

## **Nos Perteneíamos:**

### **Finding Community in a Summer Literacy Camp for Emergent Bilinguals**

Erin Hamel  
Winthrop University  
[hamele@winthrop.edu](mailto:hamele@winthrop.edu)

Lindsay Yearta  
Winthrop University  
[yeartal@winthrop.edu](mailto:yeartal@winthrop.edu)

Bettie Parsons Barger  
Winthrop University  
[bargerbp@winthrop.edu](mailto:bargerbp@winthrop.edu)

#### **Abstract**

This is the story of sixteen early childhood emergent bilinguals, their families, five elementary-aged bilingual peer mentors, two teachers, and a university research team as they embarked on a journey to participate in an inaugural summer literacy camp for emergent bilinguals. Participants started that first day of camp as strangers to one another and in five short days became a community. Trends in the data suggest components necessary to establish community in a diverse setting and indicate important implications for sustaining emergent bilinguals' identity through community.

**Nos Pertenecíamos:****Finding Community in a Summer Literacy Camp for Emergent Bilinguals****Introduction**

*“Thank you for everything you inspired in me and my children because I can know that there are still people with a big heart. God bless you and your family forever. This is from me and my family.”*

These are the words of a Latinx mother, whose two elementary-aged children served as peer mentors to early childhood-aged children enrolled in a week-long summer literacy camp. The camp, held in an early childhood laboratory school on a university campus, was designed to provide literacy-rich experiences for emergent bilingual children in a space that intentionally honored, respected, and valued their identities. While our country is filled with schools that privilege mainstream populations and embrace Eurocentric mindsets that adopt white-esteemed curricula (Alim & Paris, 2017), this “school” (camp) experience was designed to be different. The intention was not to maintain the status quo but to educate for empowerment and liberation. Here, Latinx children and families, populations often marginalized in schools, would *know* they matter and their rich histories, experiences and knowledge bases would serve as valuable contexts for learning. Together, we sought to create learning spaces where young Latinx children saw themselves in every crevice of the classroom. On the walls, in the books, through the songs and in the language, we aimed to focus on identifying our “collective humanity and [establishing] a communal sense of belonging” (Baines, Tisdale & Long, 2018, p.14). This is the story of sixteen four- and five-year-old children (nine of whom

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were Latinx) and their families, five elementary-aged bilingual peer mentors, two teachers, and a university research team as they embarked on a journey to participate in an inaugural summer literacy camp. We came to that first day of camp as strangers to one another, yet in five short days, we became a community. We belonged to each other.

### **Literature Review**

Emergent bilinguals are the most rapidly growing population in the United States; currently 25% of students in the United States speak a language other than English at home (García & Kleifgen, 2018). Speaking more than one language results in increased metalinguistic awareness, cognitive functioning, and creativity (García & Kleifgen, 2018). For nearly a decade, researchers have been calling for a shift in the terminology used to describe children who speak languages other than English and are learning English (García, 2009). The intent is to move away from deficit view labels such as English as a Second Oral Language (ESOL), English Learner (EL), and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) toward a term such as *emergent bilinguals* which recognizes and places emphasis on the expertise required to become bilingual or multilingual (García, 2009; Lazar, 2018). As educators, we must respect and affirm emergent bilingual children as the cultural and linguistic experts that they are (Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee, 2017).

Language is inextricably bound with identity (Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee, 2017; Cain, 2017). In this camp, we wanted to “acknowledge, respect, affirm, and value” the languages and identities of these campers (Cain, 2017, p. 486) with the intention of utilizing what we had learned from the pivotal research on culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) (Alim & Paris,

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2017). For us, culturally relevant pedagogy lays the groundwork for using asset-based perspectives as we plan curriculum and engage with young emergent bilingual children. We believe culturally sustaining practices push us further, to strategically develop educational experiences, using culturally authentic texts and materials that are interconnected and designed to “build, extend, and sustain students’ local and cultural knowledge” (Nash, Panther, Arce-Boardma, 2017, p. 605). In this way, we see the foundation of this camp as being grounded in our understandings of CRP, but our ultimate vision is that the camp is a site that *sustains* the cultural identities of young emergent bilinguals.

