English language skills, thus responding to Pilar's desire to have her children learn to live in both worlds.

I received mixed results when asking the women about their backgrounds and personal stories. Guadeloupe, Mariana and Camila were reluctant to share details of their upbringing beyond stating that they immigrated to America from Mexico. They spoke solely about their children and families when asked about their personal lives. Pilar and Isabela were willing and eager to speak openly about their youths, discussing both positive and negative experiences with enthusiasm and passion. The difference in willingness to share personal information proves to be an interesting research finding. There are many factors that could explain some of the women's unwillingness to talk about their past. Some of these topics, like immigration status or unhappiness during childhood, could be sensitive subjects and I did not press the women for further information. However, upon reflection, it seems likely that the language barrier may have been a primary contributing factor. Pilar and Isabela had the best English skills, and were able to tell their stories directly to me without much assistance from the translator. Perhaps this made them more comfortable detailing their personal lives. Guadeloupe did not speak any English and seemed the most guarded. She appeared leery of a stranger asking questions about her life. Despite the fact that she was the oldest mother and has years of experience raising children and working with family literacy, she did not seem comfortable sharing personal information. This is reflective of research showing that Latin American parents may not feel at ease in American classrooms working with English speaking teachers, due to the language barrier and cultural differences (Wasik, 2013).

Guadeloupe may not have been comfortable revealing personal details. I do not speak Spanish and am not from her culture or community; maybe she felt that she and I could not relate. Iddings (2009) describes how her welcome center was shaped to accommodate Latin American immigrant parents to help them feel at home. While Guadeloupe was certainly familiar

and receptive to the Easton Heights environment, I think that my presence as a mono-lingual English speaker, and the fact that I did not have a trusted relationship with her may have made her reluctant to open up personally. Interestingly, the desire to share their experiences and achievements as good mothers and family literacy experiences pushed them to engage with me.

Another interesting finding was the tangible sense of community between the women at Easton Heights, a community that struggles with poverty and violence. Daniela spoke to me about the center's strong female support system, and I expected to see an emphasis on family and neighborhood unity; however, I was surprised by how much obvious parental camaraderie I saw in such a short period of observation. For example, many of the women I interviewed are friends with one another and their children were playing together. Throughout the course of my interviews, Camila told me that Mariana encourages her to attend meetings, and Isabela said that Guadeloupe serves as a motivator for staying involved. While Easton Heights aids children, it also serves as a hub for mothers. Isabela spoke most clearly about her personal interest in becoming involved in family literacy, beyond the educational needs of her daughter due to her desire for contact with women her own age. She drew attention to social differences between motherhood in Mexico and that in United States and praised the way women in the U.S. can come together through family literacy centers. She greatly appreciated the opportunity to connect with her peers rather than remain isolated in her house. For Isabela her engagement in family literacy went beyond a desire to support her child's education; her attendance was motivated by a need for social interaction. Wasik (2013) description of centers as social spaces that help women create relationships is crucial. As many family literacy centers do, Easton Heights assists women like Guadeloupe, Pilar, Camila, Mariana, and Isabela to form unique bonds as fellow immigrants, women, and neighbors (Prins, Toso, and Shafft, 2008). This resource is often more important in a

neighborhood, such as Easton Heights, where issues of safety do not allow for safe social spaces outside the home. I was impressed by the strong sense of companionship and intimacy within a neighborhood plagued by such difficult hardships.

Through the interviews, I sought to determine if the women had personal goals, and if there were similarities in future aspirations. The women wanted to be good mothers and to learn more about supporting children's education; however their other individual goals were not necessarily the same. Pilar and Mariana, answered the question "What have been some of your personal goals throughout your work with Easton Heights?" with confident ideas about their own academic progression. Pilar is currently working towards her GED®, and Mariana spoke about increasing her English skills to secure a job in education. They clearly were involved in Easton Heights to improve their English literacy, and to obtain employment. On the other hand, Guadeloupe and Isabela were dismissive of personal aspirations, instead focusing solely on their children's educations. Camila fell somewhere in the middle of this spectrum in that she recognized that she may want to work on her own education *in the future*. Perhaps the strongest takeaway from the question about personal goals is that family literacy helps parents advance their own educations to whatever degree they choose to pursue. It also allows women to focus on different goals at the pace that works for their busy schedules and the competing needs of their families' lives. Ultimately, women appeared to have space to set their own goals which differed dependent on the centrality of their ideas of motherhood.

