Community engagement and the method "Learning by Teaching": A pilot project to embrace foreign language learning from the first days

El compromiso de la comunidad y el método "Learning by Teaching": Un proyecto piloto para abarcar el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras desde los primeros días

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ABSTRACT

The community-engaged project, *Niños y Niñas Bilingües y Biculturales* (NNBB) forged through a partnership between the University Child Development Center and the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, combined the learning goals of tertiary-level Spanish courses with the benefits of learning a foreign language at an early age. College students worked cooperatively to develop a 3-week program covering basic vocabulary, geography, and cultural features from Spanish-speaking countries for monolingual English-speaking preschoolers. The purpose of the study is to understand the impact of the community-engaged program on a) college students' perceptions on their involvement in the community and b) college students' perceptions of foreign language learning at an early age. Students' written reflections indicated that this program stimulated them to proactively participate more in the community and helped them to experience how quickly children are able to learn a foreign language. Participating parents revealed in the Likert-scale surveys a willingness to implement a systematic and consistent foreign language program in the preschool curriculum.

Keywords: bilingualism; community engagement; early education; learning by teaching; monolinguism

RESUMEN

El Proyecto *Niños y Niñas Bilingües y Biculturales* (NNBB), consolidado gracias a la colaboración del centro de educación infantil en la universidad y el departamento de lenguas modernas, combinó los objetivos de aprendizaje de dos cursos de español avanzado con los beneficios de aprender una segunda lengua a temprana edad. Los estudiantes universitarios desarrollaron un programa de tres semanas de duración centrado en la enseñanza de vocabulario básico, geografía, y aspectos culturales de países de habla hispana para niños angloparlantes y monolingües. El objetivo de este estudio es comprender cómo el programa en la comunidad afectó a) las percepciones de los estudiantes universitarios sobre su participación en la comunidad; y b) las percepciones de los estudiantes universitarios sobre el aprendizaje de lenguas a una edad temprana. Los ensayos personales escritos por los estudiantes indicaron que este programa los incentivó a participar proactivamente en la comunidad y les ayudó a experimentar de primera mano la efectividad en la habilidad que poseen los jóvenes aprendices para adquirir una segunda lengua. Los padres de los niños en el programa indicaron en el cuestionario una disposición sistemática y consistente para implementar un programa de segundas lenguas en el currículo de preescolar en el centro.

Palabras claves: bilingüismo; participación en la comunidad; aprender-enseñando; educación infantil; monolingüismo

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1. Introduction

CE= Community Engagement

NNBB= Niños y Niñas Bilingües y Biculturales

The globalized world that college students in the United States (US) will encounter when they graduate will be a bilingual one, if not multilingual. Around the world, bilingual students are the norm in classrooms and not the exception. Despite the efforts of language educators to create a more bilingual society, most schools in the US still disregard the bilingualism of students insisting on teaching only one national language (García & Sánchez, 2015). However, most foreign language educators and community-engaged scholars have the tools and knowledge to alleviate this monolingualism to some degree. It is a question of *how*, *when* and with *what funds* they can start flattening the monolingual curve. In a society that places a strong emphasis on the individual achievements and individual successes, community-engaged teaching might provide students with a script to cooperatively develop well-balanced relationships between their institution of higher education and community partners. As Ernest L. Boyer (1987) stated more than three decades ago "higher education has the obligation to teach students a sense of responsibility to their community that extends beyond their career goals and personal interests" (p.296).

NNBB is a program conceived and developed to counteract monolingualism within the college campus; to involve college students in meaningful second language L2 cultural learning; and to connect college students with their community. NNBB combined departmental and university goals into one compacted project that benefited college students of Spanish and preschoolers and their families in the community. NNBB linked the learning goals of the college upper-level course, Spanish Composition & Conversation I and II-Community-Engagement (CE), with the benefits of exposing children to bilingualism at an early age. The program lasts 3 weeks, two weeks during Fall and one week during Spring semester. In this program, college students become language teachers and share their knowledge of Spanish language and culture with preschoolers in the Child Development Center in campus. NNBB focuses on developing a type of passive bilingualism among young children. Out of the several definitions for bilingualism that can be used to describe the linguistic situation in the United States (US), we will focus on passive bilingualism instead of active bilingualism. Passive bilingualism is when one person is completely fluent in one language but it is only able to understand the other (Vera, 2011), while active bilingualism is when the speaker is able to use both languages interchangeably.

The overarching goals for each group of participants in the program are the following:

1. For college students: Practicing their second L2 and culture; learning pedagogical strategies while conducting research on cultural features with native speakers.

2. For preschoolers: Exposure to the benefits of learning an L2 and cultural features at an early age while increasing motivation to learn an L2.

3. For parents of the preschoolers and center directors: Familiarity with benefits of learning an L2 at a young age while advocating for Spanish lessons at an early age.

To achieve these goals, students implement CE pedagogy and the teaching approach known as the *learning by teaching*, coined by psychologist Lev Vygotski (1962) to conduct their language lessons. First, CE is a method that integrates community outreach initiative into academic courses and it differs from voluntarism or service in

its intentional link and reinforcement of the academic learning objectives (Barreneche & Ramos-Flores, 2013). CE has been considered an effective vehicle for teaching students about citizenship and civic engagement. (Barreneche & Ramos-Flores, 2013). As Caldwell states in regards to CE and foreign language teaching, "given our particular field in the foreign language field, we are in a unique position to lead the service-learning movement [here in the US]" (Caldwell, 2007).

Second, the *learning by teaching* approach allows college students to prepare and teach lessons, or parts of the lesson, to other learners while they learn the content and reflect on it. Vygotski described in many of his writings the positive and profound connection between language and cognition, and in particular, the relationship between oral language and learning. "The one who does the talking, does the learning" may best summarize the point made by Vygotski. Students learn the content by practicing what Vygotsky called "social learning", the learning that occurs through interactions with other peers. When focusing on academic settings, Vygotsky (1962) stated that considerable learning takes place through the interactions that students have with peers, teachers, and other experts. Hence, it is strongly recommended by educators to create a learning environment that maximizes the learner ability to interact with each other through discussion, balanced cooperation, and teaching and learning practices. Students use the *learning by teaching* approach to enhance their learning about the cultural nuances of the different cultural rituals researched in the program. Students not only raise awareness about the importance of learning a foreign language from an early age, but they also learn new content from teaching the new cultural material to the preschoolers while motivating the preschoolers to learn more about the foreign culture.