The purpose of this camp was to affirm the cultural identities of emergent bilingual children in a setting that was culturally sustaining. A major component of culturally sustaining pedagogy is supporting and valuing communities who have historically been, and continue to be, harmed and erased through the schooling process (Alim & Paris, 2017). We intended to honor camp participants’ culture, identity, and heritage in a literacy-rich environment, where literacies beyond what are typically privileged in schools are legitimized (Campano, Ghiso & Welch, 2013; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Taylor, 1997; Purcell-Gates, 2007; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), using culturally sustaining practices. Through our attempts to do so, we developed a strong community.

Communities play a central role in the lives of emergent bilingual children. Elements of thriving communities often include effective leadership, growth and development, lifelong learning, cultural heritage, and a sense of community (“Eleven Components of a Successful Community,” 2014). The remaining sections of this

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manuscript provide a detailed analysis of our summer literacy camp community and shares implications for educators.

### **Methodology**

#### **Setting**

The first annual camp occurred during one week in June 2018 at a university laboratory school in the southeastern portion of the United States. The planning of the literacy camp took place over the course of the preceding academic year. The two teachers, Ria, a native Spanish speaker and Lisa, a native English speaker, created and facilitated the camp experiences. The teachers agreed that during the camp, Ria would speak Spanish and Lisa would speak English. Together, they developed the daily schedule and curriculum. Literature, music, art, and physical activity were interwoven throughout the day. They utilized a play-based, centers-approach as they designed camp engagements that were grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogy.

A typical day at camp began at 8:30 when campers and peer mentors were dropped off by their parents or the bus. Families had the option to bring their children directly to the camp or to a local Latinx church for bus service. As students entered the classroom, they were greeted by the teachers and encouraged to play in the different learning centers. Campers milled about the room, talking and playing until 8:45 when they were called to the whole group meeting area for group time. Each day, group time included a song and movement activity, a read-aloud conducted in Spanish and English, and a discussion, connected to the read-aloud, about the day's center activities.

By 9:00, children were actively engaged in learning centers of their choice. Children experienced play-based learning as they navigated the centers and learned about

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and shared aspects of their identity. For example, after reading *Marisol McDonald Doesn't Match* / *Marisol McDonald No Combina* (Brown, 2011), campers wrote about and illustrated their own special talents in their “All About Me” books in the book-making center.

Teachers encouraged the children to clean up their materials at 10:00 and the group moved outside, or to the gym, for large motor free play. Around 10:45, children came back inside, participated in a yoga activity, engaged in an interactive poem, fingerplay and/or song, and then transitioned back into centers. All engagements were presented in both Spanish and English.

At 11:40, students returned to the carpet and engaged in a culminating activity. For example, on Wednesday, children listened to a poem that was related to the book from the morning; on Thursday, the peer mentors each chose a book to read to small groups. Teachers also used this time to pass out notes or materials if necessary. Camp concluded at 12:00 and students went home with their waiting families or got back on the bus to be driven to the church.

### **Participants**

The camp participants included early childhood campers, upper elementary peer mentors, teachers, and researchers (see Table 1). The children’s school district is comprised of approximately 18,000 students, 6% of whom are Hispanic (as referenced in the school district’s website).

**Table 1: Camp Participants**

Participants	First Language	
	Spanish	English
<b>Campers (ages 4-6)</b>	10	6
<b>Peer Mentors (ages 9-12)</b>	3	2
<b>Teachers</b>	1	1
<b>Researchers</b>	0	3

**Campers.** Sixteen rising kindergarten and first grade children were recruited from the school district (local to the university lab school) to participate as campers. According to camp applications completed by parents, ten of the children were native Spanish speakers and six were native English speakers. Some of the native Spanish speakers and all of the native English speakers were enrolled in the language immersion school of choice program within the school district.