Throughout conversations with all five women, none mentioned their husbands as participants in family literacy. They all told me that they were married, but did not discuss the roles their husbands play. I found this interesting given their strong emphasis on family units and the cohesive nature of literacy within the home. They painted their families as close-knit and

united, yet never discussed their male partners. I wonder whether there is significance in this silence. Daniela, Amy, and other Easton Heights staff stressed the presence of fathers at family literacy events and an agenda of involving all members of the family in literacy activities in daily life. When observing the parent meeting, four fathers were present. All the parents in the room made introductions, and the first father who spoke said that he wanted to start taking a more active role in supporting his eight-year-old son's education. Upon hearing this, an older Hispanic woman, Maria, who assists with many of events at the Easton Heights Center, began clapping and cheering in an outward expression of praise. This triggered all the other parents in the room to join the celebration, and many other women added encouraging remarks. This congratulatory precedent was followed for the remaining three fathers. While on the surface, this act seemed insignificant, upon further reflection, it reveals the value that the community places on paternal involvement. Perhaps the women's silence on men in their interviews signifies that their partners are not strongly involved in literacy activities in the home. This could echo the traditional role of women in the Latina culture to care for children and their education. It might also reflect that, given the women's enjoyment of the social aspect of the center, they wanted to keep the family literacy space as one that was "their" space to be mothers and nurture an identity separate from the family. Lastly, it may reveal that my questions did not allow for the topic to come up in conversation. I hope to explore further about men in family literacy. Is the silence regarding fathers and husbands specific to Latino American families? Perhaps the discrepancy can be attributed to a long-standing belief that mothers and grandmothers are the sole drivers behind children's educations (Wasik, 2013). While the women value their connected family, maybe they do not view literary engagement as a paternal responsibility. I see this sector of family literacy as a place for potential future study.

My first research question explored the educational and cultural backgrounds of parents engaged in family literacy. While all of the mothers I spoke with were immigrants from Mexico, each provided her own story, detailing personal and educational experience. Secondly, I sought to understand why parents choose to enroll in family literacy, which I now understand to be based primarily on the support of their children. However, mothers also seek to fulfill individual goals that may or may not relate to their children's education but rather their well being, such as working to raise the family's social economic standard. Thirdly, my research probed parent's perceived benefits of family literacy engagement. I now know these to include bettering their children's futures, becoming involved in community activities, and seeking social outlets and connections. Lastly, I hoped to learn about parent's goals for enrolling in family literacy, and more specifically understand their personal aspirations. My findings show that the women's overarching goal of family literacy involvement is to improve their children's educations. Some of the women also shared personal educational and employment aspirations to varying degrees.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Easton Heights Center provides a safe space for enriched English literacy advancement and connection between parents and children. As research on family literacy suggests, Easton Heights fosters relationships between family members, and serves as an educating body for immigrant families acclimating to the United States educational system. Daniela and Amy function as literacy liaisons, nurturing friendships with parents and promoting a comfortable and open environment. Overall, I was impressed with the innumerable similarities between family literacy research and the initiatives and practices at Easton Heights. Comparable to the way Iddings (2009) describes her Welcome Center, Easton Heights was warm and hospitable; it was a space of judgment-free learning. The great emphasis that Easton Heights puts on its family service learning initiatives clearly parallel the Goodling Institutes for Research in Family Literacy's writings on the power of community involvement and improvement. Easton Heights has documented increased civic engagement and neighborhood enhancement through its Safety Walk and other community engagement activities and forays into other parts of the city. While I only spent a few hours at the center, I got a strong sense of community running throughout all members. Conversation with Daniela and Amy, observation of the parent meeting, and my interviews showed the dedication, from both parents and staff, towards community and literacy advancement.

I entered my interviews with an acute interest in parental objectives. The women clearly displayed a drive to improve their children's futures, which serves as an indicator of motivation

for enrollment. Research has shown that parents are also motivated to engage in family literacy for reasons such as advancing their own futures. I sought to understand if these women aligned with these research findings, and understand a general set of future goals. I now comprehend that one standard set of aspirations does not exist as the women's goals reflected an individuality of experience, locus of importance, and desires.