Students who major or minor in a foreign language are usually aware of the potential assets of bilingualism for young adults, such as, academic advantages, improved career opportunities, understanding and promotion of cross-cultural communication, and so forth. (King and Fogle, 2006). Most of them are aware of the multiple benefits of learning an L2 and culture at an early age rather than starting at the age of fourteen or fifteen, as many of them did. Most college students majoring or minoring in Spanish were introduced to the L2 during adolescence, experiencing the numerous challenges and obstacles entailed in learning a language at this particular age. Listening and speaking in the L2 becomes a harder task during adolescence than during preschool years. As Graham (2003) stated many L2 school age learners often regard listening as the most difficult language skill to learn. Oral skills are also considered one of the hardest skills to practice due to the insecurity and nervousness typically associated with the adolescence phase (Buitrago-Tinjacá & Ayala-Contreras, 2008). Moreover, as Hurford (1991) and Pinker (1994) specified, after adolescence, the motherboard that is required for language learning is dismantled because in adulthood there is no pressure on humans to keep learning languages and the metabolically greedy neural systems sabotages the process of language learning. This might explain why adolescent language learners encounter more difficulties with pronunciation of certain Spanish phonemes than young children do. However, not every aspect of learning a foreign language is at a disadvantage when the learners are adolescents. As Hardach (2018) determined, on one hand, young children have the ability to hear more accurately different sounds, therefore they can acquire and recognize different accents more effortlessly than adolescents. On the other hand, adolescents have the ability to focus more intensely, which enhances their vocabulary and grammar learning process. Another reason that explains why teenagers have a harder time learning an L2 is linked to the tendency among adolescents to be being critical of other while they dislike and disapprove criticism from each other (Buitrago-Tinjacá & Ayala-Contreras, 2008). The fear of criticism might lead teenagers to remain silent during class time and take less risks with the oral language, while younger children tend to constantly take risks with their oral interventions. Consequently, the younger the learner is, the more effective and beneficial the L2 learning process is.

The present study focuses on the impact of NNBB on college students' perceptions of learning a foreign language at an early age, and the impact of the program on their future relationship with their immediate community. Additionally, it shows feedback from participating parents to learn about their perspectives towards language community-engaged programs in their children's schools. To my knowledge, this article is the first on Spanish community-engaged courses that concentrates on unveiling what college students learn while performing as language educators for preschoolers in the community, and what parents perceive as benefits of this type of programs for their children's learning.

2. Framework

2.1. Early age second language exposure in the US

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) guidelines confirm and support the positive impact of bilingualism and biculturalism at an early age. Current research suggests that all children, even those with special needs, are capable of learning foreign languages from their earliest months of life, and this language challenge benefits learners in multiple ways (Espinosa, 2015). Due to the effects of globalization and the increased movement of labor across countries, more and more children in the US are exposed to a foreign language from a very early age (Cha & Goldenberg, 2015). Ignoring this reality would restrain monolingual citizens from being prepared to face challenges involved in interactions with neighbor citizens and/or members of their own family.

When paying close attention to schools in the US, we see that there is a growing number of students whose families speak a language other than English or whose backgrounds are culturally diverse. The majority of households in the United States in which English is not spoken are Spanish-speaking (28.1 million) (Díaz-Rico, 2012). Spanish-speaking families are the fastest growing rate driven largely by births rather than immigration (Gaouette, 2006). These newborns are legal citizens of the US who will likely stay in the country. Nearly half of the Latinos (46.4%) (Latinos and Hispanic are terms that the census uses interchangeably to refer to Spanish-speaking people from Latin America) live in a central city within a metropolitan area. When focusing on school children, according to Konhert (2010), approximately 20% of the US children speak a language other than English at home, with Spanish as the most common language. In the face of this diverse linguistic and cultural landscape, the educators' responsibilities in the US have become increasingly varied and complex. Because the core of the teaching profession in the US still remains monolingual, including a foreign language that takes a central role in children's education is still a challenging undertaking.

At the present moment, US preschool, elementary and secondary school teachers face an exceptional challenge. This challenge involves educating students to face the reality of their country, which is a multilingual and multicultural space shaped by citizens with linguistic and culturally diverse backgrounds. To face this linguistic challenge, schools need support. Schools districts must devote funding to implement foreign language programs at the preschool level and support it throughout the elementary years, instead of cutting the funding at the elementary school stage. Unfortunately, only a few states in the US, such as California, Florida, Oklahoma, Vermont, and Washington DC offer public preschool education while states like Montana, Utah and Wyoming do not offer state pre-kindergarten programs because as Espinosa (2015) declares, these states decided not to fund early care and education. In the Midwest area of the United States, some states have made high-quality pre-

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kindergarten centers available, yet, not many 3- and 4-year-old children have access to these programs. For example, current funding levels for pre-kindergarten in Pennsylvania are only enough to help 1 in 6 children to be included in high-quality programs. Consequently, given that most available high-quality pre-kindergarten are private, most middle-class families cannot afford high quality pre-kindergarten education. Albeit, research has proven that foreign language at an early age is an essential key to strengthening children's education (King, K. & Fogle, L., 2006; Unsworth, 2016;), high-quality pre-kindergarten centers that incorporate foreign language programs in their academic curriculum are still uncommon in the area where this research was carried out. At the present moment, there is only one preschool that officially offers bilingual instruction Spanish-English (La Escuelita Arcoiris) for young children. Due to the small size of this school, the waiting list to register a child is extensive. It might take up to two years for a child to be accepted. Besides the long list, the cost of tuition for a full-time preschooler is typically only accessible for families in a higher socio-economic bracket, which leaves children in families with lower resources with no option to apply. This reality reflects, not only to the immediate area of this study, but most of the country. Bilingualism for young children comes with a serious financial burden. Bilingualism at an early age is almost inaccessible for many families, and when it is accessible in magnet or charter schools, it comes with a long waiting list and an arduous application process. In many instances, applicants have to be included in a lottery system and their acceptance to the school is decided by luck.

In NNBB, students of Spanish and Spanish professors contribute with their time, knowledge and skills to flatten the inequality of opportunities for bilingualism due to financial resources. The program NNBB works to compensate for lack of foreign language content in early grades. NNBB cooperates with preschool centers where funding is not available for foreign language programs. In addition, NNBB offers college students of Spanish the opportunity to develop language teaching programs in their local community, develop relationships with the preschools and learn from the process.

2.2. Community Engagement Pedagogy in Language Education

In an attempt to celebrate the pluricultural society that the United States (US) is becoming, the US congress joined the American Association on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in launching the year of Discover Languages Program in 2005. This initiative supported the effort to acknowledge the importance of learning foreign languages in multilingual societies. Ever since the Discover Languages Program was in place, the terms multicultural and pluricultural became more common in secondary and higher education language departments. Simultaneously, there was an increment in the number of students showing interest in foreign language or cultural studies, summer study abroad programs, community-engaged projects and local immersion experiences (Osa-Melero, 2016). As a response to students' interest in language immersion experiences, the CE pedagogy became an important asset for language departments, especially for upper-level language courses.