**Peer mentors.** Five upper elementary-aged children, all enrolled in the same language immersion school of choice program where Ria worked, served as peer mentors at the camp. The peer mentors were Nieve, Tabitha, Adrianna, Nicholas, and Joaquin (all names are pseudonyms). Three were native Spanish speakers and two were native English speakers. Their role was to support the children and teachers in the camp experience, assisting with translation between children and teachers and between teachers and families; working with campers in small groups and one-on-one; playing with

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children during recess; assisting teachers in setting up the classroom, preparing snacks, etc. The peer mentors provided consistent and invaluable support each day. During the camp, they spoke in both languages and often engaged in translanguaging in their communications with the campers.

**Teachers.** Ria, a native Spanish speaker, was employed as a kindergarten assistant in a language immersion school. The school is one of two language immersion schools of choice in the local school district. She was born in Ecuador and moved to the United States when she was seventeen years old. The other camp teacher, Lisa, a native English speaker and born in the United States, was employed as the lead kindergarten teacher at a university early childhood laboratory school. The teachers co-planned and co-taught the camp. In general, all communications to the whole group were given in Spanish and English. One-on-one communications between teacher and child were conducted in the teacher's native language.

**Researchers.** Throughout the week-long camp, the research team, comprised of three university faculty members, one of whom also served as director of the camp, collected data. Throughout the week, they were participant observers in the field (Wolcott, 2001). At times they quietly typed observational notes, while at other times, they interacted with children by answering their questions, accepting their invitations to play, etc. When an opportunity to interact with the participants organically developed, researchers attempted to record the interactions in reflective journals. All three researchers were native English speakers.

In total, the group of summer camp participants were enrolled in three different schools and one university. While some participants knew each other (i.e. they attended

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the same school), no single participant knew everyone. For example, while the peer mentors all knew each other because they attended the same language immersion school, the campers did not. The sixteen campers represented three local schools: the school district's child development center (three children), language immersion school A (eight children), and language immersion school B (five children). Ria and Lisa, the two teachers, did not know each other prior to the camp. The camp director (and researcher) knew the two teachers, but the other two researchers had not met Ria prior to camp. For all involved, there were some familiar faces and many new faces.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection included reflective journals for each teacher and researcher and daily observation notes from researchers during the camp. The reflective journals were completed by teachers and researchers prior to the start of camp, during camp, and after camp. Some reflections were open responses and others were directed by prompts. Prior to camp, teachers and researchers reflected on readings about CRP and about the process of developing the camp curriculum. For example, teachers read “Employing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy to Foster Literacy Learning in Schools” (Wearmouth, 2017) and then responded to the following prompt: “Please journal your reaction to the articles that you read. This reaction can include questions, connections, new ideas, the information you want to remember, etc.” During camp, teachers and researchers completed a written reflection at the end of each day. Teachers also completed post-camp reflections (prompted) after the final day of camp (see Appendix A). In addition to reflective journals, the research team took daily, detailed observation notes about the camp activities and interactions between campers, peer mentors, and teachers.

**Data Analysis**

Researchers used an interpretivist approach (Erikson, 1986) as they coded data. They engaged in ongoing thematic analysis to code and make sense of the data (Glesne, 2006). The strongest themes to emerge from the data served as the basis of the findings. In an attempt to better understand the complexities of community, the research team studied the components of a successful community in “Eleven Components of a Successful Community,” (2014). The components of community outlined in this article closely aligned with researchers’ data codes (see Table 2 for the code comparison). It is important to note that there were some components detailed in the article that were irrelevant to the camp’s context. For example, data was not coded for transportation because it did not play a prominent role in the camp. Utilizing these components of community as the framework, researchers worked together to analyze the data again. Through a constant-comparative analysis, themes, codes and subcodes (Saldaña, 2016) were determined.