The primary finding from my interviews was the magnitude of value that the five women have to offer their children. They all care so deeply about their sons and daughters' futures and educational aptitudes. Whether they speak English fluently, or know little English at all, each woman is working to provide their children with a literacy-enriched upbringing. Aeurbach (1995) wrote that while undereducated parents may not be highly English-literate themselves, they see literacy as the most treasured aspect of their children's futures, and will work to support academics. This is without a doubt shown to be true through the actions and stories of the Easton Heights mothers.

Appendix A

Family Literacy Participants Interview Questions

1. How did you hear about this family literacy program? How did you become involved?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? (probe: educational background, family, living, did you finish high school – why/why not)
 - o Did your parents help you with your schooling?
3. Can you tell me about your children's current educational experience?
4. Why did you choose to enroll in family literacy? (probe: beyond improvement for your children)
5. Does anyone support you or encourage you to stay involved in this program? (if yes: how to they support you, of no: why do you think they do not support you?)
6. What have been some of your personal goals throughout your work with Easton Heights?
Follow up with why are these important to you? (probe: employment goals)
7. Do you feel that this program has helped you achieve these goals? (If yes: how? If no: what would have helped you achieve these goals?)
8. Do you have a job? If no: do you want to work in the future?
9. What has been your favorite part of working with the program? Do you have a favorite story or memory? Did you learn anything from this?

Appendix B

Program Director Interview Questions

1. Why did you start working with family literacy?
2. What is the structure of your family literacy program?
3. Why do parents get involved in family literacy? What are their motives for themselves and their children?
4. Who is supporting or encouraging parents to get involved in family literacy?
5. Are there more men or women involved?
6. How is your program funded?
7. What have been some of your family service learning initiatives?
8. Can you speak about one of your favorite or most successful events or programs?

Appendix C

Findings From Interview With Program Director

Daniela Martinez off as a parent educator for Easton Heights in 2011, and has since worked her way up within the organization. Born and raised in the Easton Heights neighborhood, Daniela has a strong connection to the well being of the area and is highly vested in improving the community. This drive, along with a background in special education, is what motivates Daniela to improve the lives of local community members. She feels that working in family literacy allows her to feed her passion for education by teaching both children and their parents.

I spoke with Daniela about the different programming that she organizes at Easton Heights, and she raved about the Safety Walk described earlier. She also discussed the importance of Parent Time as a component of Easton Heights Programming by comparing it to public school's services for parents. This provided a fresh take on parent family literacy engagement. Unlike parent-teacher meetings at school that are frequently rigid and structured, Parent Time gives guidance but also space and power to execute. This distinguishing difference is a major reason why parents choose to remain involved at Easton Heights. Parents do not want to be dictated to one "right" way to teach their children. Oftentimes schools do not recognize a parent's native language and traditions. Culture plays an important role in a family's home dynamics while also may cause learning to be more difficult for children. Parents prefer to work in flexible and fluid arenas, with staff that knows and appreciates their culture and native language.

I asked Daniela why she believes parents get involved in family literacy. What motivates them? She said that parents are driven by the desire for long run change. They engage in family literacy programs because Easton Heights makes them feel that another party listens to their

needs, cares about their wellbeing, and will help them make progress. Family Literacy Programs are not one-off deals, like many of the seminars held in schools. Easton Heights events are attended over the course of months or years, and families are able to form meaningful relationships with staff members that are nurtured with time. This program has many undocumented Mexican and South American families who feel rejected by their lack of citizenship. Family Literacy Programs do not ask members about legal status and therefore provide a discrimination-free environment for all. In many other aspects of society, these members feel brushed off and neglected, whether that be in their children's schools or their workplaces. Family literacy gives them an environment in which they matter.

Daniela mentioned to me that a vast majority of participants at Easton Heights are women, and I asked her if anyone supports these wives, mothers, aunts, and daughters to engage with family literacy. She said that many participants are encouraged by other women. They women work together to attend events with and without their children, which was a recurring theme throughout my personal interviews. Easton Heights programming acquires most of its participants from early childhood events, like the one I attended. Once these children and mothers are involved in family literacy, they frequently remain involved as the child progresses through school. Since the time she started working there in 2011, Daniela has seen only five fathers consistently involved for multiple years. The biggest struggle with attracting fathers to family literacy is work schedule conflicts. Since most of the workshops and programs occur during working hours, fathers have a hard time attending. In the instances in which fathers are involved, they have always attended weekend programming.

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