CE pedagogy, as Barreneche and Ramos-Flores (2013) previously stated, is the teaching method that integrates community outreach initiative into academic courses. Nevertheless, CE is not just a new trendy topic. More than two decades ago, Boss (1994) had already stated that CE pedagogy proved to be an effective teaching tool when adequately interconnected to a specific area of academic study. Several studies illustrate how from student self-perception, there is a relevant development of the target language and civic engagement while participating in a community-engaged program. For instance, in Caldwell's study (2007), students planned, prepared and executed story time in Spanish at the public library for 15 weeks. Student reflections and questionnaires confirmed that CE promoted language development and self-confidence in the L2. In the same line, Falce-Robinson and

Strother (2012) implemented community-engaged projects throughout the Spanish major course sequence in which non-heritage and heritage speakers successfully participated. In their final reflective narratives and poster presentations students expressed that the CE assisted them in their language development and increased their motivation to continue their studies of Spanish, as well as a tighter collaboration with the community. The evidence found in the present study positively supports Caldwel's (2007) and Falce-Robinson and Strother's (2012) results.

CE pedagogy, not only assists students with cognitive skills, but it also increases academic motivation (Bringle, Phillips, and Hudson, 2004). As part of the academic work, students have to self-reflect on their contribution to the community. Self-reflection, a fundamental component of CE, is a way to deepen the understanding on the course content and the community needs (Bringle and Hatcher, 2009). Petrov's study (2013) with heritage learners provides additional evidence to the positive impact on communicative skills. Her study confirms how heritage speakers in an intermediate-high course improved their communication skills when cooperating in service projects in the Spanish-speaking community members in the Chicago-area. While Petrov does not detail the specific task with the community agency, she concludes that the end of the program self-reflective essays and surveys completed by students confirmed notable gains in communication skills, "Students recognized service learning as a pedagogy that helped their speaking and writing skills, as well as their cultural knowledge" (p. 319). While the above-mentioned studies corroborate that students self-perceive language improvement when involved in a CE project, studies such as Caldwell 2007; Falce-Robinson and Strother, 2012, Hartfield-Méndez (20013); and Petrov (2013), further emphasize that CE can be the journey of learning, critical thinking, and self-discovery that leads to not only linguistic, but also cultural achievement. The unique personal commitment embedded in CE programs motivates students to become more involved. This motivation and this involvement is a favorable influence for language acquisition. Furthermore, CE pedagogy not only improves and strengthens university and community relationships, but it also increases student academic motivation and cognitive skills performance (Falce-Robinson & Strother, 2012). Foreign language departments seem to be in an exceptional position to lead community-engaged experiences that expose students to authentic language while responsibly aligning with academic objectives. The studies described in this section exemplify the beneficial connection between CE and language and culture development in undergraduate students of Spanish, especially to language development. The present study proves that the unique personal commitment and motivation involved in community-engaged programs is a favorable influence for language acquisition. Considering the culturally and linguistically diverse demographics of the US and the recurrent Spanish speaking immigration waves to this country, it can be predicted that language departments are in an exceptional position to lead community-engaged experiences that responsibly align with foreign language learning academic objectives and with the community needs.

3. Research questions

Based on the program goals, the following questions were addressed in this three-year cross- sectional and multigenerational study:

1. How did NNBB impact students' perceptions about CE and language learning at an early age?

2. How did NNBB shape parents' perceptions about CE and foreign language learning at an early age?

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4. Methods

4.1 Participants

The participants in this program fall into three different groups.

1) College students with the role of language educator

2) Parents of preschoolers, with the role of language assistants

3) Preschoolers (not included in the pilot research study)

For research purposes, we only consider group 1) college students and group 2) parents of preschoolers as participants.

The program was implemented during 5 semesters within 3 consecutive years. Spring 2015 was the only semester that the program was not in effect since its inception due to administrative reasons. Each semester included different students, however they all minored or majored in Spanish studies. Table 1 shows the number of participants at every particular year and the total number of participants throughout 3 years. The number of participants varied each year, not only for college students, but also for preschoolers and parents. The maximum capacity allowed for the college students on a given semester was 15. The maximum children accepted in the preschool at one particular semester was 12. The number of preschoolers allowed in the Child Development Center is controlled by state regulations and based on different features of the center, such as size of the physical space and number of available certified educators.

	College Students			Preschoolers			Families
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total	
Fall 2014	0	9	9	5	6	11	N/A
Fall 2015 & Spring 2016	4	7	11	4	6	10	10
Fall 2016 & Spring 2017	3	11	14	10	1	11	11
3 years	7	27	**34**	21	11	**32**	**21**

Table 1. Participants per year and participants in total

Next, we will describe each group of program participants in detail.

1. College students: This group involved 34 undergraduate students enrolled in the upper-level classes Spanish Conversation and Composition I and II. Four students double majored in Spanish and in another discipline within the College of Liberal Arts. Thirty students minored in Spanish with a major in another discipline. Out of thirty students, six worked towards a major in the School of Education while completing a minor in Spanish. Regarding ethnicity, thirty students described themselves as White/Caucasian. The rest used varied definitions. One female described herself as a Puerto Rican descent; another female born and raised in Togo; another female claimed to be bicultural (Mexico and USA) with English as her dominant language; and one male claimed Mexican heritage. All 34 students were raised in a Midwest big city or in a neighbor town in the Midwest area.

2. Preschoolers: This group consisted of 32 preschoolers, ages 3 to 5, who were completing their preschool years at the Child Development Center. Due to the fact that 12 children were in preschool for two consecutive years, only a total of 20 children were involved in the project, with 12 of them being involved during two consecutive

years. Fifteen children were described as White/Caucasian; two of them as bicultural and bilingual (Spanish and English), two children were categorized as African-American, and only one was described as Asian, who recently immigrated from China.

3. Parents of the preschoolers: This groups entailed 20 mothers/ fathers who participated in the home-tasks assigned by students. Only 14 of them completed and returned the end of the program surveys. There is no data available about families' ethnicity, educational level, or socio-economic status. A feature that could give us an idea of the families' socio-economic status is based on the preschool charging fees. During the years of the study, the full time preschool fee was $9,684 a year. Most families complied with payment without government financial aid.