**Table 2: Code Comparison**

New Hampshire Community Codes	Our Community Codes
1. Effective Community Leadership	Leadership <i>(teachers as leaders; peer mentors as leaders; our vision for the camp vision)</i>
2. Informed Citizen Participation	<i>Not coded. *this facet of community is implied by the campers’ participation in the camp and therefore was not coded</i>
3. Sense of Community	Sense of Community <i>(sharing and caring amongst camp participants)</i>
4. Fostering Healthy Families, Individuals, and Youth	Fostering Healthy Families <i>(our positive interactions with families)</i>

5. Lifelong Education and Learning	Lifelong Education & Learning <i>(teachers' professional development)</i>
6. Community Services, Facilities, and Utilities	<i>Not coded.</i> <i>*This facet of community was intentionally embedded in the running of the camp and not pertinent to the study.</i>
7. Recreation and Cultural Heritage	Cultural Heritage <i>(identity building, culturally relevant pedagogy; recreation was intentionally embedded in the running of the camp and not pertinent to the study)</i>
8. Working Landscape and the Natural Environment	Working Landscapes <i>(physical space of camp; structures and routines of camp; discussed in settings above)</i>
9. Economic Vitality	<i>Not coded.</i> <i>*This facet of community was not relevant to the camp context.</i>
10. Growth and Development	Growth & Development <i>(social and emotional growth of the campers and peer mentors)</i>
11. Transportation	<i>Not coded.</i> <i>*This facet of community was intentionally embedded in the running of the camp and not pertinent to the study.</i>

**Findings**

The following section outlines the findings from our study, organized by the components of community identified above: cultural heritage, growth and development, lifelong education and learning, leadership, fostering healthy families, and sense of community. We propose that together, these constructs created the conditions for a thriving community to be established in our emergent bilingual summer literacy camp.

**We Recognized and Honored *Cultural Heritage* and Identities**

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When activities reflect cultural heritage, they “build a community’s positive sense of self” and “strengthen the fabric of social interactions” (“Eleven Components of a Successful Community,” 2014, p. 2). One goal of the camp was for children to feel affirmed in their identities. Children created “All about Me Books” where they wrote stories about the origins of their names. Parents submitted these stories early in the week so that children could use them as a guide. Lisa noted that this activity gave children “a chance to learn about their heritage and where their names derive from. The kids were given an opportunity to share what they knew about their name with the rest of their peers.” For example, Aliza’s mom wrote that her name is significant because it means that she is the “la alegría del padre” and Jacenia’s mother wrote that she chose the name Jacenia “because it’s fun. Because it brings all of the love into our life and it’s not a very common name.” While families chose names for a variety of reasons, by sharing their names and their origins with their peers, all children were supported in developing a sense of identity.

Another significant goal of the camp was that it “valued the children’s cultures and gave them positive school experiences,” as noted by the director. In order to do that, it was imperative that the materials, including books and songs were authentic. When selecting authentic texts, we looked for children’s literature that did not perpetuate stereotypes, included realistic stories that were not folklore, and that were written by a cultural insider (see Appendix B). We also used Spanish translations of favorite children’s books, as we wanted to present bilingual books and books in first languages for all campers.

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One afternoon, the peer mentors spread out on blankets with a group of campers to read books as the campers enjoyed popsicles. Joaquin, a peer mentor, had David, a camper, hanging on every word of *¡Un caso grave de rayas!* (Shannon, 2002), the Spanish translation of *A Bad Case of the Stripes*. When the book was over, David requested that Joaquin read the book again. When it was time to move to the next activity, he was uninterested in anything suggested to him, including a book that Lisa was reading. Later that day, when Joaquin was able to continue reading, David was once again hooked. In fact, the next morning David requested again that Joaquin reread *¡Un caso grave de rayas!* One of the researchers asked David why he was so interested in what Joaquin was reading. David responded that it was because the reading was in Spanish. This example suggests that using books in his first language was a powerful and meaningful experience for David.

The research team and the teachers often underscored to the children how smart they were and how much they could and did contribute to the camp. One day, Lisa spelled the name of Mercedes' father and Mercedes asked how Lisa knew this information. Lisa responded that she had taken some Spanish classes. Then, Mercedes asked if she knew how to spell her mother's name. Lisa replied, "No, but can you teach me how?" When Mercedes spelled the name, Lisa replied "See how much you can teach me?" This example demonstrates how the teachers sought to establish a positive sense of self in the children. This focus was embraced by the researchers as well. One researcher reflected "I hope the [children] felt honored and like the experts they are."

As camp progressed, the research team discovered multiple places for improvement in affirming the cultural heritage of camp participants in a more thorough

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way. One researcher wrote in her reflective journal, “I so very much loved being able to listen to and learn from the children.” She wondered what would happen if the peer mentors helped to create some of the camp materials. The director noted the same idea in her reflective journal:

We need more of the children in this and less of us. Maybe the peer mentors and the children can create books together? Skits? Let them truly be the center of the camp, rather than just attendees. Right now, this looks like a bilingual day at [a school] and that is not what my hope is for this camp.

Ultimately, it was imperative that the campers felt valued for their identities, languages, culture, and individuality. Lisa summed up her hopes when she wrote, “I hope that camp would be a place where children could feel at home and welcomed - that they would know that each one of them is valued and respected as an individual.”

### **Members of Our Community Experienced *Growth and Development***

Thriving communities foster the growth and development of its members (“Eleven Components of a Successful Community,” 2014, p. 3). While the goals of the camp did not include specific academic aims (i.e. camp participants will make gains in Fountas and Pinnell reading levels), the camp’s mission, from its inception, was to provide a *literacy-rich* learning environment for young emergent bilinguals. The classroom was set up in learning centers, each equipped with materials intended to serve as provocations, inviting the young learners to engage, explore and inquire. For example, a variety of books, writing tools and paper, instruments, manipulatives, art medium and tools, blocks, Legos, puzzles, games, science materials, and computers were made available to campers to use for purposes that they found meaningful. Again, the camp

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was not designed to intentionally teach and assess. Accordingly, data collection did not focus on cognitive growth and development. However, what became obvious in the data was that growth and development *did* take place for many of the campers and peer mentors, as well.

In her post-camp reflection, Ria noted, “The benefits for participants attending the summer camp is that it made a great positive impact on their social skills.” Time and time again, data excerpts illustrate the ways that the young campers, in just one short week, grew socially. We were initially fearful that the young children would be afraid. After all, this was a new school, new classroom, new teachers, new peers, and new routines and procedures. We were amazed how quickly the children, who were quiet and reserved on that first day of camp, began to openly engage with the other campers, peer mentors and teachers. Mid-week, the director commented in her reflective journal, “I see them blossoming. They are not as shy as they were in the beginning. They are telling me stories about their homes and families. They are asking questions and laughing more.” While at the beginning of the week, there were lots of wide eyes and cautious steps as children chose which centers they wanted to work in, by the end of the week, the classroom was filled with children who were eagerly talking with one another, laughing, and sharing stories.

The role of peer mentors, at the start of the camp, was largely to be assistants to the teachers. Our thoughts were that the peer mentors would play with the children during center time, assist with translation (both written and verbal), help set up the classroom materials, and be an overall support to the children and teachers. Data excerpts reveal that on the first day of camp, the peer mentors tended to stick together. For example, one

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researcher noted that all the peer mentors were playing Candy Land with one another, but no campers were playing with them. Later that morning, Lisa noted that all the peer mentors were playing with a small group of children in the dramatic play center, at the same time. After the campers and peer mentors went home on that first day, the teachers and researchers discussed these observations. It was decided that the director would talk to the peer mentors about separating from one another, spreading out in the classroom and engaging with small groups of children.

After this short, clarifying conversation with the director, peer mentors appeared to grow more confident in their roles. For example, Joaquin self-assuredly led an activity in the science center and expertly scaffolded the experience to meet the varying ability levels of the campers. Additionally, one day, Tabitha was working a puzzle. Two campers, Reid and Vincent, approached her and showed interest in the puzzle. Tabitha demonstrated gradual release of support by first independently putting some pieces of the puzzle together, then verbally directing Reid and Vincent to add some pieces and finally, completely turned the puzzle over for them to complete on their own. These examples demonstrate how the peer mentors grew more socially comfortable and confident in fulfilling their roles.

In these ways, the camp experience *did* foster growth and development. The campers grew socially and emotionally. While supporting children's growth and development was not specifically named as a goal, it certainly became an obvious outcome of the camp experience.