4.2. Teaching procedures

Given that the mission of this particular university is based on working with the community, students who enrolled in community-engaged classes are aware of the high level of involvement in the community projects. The first edition of the program served as a point of reference to enhance following editions. Student reflections and oral discussions during class served as valuable feedback to shape the following editions of the program. Additionally, meetings with the director of the center assisted in shaping the schedule, home tasks, duration of the teaching sessions, and other logistical aspects that enhanced the program. An example of how the feedback from students was implemented would be the modification we made for students during the preparation phase. This phase was extended from one week in Fall 2015 to three weeks during the years 2016 and 2017. During the preparation phase in 2016 and 2017, students read four scholarly articles and magazine articles about language pedagogy for young children; teaching strategies for young learners; effects of bilingualism at an early age; and an article centered on Gardner's seven intelligences (2006). Following the reading assignments, students attended a one hour-long virtual workshop led by an expert in the field of early childhood language pedagogy. In this workshop students participate in an open discussion about language learning at an early age and pedagogical strategies to teach language in an enjoyable manner. Students are also invited to contact the expert throughout the duration of the project for ideas and feedback. Most students emailed her with specific questions about the assessment stage. Additionally, the professor developed a package that included a sample lesson plan, detailed grading criteria and a set of effective interactive activities for young learners. The packet for 2016 and 2017 also included links to videos of teaching performances; journal samples; and a final reflection sample from students in the previous semester.

The first step for college students was to visit the center to meet director and preschoolers. During this visit, students have the opportunity to ask the director any question related to preschoolers and their learning process. Second, students created lesson plans that included activities and assessment activities for children and homework for children to complete with their parents. Once the lessons were prepared and reviewed by the professor, students, with their groupmates went to the preschool to teach 25-minute lessons to children. During the lesson, students assessed children's learning in a formative manner. The sessions were conducted on Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 12:00 to 12:30 pm during the assigned weeks or Tuesday and Thursday from 3:05 to 3:35 pm, contingent to the semester. For fall semester, students taught two lessons, each lesson is taught throughout one full week. The first lesson focused on vocabulary related to colors, numbers and parts of the body. The second lesson in October focused on comparing and contrasting two of the most recognized

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celebrations in the US: Halloween vs. *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). The third lesson takes place in February and it compares and contrasts *Día del Amor* (Valentine's Day) in different Spanish-speaking countries with the traditional celebration in the US. Students learn about the cultural content by interviewing native speakers in their home countries. Students are in charge of holding brief Skype conversations with native speakers, mostly friends and colleagues of the professor, about the assigned cultural topic. These conversations offer the students the chance to practice with native speakers on the phone and learn a significant amount of cultural knowledge. For Día de los Muertos, students attend the two-hour long workshop offered by adjunct instructor Mildred López in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures. Table 2 displays the topics and timeline for the lessons.

Week	Topic
3rd/ 4th week of September	Colors, Numbers and Parts of the Body
4th week of October	Day of the Dead vs. Halloween
2nd/3rd week of February	Valentine's Day in Spanish-speaking Countries

Table 2. Timeline and topics of the lessons

Overall, college students prepared three lesson plans for three different lessons. Lesson plans were turned in to the professor a week before they were implemented for the preschoolers. Professor reviewed them and offered constructive feedback. The grading criteria for lesson plans was based on the following components: 1. adaption of content for young children; 2. creativity and range of activities; 3. teaching approach; and 4. assessment tools.

Lesson plans were promptly returned to students with suggestions for improvement. Students discussed suggestions with professor and implemented necessary modifications. The wide variety of activity formats selected by students included bingo games, cards, coloring tasks, dances, videos, drawings, matching exercises, posters, songs, and so forth. The assessment section for preschoolers included different types of activities such as brief interviews with three to four yes/no questions, short answer questions, matching activities, multiple-choice questions with two answers, and object identification activities.

4.3. Data Collection Instruments

Students write three journal entries and a self-reflection long narrative that was qualitatively analyzed by the researcher. One assessment method that captures students' reflections of the research process are reflective essays. Reflective essays are different from the conventional academic essays as they require students to make sense of their experiences by building mental models of the process and knowledge that they have acquired and being aware of the knowledge state they have achieved (Klein, Moon, and Hoffman, p.47). "The content of the reflective essays provides the researcher with a passage to the students' thoughts throughout the program" (Balgopal and Montplaisir, p. 4). We are aware, though, that reflective essays only provide students' constructed views of their experiences, and not their actual experiences (Hosein & Namrata, 2014). Nonetheless, reflective essay is still one of the most common data collection tools to gather statements about personal perceptions. Regarding data from parents, they completed a 5-point ascending Likert-scale survey that elicited information about the level of agreement or disagreement on 14 statements about the efficiency and efficacy of the program (Appendix A).

4.3.1. Reflective essays for students

At the end of each week, each student individually writes a short journal entry (120 words) in Spanish. This entry was a place for students to openly describe their feelings, fears, achievements, and challenges related to the lesson and lesson implementation. At the end of each semester, each student writes a long reflective essay (425 words) centered on their personal experience in the program. To complete this long essay, students are required to answer a set of reflective questions incorporated in the package. The purpose of these questions is to elicit reflection and critical thinking from students in relation to the community-engaged experience; an analysis of the challenging and successful tasks; an evaluation of participants including themselves; and suggestions for future editions of the program. A total of three journal entries and one long essay are collected from each student at the end of each semester. Self-reports usually provide a wide range of introspective information on how learners view their experiences. As Boud, Keogh &Walker (1985) and Dewey (1933) state, reflection is an intentional, dynamic process that allows improvement in one's actions, abilities, and knowledge by learning from past experiences. While the process of reflection can be useful in almost all aspects of life, reflection on a community-engaged program is particularly beneficial for the community members, as well as for the student actively involved in the community and their professor. Successful participants must be able to reflect on their experiences to achieve program goals and therefore, success. While there is not much research in the CE literature that particularly addresses techniques of reflection, there is evidence from studies on problem–based learning and cognitive development that suggests that reflection methods may enhance and facilitate participation in the community (Eyler, 2002). Tse (2000) also supports reflective essays as a tool to enhance participation. Tse (2000) asserts that when reflective essays are used with caution, these provide a useful lens for examining a larger number of student views over time, confirming, and possibly challenging, conclusions obtained from other survey and questionnaire methods.

The qualitative analysis begins with the open-ended responses to the 21 guiding questions for the semester-final reflective essay. The questions prompting the essays, as well as the essays, are originally written in Spanish and translated verbatim into English for research purposes. The content in the essays was analyzed using an open coding process. Through a thematic process we identified significant patterns and repeated evidence of predominant categories. We thus further collapsed the categories into six general themes informed by our research question: *How did NNBB impact students' perceptions about CE and language learning at an early age?*

The open coding process respected the following procedure: 1. researcher conducted a preliminary essay reading at two different points within the same week, one at the beginning of the week and the second one at the end of the week; 2. researcher created tentative categories from segments of data. Categories summarized the content that students tried to convey; 3. researcher recorded examples of participant words for each category. 4. researcher collapsed the categories into five general themes informed by our research questions. There was only one rater analyzing the essays at two different points in time. The intra-coder agreement was 98%. There was not an external coder involved in the analysis.