**Teachers and Researchers Participated in *Lifelong Education and Learning***

In order to contribute to community life, participants need to constantly develop knowledge (“Eleven Components of a Successful Community”, 2014). Both teachers and researchers demonstrated evidence of lifelong learning in their journals. They questioned what they were doing, how they could do it better, and to what degree the camp was, if at all, culturally relevant and sustaining. Throughout the camp the team reflected on and discussed these questions together. For example, one observation was made that the camp privileged English. The charts around the room listed the English words on top with Spanish words underneath. The bilingual books read aloud to children had pages that were printed in English first and then Spanish. Researchers questioned how to make changes so that Spanish was privileged as the first language just as often, or possibly more than, English was privileged. Together, the team made decisions and by the third day of camp, charts were written in Spanish first, books were read in Spanish and then English, and letters to families were written first in Spanish and second in English.

The teachers’ journal reflections often described their excitement for the opportunities for learning they perceived the camp afforded them. Ria indicated that she was looking forward to “teaching and learning from the kids.” Lisa wrote, “I was excited about the chance to expand my own knowledge, work with people I don’t normally get to work with, work with a different population, and grow as an educator.” She wrote about the need to research culturally sustaining practices to better plan for the camp. Teachers also explained that they learned from each other. Lisa claimed that her work with Ria led her to “a more culturally responsive curriculum.” These teachers were excited about learning something new, indicating that they are lifelong learners.

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In reflective journals, researchers asked questions about how the camp was or was not fulfilling the original vision of creating a space where Latinx children saw themselves in every space of the classroom. The director wrote “How can we do CRP if we don’t know the kids? What did we do to get to know the kids on Day 1 of camp?” They also asked complex questions about their biases and their behavior. In one documented incident, the director asked Ria what types of snacks to serve to make the campers feel like they are “at home.” Ria responded that she did not know. After reflecting on that day, the director questioned her own assumptions. She wrote, “How could she know? She doesn’t personally know these families/children. Do I treat her as though she represents the personal inclinations of every Spanish-speaking child? I think I do tend to look to her for insights. [This] might be unfair...” The director recognized that she made Ria the spokesperson for the group of Latinx children, when in reality, there was diversity among each individual camper. While the director was intentionally seeking to identify and honor the culture of the children, she conflated all Spanish-speaking children with a singular Latinx community, as if such a group existed. Her missteps were two-fold: one, believing Ria could name culturally appropriate snacks for all native Spanish-speaking children because she herself, was a native Spanish-speaker; and two, that all native Spanish-speaking children eat the same snacks at home. It is clear that the camp provided a valuable space for teachers and researchers to continue learning and growing in their profession.

### **Camp Participants Engaged in Shared *Leadership***

Community leaders represent their community, empower community members, and bring the community together (“Eleven Components of a Successful Community”,

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2014, p.1). This camp was the brainchild of the director, whose vision was “beyond providing a positive learning experience” for emergent bilingual campers. In reflective journals, she grappled with how to best articulate this vision in a way that would honor the students, allow families to see themselves in the camp, and for all of them to “know that they matter and that their lives serve as rich contexts for learning in schools.” In addition to working through how to bring this vision into reality, her leadership empowered teachers to create the space for the campers. This was noted in Lisa’s reflective journal. She explained, “I liked the control that we had and the access to materials. I felt that we had a lot of freedom to provide the campers with culturally responsive materials.” The strong leadership of the director, who encouraged teacher leadership, was a guiding force in the climate, atmosphere, and success of this camp experience.

When starting the camp, we knew that the peer mentors would play an important role in the daily operations of the camp; the director reflected that she was “amazed by the significant role of the peer mentors. I never knew how valuable they would be.” Data suggests the peer mentors voluntarily assumed leadership roles in several ways. First, the peer mentors enthusiastically assumed leadership roles in engaging students in activities. For example, Joaquin and Tabitha once noticed a camper standing alone and invited her to play Twister. On another occasion, Nicholas, a peer mentor, worked with Vincent to complete an alphabet puzzle, praising Vincent for naming the correct letter and sounds in sequential order. The peer mentors often took the initiative to read to the campers. In fact, Joaquin told the director “I really wish we had a chance to read to them. That would be more fun for us.” The director spread out quilts, peer mentors found books, and campers

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settled in with popsicles to enjoy a story. The researcher reflected, “It was perfect. The children were happy. The peer mentors were happy. Everyone was engaged. The peer mentors did an amazing job...” Their active leadership in engaging campers was invaluable.