The essay questions elicited student emotions; sense of civic engagement; perceptions on their own learning; expectations and conclusion. The questions are divided into three different time periods: 1. before project was initiated; 2. during project; 3. after project. With the purpose of analyzing student perceptions of their learning in the program, the qualitative analysis in this research project paid special attention to responses given to

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question 18 in the during the project period. *Q.18. "During the project. When you think of community engagement and language learning at an early age, what was your most substantial learning?*

5. Results

5.1. Qualitative Data from Students

The data addressing students 'own learning throughout the program were analyzed in multiple phases. In the first phase, researcher conducted an initial "open coding" of the written narratives. Researcher read the narratives using a line-by-line coding method grounded in the data sources rather than reading the narratives with a preset list of codes. Researcher wrote analytical memos throughout the process. These memos included written records of analytical thinking and provided interpretive data points that called the researcher attention. As expected, the writing process informed the second phase of the qualitative analysis, the interpretive process, moving from over 80 accumulated codes to clusters of similar codes that later developed to fifteen larger categories. This type of focused coding helped to transform codes into categories. Through a thematic and conceptual development process significant patterns and repeated evidence of predominant content themes were identified. The researcher further collapsed the fifteen categories into five general themes informed by the essay question #18: *"When you think of community engagement and language learning at an early age, what was your most substantial learning?* The five prevalent themes identified in student narratives in response to this question are the following: 1. Children enjoy learning; 2. Willingness to work more with children; 3. Importance of teacher preparation; 4. Benefits to the community; and 5. L2 culture entertains children.
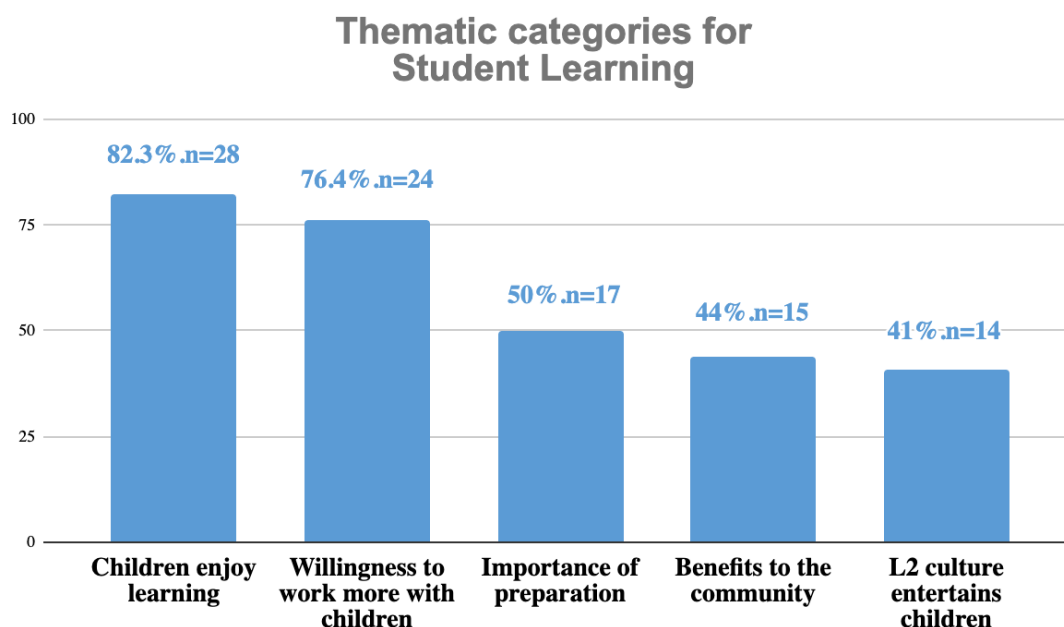

Thematic categories for Student Learning

- Children enjoy learning: 82.3% .n=28
- Willingness to work more with children: 76.4% .n=24
- Importance of preparation: 50% .n=17
- Benefits to the community: 44% .n=15
- L2 culture entertains children: 41% .n=14

Figure 1. Thematic categories from student reflections

As shown in Figure 1, the most prevalent theme was "children enjoy learning" (n=28), 82.3% of the students indicated that throughout this project they were shocked that children enjoyed learning Spanish language and culture as much as they did. Students reported that they had not expected much enthusiasm from preschoolers and they stated that children's willingness to participate in the program encouraged them to be more committed to the quality of the teaching sessions. Several students shared an appreciation for the non-judgmental and open-minded attitude of the preschoolers towards their material and their teaching skills. On the contrary to what students expected, most preschoolers showed an accepting attitude towards the lessons. Two representative examples of this finding were the following: "Children are very excited to learn about Day of the Dead and they had many questions. I did not think they wanted to know so much about this festivity" (Student #25), and "The little ones always smile and they are happy to be in Spanish class. They are intelligent and have good questions. We did not expect this" (Student #10). The second theme was "willingness to work more with children". Student reflections showed that 76.4% of the students, a total of 24 students, felt joy while working with preschoolers and they were willing to invest more time teaching and learning with children. Many of them did not specify if they were willing to continue working with children in a community-engaged project for an academic class or if they wished to spend time with children outside the academic context. Nevertheless, phrases such as "more time with children" "more projects with children"; "I want/ I would like/ I hope to see the children next semester"; "I want this activity to stay in this course for many years" were evident in 76.4% of the essays. The third theme was "importance of preparation". A total of 50% of the students (n=17) stated that planning the lesson and choosing the adequate pedagogical materials in advance was key to successful sessions. The verbs, "to organize", "to plan", and "to prepare" were used by the students who reported that a preparation phase was crucial to accomplish lesson objectives. Planning a wide range of activities and having a plan B in case preschoolers did not engage as expected, was decisive for the success of the assignment. For example, Student #11 wrote "I learned that it is important to have well prepared lessons and we should not go to the school to improvise. There was a day that I improvised and it did not work well at all". Additionally, several students acknowledged the importance of including different activity formats directed to multiple intelligences, as described in Gardner's book (2006). For example, student #33 stated "children like to dance, to sing, to paint, to watch videos. It is important to change the activity formats frequently to accommodate the different intelligences and children short concentration span". The fourth theme was contribution to the community. A total of 44% of students realized that there were alternative ways to contribute to the community that could be highly engaging and stimulating for them. Their comments discussed student gratification with their contribution to the community within their college. The enjoyment of contributing to their immediate community in a gratifying manner while learning about language and culture made an impact on them. Student #12 stated "I loved contributing to the Duquesne University community. I did not know that teaching about another culture is also a way of engaging with the community. I liked to share everything I learned about Colombian culture with the children and their parents" (Student#14). Student #8 also referred to a new way of contributing to the community by sharing with preschoolers the appreciation for a new language and culture. "I learned that I can benefit the community within my campus. I thought that participating in the community can only happen in a hospital or in a food bank. Now, I understand that when we helped children to learn about Latin-American culture, we helped the community to be more tolerant and more prepared". (Student #9). For the fifth theme, 41% of the students, a total of 14 students, declared that children eagerly learned L2 culture. Particularly, students in the third year of the project realized that culture worked as a bridge to teach language to children and it helped them understand different cultural perspectives. During the third year the researcher gave students an introduction to content-based instruction and gave them several simple examples to teach culture content and

language simultaneously. "Children loved learning about the Valentine's Day kisses in Spain and about the flowers tradition. I was happily surprised that they had questions about the kisses and the presents" (Student #30). A few respondents commented on the complexity of some cultural nuances, such as the meaning of death in Mexican culture, the imagery of the butterflies, and the symbolism of the candles. "Teaching culture was my favorite part, even though when we had to talk about death and how some Latin Americans celebrate death, we were a little nervous" (Student#29). Students admitted to have a difficult time explaining these concepts to the preschoolers. Notwithstanding, despite the complexity of the topics, 41% of the students confirmed that children were motivated to learn and engaged during the cultural lessons.

5.2. Quantitative Data from Parents

Evidence addressing the effectiveness of the program NNBB to raise awareness about the benefits of exposing children to an L2 was drawn from Likert-scale surveys completed by the parents. To answer the second research question of the present study, the researcher focused on item 1 in the survey. *"This program helped me to reconsider the significance of having my child learning a foreign language"* and question 3. *"This program encouraged my child to learn Spanish and it developed a positive attitude towards the Spanish language and culture learning process"*. All data was imported into Microsoft Excel and percentages for their responses were calculated. For question 1, 12 parents, 85.7% of respondents, responded "strongly agree" while 2 families, 14.2% marked "agree". Regarding question 3, which inquired about encouraging children to learn more about the L2, 14 parents, 100% of the families, responded "strongly agree". Figure 2. shows the results from the surveys returned by the parents. We acknowledge that the small sample of participating parents completing the surveys does not permit us to generalize the results, however the encouraging responses from the families indicate a solid willingness to advocate for foreign language exposure in the pre-school settings.
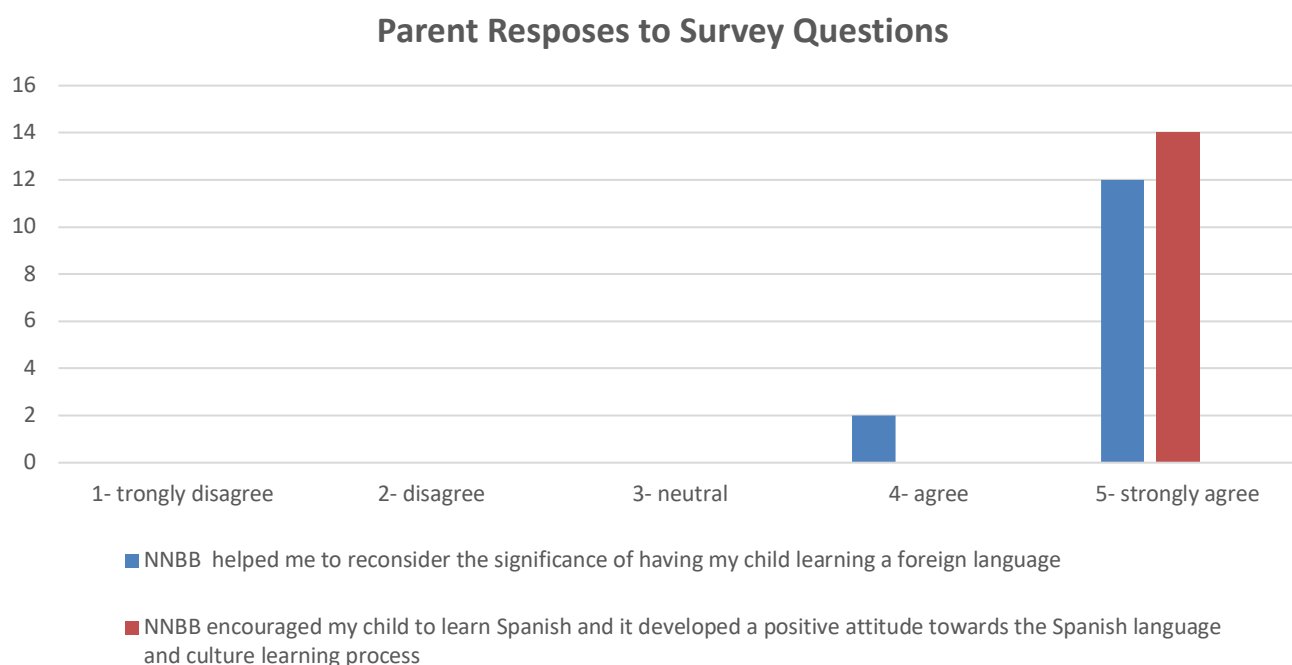

Parent Resposes to Survey Questions

■ NNBB helped me to reconsider the significance of having my child learning a foreign language

■ NNBB encouraged my child to learn Spanish and it developed a positive attitude towards the Spanish language and culture learning process

Figure 2. Parent Responses to Survey Questions # 1 and #3

5. Discussion

Overall, the program NNBB proved to be an effective tool for helping students to consider CE pedagogy to promote foreign language learning at a young age. As Unsworth (2016) stated, there are significant age effects that need to be understood when learning a foreign language, and we believed that students in this study had the opportunity to observe some of the young age advantages during the language learning process. Students' perceptions of learning a language at a young age correlate with Muñoz and Singleton (2011) when they highlighted that children typically outperform adults when learning an L2, even though the critical age period to learn an L2 still remains controversial (Muñoz & Singleton, 2011). In the written reflections, students shared their viewpoints towards learning a foreign language at an early age after having worked with preschoolers for three weeks. As Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson (2003) proved in their study, students in NNBB believed that young children showed a cognitive advantage to learning an L2 over other age groups. Students had the opportunity to experience first-hand the age bracket in which learning an L2 can be accomplished more efficiently than in later age brackets. More traditional educational approaches commonly used in the US expose children to a foreign language at the age of twelve. Teaching Spanish to young children versus adolescents or adults, and reflecting on the shortcomings involved in learning an L2 at an older age, encouraged students to think critically about their work with the preschoolers. Despite the challenges, such as children's short attention spans, time consuming assignments, and the logistics involved to interview native speakers in their home countries (time changes, difficulty to understand the native accent of the interviewee and/or technical issues), most students positively indicated their appreciation with the college community and their intent to continue working on CE in future semesters. As a matter of fact, a total of 76% of them, expressed a strong willingness to continue participating in community-engaged projects. They also asserted that after participating in NBBB, some of them planned to stay connected to the Child Development Center. The inclination to expand their engagement with the preschool might be directly connected to the well-designed and meticulously implemented program, as well as, the contagious motivation of the preschoolers and director of the preschool. The prospect that students will develop a desire to continue working with the community is a relevant effect of the program. This program proves that involvement in community-engaged programs does not only involve participants in civic engagement, but it also benefits community partners by assisting with needs, such as second language exposure in a highly monolingual area where bilingual schools are out of the reach for the average family. As mentioned in the introduction, bilingual education at an early age comes with a price in this area of the US.

Students reported a willingness to work with the community in future endeavors related to Spanish learning. This fact speaks to the positive impact that goes beyond the "one-time" CE course experience (Osa-Melero, Fernández & Quiñones, 2019). Student narratives demonstrated that this program provided students with the opportunity to use their newly learned L2 cultural knowledge and their linguistic knowledge to step outside of the traditional classroom and raise awareness about the importance of an L2. As it Caldwell's study (2007) proved, NNBB also promoted self-confidence in the L2 as shown in the willingness expressed by the students to continue working as language educators in the community. Students' motivation to continue their collaboration with the community gradually increased as Falce-Robinson and Strother's participants (2012) revealed in their study with heritage and non-heritage speakers.

An additionally noteworthy finding is the fact that students recognized and understood the importance of class preparation in order to achieve success as a language educator. The fact that 50% of the students admitted that improvising activities did not translate into effective teaching can be considered a positive learning outcome.

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Most educators are aware that detailed planning is essential for a successful lesson. However, college students did not fully understand the critical role of lesson planning prior to their participation in this program. Learning the benefits of preparation and planification, especially when the audience is formed by preschool children, is a well-regarded accomplishment for college students. Professional development and teacher preparation for sustained contact with students are key for successful teaching performances. In line with this finding, King and Newman (2000) point out that enhancing teachers' knowledge, teaching skills and dispositions through professional development positively impacts student achievement. In the same line, Meador (2019) reiterates that, on the one hand, preparation and planning are a critical component of effective teaching, but on the other hand, lack of preparation thereof will lead directly to failure. If anything, every teacher should be over prepared.

Regarding the second research question, researcher was heartened to see data that confirms the value of CE as a tool to make parents (re)think about their monolinguistic reality versus their bilingual ideals. To the statement *"This program helped me to reconsider the significance of having my child learning a foreign language"*, 85. 7% of the surveyed parents responded "strongly agree" and 14.3% responded "agree". The program was also strongly acknowledged by the parents as a program that raises children's interest in Spanish language and culture. Survey results confirmed that NNBB reiterated the importance of exposing children to an L2 during preschool years instead of waiting until the adolescence stage. Considering the tuition rate for the academic year at the Child Development preschool, we could assume that most of the participating families would fall in the middle-class socio-economic category. Therefore, we can assume that the knowledge of the benefits of bilingualism are spread among these families. This program was key though, to reinforce the idea that the younger children are exposed to an L2, the more beneficial this exposure is for the learners' language learning process. Parents seemed to understand, as King, K. & Fogle, L. (2006), and Unsworth, 2016 declared, that foreign language exposure at an early age is an essential key to strengthening children's education.

The endorsement of this idea is key for restructuring the curriculum in the Child Development Center and it opened a space for foreign language learning. The director of the center and the researcher discussed results and comments from parents' surveys to conclude that the program NNBB would continue each academic year with two to three additional cultural lessons; more effective communication lines between parents, college students and professor; and simpler but more effective homework activities. Given that parents are assigned a brief task to review the lesson with their children every night after the Spanish sessions, it is vital to acknowledge the role of the parents for the goal of this program. The review task, created by students under the professor's supervision, focuses on reviewing the content of the lesson and invites parents to become involved in the learning process. Programs like this show parents that language programs in preschools are positive. This realization has initiated a conversation between parents and the center director about a long-term and more structured Spanish program in the Child Development Center academic curriculum in the near future. The National Research Council (2001) asserts that "Educational concerns may motivate professional organizations, parents, and others to work towards particular goals" (p. 73). Parents exert control over the education of their children. If parents are concerned that their children's educational interest is not well served, they usually voice their concerns and, as a group, they have the power to influence the school curriculum. Many schools, like Child Development Center welcome collaboration between parents and teachers, and parents are frequently invited to offer suggestions to make the school experience more meaningful for the children. Following the parents and researcher conversation with the director of the center, several modifications benefitting L2 language and culture learning will be implemented in the preschool curriculum in the future.

Considering that there is not a single parent who responded, "neutral" "disagree" or "strongly disagree" to any of the questions in the survey, it can be stated that the program helped the parents to (re)think about their children's monolingual context and the advantages of learning a foreign language at a young age. Regarding the comments box, most parents requested to extend the program to 5 or 6 weeks in order to achieve a more impactful result. They also offered constructive feedback to the program and shared notes of gratitude to the professor, students, and preschool director. The length of time mentioned by the parents is an important factor for community-engaged programs. Prolonged and sustained community-engaged programs are important because these allow for campus and community partners to get to know each other well enough for the experience to improve over time for both parties and increase the benefits. As Brown (2001) stated, long term partnerships that begin before and last beyond the semester and provide opportunities for continuity avoid the "turnover" typical in traditional service-learning courses. As Mitchell (2008) asserts, projects focused on social change do not happen overnight, these take time. Due to the fact that one semester is not usually enough to shape children's language and director and parents 'perspectives, the director and professor agreed upon a timeframe of three consecutive years. Bearing in mind the beneficial effects that come with prolonged partnerships, the department of Modern Languages and Literatures is studying the possibility of extending NNBB to five weeks in the Conversation and Composition CE classes, and implementing it in other language courses with a community-engaged component.

6. Limitations

Although the results of this study add evidence to the existing literature on the effect of community-engaged programs at the university setting and the importance of early exposure to an L2, it is critical to acknowledge the limitations and mention recommendations for future applications of this program. First, we are aware that community-engaged programs are geared towards underserved populations. However, in this particular language context, the young monolingual population in a globalized and diverse society like ours, can be considered underserved. Depriving young children of the opportunity of becoming more sensitive to foreign languages and cultures until they reach adolescence is a disservice to the children.

Second, the present program includes less contact hours with the community per semester than typical CE programs at the same university, which include an average of 12 to 15 contact hours. This is mainly due to the structured curriculum for the Conversation and Composition CE course. However, the amount of hours in the community is being revised and updated. The third limitation is the lack of quantitative data from students to complement qualitative results from their written essays, as well as the lack of data from preschoolers. A set of Likert-surveys for the students could have offered quantitative results that confirmed or challenged data in the reflective essays. Consequently, it is recommended that future studies about the impact of these programs on college students, incorporate additional data collection tools to better explore the effects of the program on the participants. The fourth limitation focuses on the parents' sample. The low rate (14 out of 20) of returned surveys might have affected the overall results. In the future, returning the surveys will be required of parents in order for their child to participate in the program.

In spite of these limitations, the collected data provides valuable insights into one form of CE merged with language teaching.

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7. Conclusion

The end of the program self-reflection essays revealed some of the same positive findings about language learning at an early age found in prior studies such as Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson (2003); Cha & Goldenberg (2015); and Espinosa (2015). Evidence in the essays also supports the positive influence of CE programs on college students regarding their commitment to the improvement of their community, such as Caldwell (2007); Falce-Robinson and Strother (2012); Osa-Melero, Fernández & Quiñones (2019) proved in their studies. This pilot study, as Osa-Melero, Fernández & Quiñones' study (2019), demonstrates that CE pedagogy successfully connects language teaching and learning with the willingness of contributing to the community outside of the four classroom walls. Additionally, NNBB offers language professors the opportunity to incorporate the elusive fifth C (Communities) in the ACTFL National Standards in Foreign Language Education into the Spanish upper-level curriculum. As Hellebrandt and Jorge (2013) point out, the C for Communities is almost universally agreed upon as the most difficult to address. Its first objective (5.1) states that "students should use language both within and beyond the school setting," and the second says that "they should show evidence of becoming life-long learners by using the language for personal enjoyment an enrichment" (204). NNBB efforts yielded numerous benefits ranging from linguistic and cultural gains for college students and preschoolers to changes in how students perceive their future work in the community. Students discovered, engaged, and dedicated themselves to a community that welcomed learning a foreign language and foreign cultural practices. Creating a community-engaged program that reconciles two different, but related disciplines, such as teaching foreign languages and CE, with the objectives of an upper-level language Spanish class, has been cognitively and personally rewarding for students, children, professor, parents and program director.

It is a positive outcome that students in NNBB confirmed their willingness to engage in community language activities to expose children to a foreign language, especially if we consider how the current federal budget proposal in the US would affect foreign language programs. When preschools do not have the financial means to implement a foreign language program in their curriculum, college students in the area can assist. Through the program's evolution, undergraduate students gradually moved beyond from the role of traditional student to the role of language educator responsible for planning, executing and following up on language lessons in their community. Students thought outside the box through CE. By connecting young children, parents, teachers, and professors with college students, we created a network of knowledge, collaboration and opportunities for all participants to start building a strong bilingual and bicultural community. As (Díaz-Rico, 2012) stated, half of the population of the United States will speak Spanish by 2050, a reality that cannot be ignored. This article is an invitation for CE educators in language departments to add to this research pilot study into their upper- level courses.

About the author

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Appendix

Final survey for parents/ tutors involved in

Niños y Niñas Billingües y Biculturales

This is an anonymous survey, unless you prefer to include your name, about the program *Niños y niñas bilingües*. Before responding the questions, please think about how this program has impacted you and your family. Be honest and write any feedback you might want to share with the director of the program and the professor leading this program. Return as soon as possible to the Duquesne main office. Surveys will be picked up by Dr. Osa-Melero and used for research purposed in total confidentially.

Please return your survey via email to osamelerol@duq.edu

Rate the following assertions following the 1-5 scale according to your level of agreement with the statement.

Overall:

1. This program helped me to reconsider the significance of having my child learning a foreign language.

_____1. Strongly disagree   _____2. Disagree   _____3. Neutral. _____   4 Agree   _____5. Strongly agree

2. This program made me realize how monolingual and monocultural my family is.

_____1. Strongly disagree   _____2. Disagree   _____3. Neutral. _____   4 Agree   _____5. Strongly agree

3. This program encouraged my child to learn Spanish and it developed a positive attitude towards the Spanish language and culture learning process.

_____1. Strongly disagree   _____2. Disagree   _____3. Neutral. _____   4 Agree   _____5. Strongly agree

4. This program made my child believe that Spanish is fun and not hard to learn

_____1. Strongly disagree   _____2. Disagree   _____3. Neutral. _____   4 Agree   _____5. Strongly agree

Regarding home tasks prepared by college students:

5. This program helped me interact with my child while focusing a different language and different culture.

_____1. Strongly disagree   _____2. Disagree   _____3. Neutral. _____   4 Agree   _____5. Strongly agree

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6. The home tasks helped me as a parent to learn some Spanish and some cultural aspects about specific Spanish-speaking countries.

_____1. Strongly disagree   _____2. Disagree   _____3. Neutral. _____ 4 Agree   _____5. Strongly agree

7. This program made me think of the benefits of exposing my children to Spanish language and culture

_____1. Strongly disagree   _____2. Disagree   _____3. Neutral. _____ 4 Agree   _____5. Strongly agree

8. The pedagogical material created by undergraduate students was engaging.

_____1. Strongly disagree   _____2. Disagree   _____3. Neutral. _____ 4 Agree   _____5. Strongly agree

9. The content of the tasks were relevant for a child and also for a parent.

_____1. Strongly disagree   _____2. Disagree   _____3. Neutral. _____ 4 Agree   _____5. Strongly agree¡

10. The brief audio messages helped me understand the content of the lessons

_____1. Strongly disagree   _____2. Disagree   _____3. Neutral. _____ 4 Agree   _____5. Strongly agree

11. The brief audio messages helped me understand the pronunciation of the new Spanish words

_____1. Strongly disagree   _____2. Disagree   _____3. Neutral. _____ 4 Agree   _____5. Strongly agree

Recommendations

12. I would recommend any parent in the Child Development center to have their child be involved in the program "Niños y Niñas bilingües y biculturales"

_____1. Strongly disagree   _____2. Disagree   _____3. Neutral. _____ 4 Agree   _____5. Strongly agree

13. I would like the program "Niños y Niñas bilingües y biculturales" to last longer than two weeks each semester.

_____1. Strongly disagree   _____2. Disagree   _____3. Neutral. _____ 4 Agree   _____5. Strongly agree

14. I would agree to a fee of $5- $10 a semester to assist with funding for pedagogical materials created by students for the preschoolers.

_____1. Strongly disagree   _____2. Disagree   _____3. Neutral. _____ 4 Agree   _____5. Strongly agree

Other comments (please add any comment that contributes to strengthen this program)

Thank you so much for completing the survey! Your answers are very helpful ¡Muchas gracias!