Second, peer mentors assumed leadership roles in communicating with campers. As we planned the camp, we understood that communication may be difficult, based on language barriers. Lisa, as well as all three researchers, spoke English as their primary language. The addition of the bilingual peer mentors helped to bridge this barrier. One of the most fascinating patterns in our data was how much more abundant and extended the conversations were when children had the opportunity to speak in both languages. One day, Lisa worked with David on his “All about Me” book. They were discussing his talents and he succinctly told her “I draw.” The director, who was observing the conversation, asked what David liked to draw and he responded, “I like to draw robots.” The director asked a follow-up question that David did not understand. She called Nicholas over to translate and David became much more talkative. With Nicholas present, David began explaining, in excited tones, that he drew Transformers. An in-depth conversation between Lisa and David about their joint knowledge of and experiences with Transformers ensued, with Nicholas translating. As noted in the director’s journal, “the conversation became so much more complex” because of the presence of the peer mentor and his ability to translate and dialogue with the camper. In another event, Angelina was in the art center painting a picture of her family. The director asked questions about her painting. Angelina nodded, shook her head, or responded with one word. When peer mentor Tabitha joined the conversation and asked

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the same questions to Angelina in Spanish, Angelina “responded in Spanish and spoke in sentences.” While we believe language played an important role in supporting conversations, we also recognize the possibility that increased comfort levels of campers talking with peer mentors (due to relative closeness in age), rather than with adults, could also have impacted the frequency and depth of conversations.

Third, the peer mentors also served as leaders in family communication. For example, when families dropped off their child at camp, there was often a need for translation. Peer mentors would converse with families, ask questions from the teachers/researchers, and translate the answers (i.e. when and where the bus would pick up). Their ability to communicate with families, campers, teachers, and researchers was invaluable. We quickly realized that the peer mentors were an unexpected hidden gem in the camp community.

In these ways, the director's facilitation of shared leadership empowered the teachers to create a meaningful learning space for the campers. In addition, peer mentors were given the opportunity to step into leadership roles with the campers and they not only accepted these roles, but eagerly seized them. The entire camp was stronger because the leadership brought the community together.

### **Positive Interactions Fostered Healthy Families**

Although fostering healthy families in terms of physical health was never a goal of the camp staff, honoring, valuing and respecting families was a central focus and data suggest that focus may have fostered families' emotional health. Throughout our week together, varied positive interactions took place between camp staff and families, both planned and unplanned; many of these interactions can be linked to their potential to

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foster emotionally healthy families. The opening quote in this article, written by one mother of a peer mentor, is an example of one family's emotional health being fostered by camp and there were many more.

**Nonverbal communication.** Some interactions that may have fostered the emotional health of families were nonverbal. For example, one morning a parent went to the wrong entrance of the school to drop off a camper. Nicholas, a peer mentor, ran after the car, waving his arms in the air. When the mother pulled into a parking spot, she spoke Spanish to the director, who noted, "I did not understand her, but I smiled and tried to show her how happy I was that she was there. Her daughter came out of the car and held my hand and we walked into the classroom together." While the director was unable to verbally communicate with this mother, arm waving, smiles, head nodding and hand holding, all went a long way towards expressing a positive message. When language barriers prohibited verbal interactions, gestures and other forms of nonverbal communication served as important communication tools to support the emotional health of families.

**Verbal interactions.** Numerous data excerpts show evidence that verbal interactions between camp participants may also have fostered the emotional health of families. Most of these verbal interactions took place between Ria and families or the peer mentors who were translating for Lisa, researchers, and families. Seldom, if ever, did Lisa or the researchers speak directly to the family members who were native Spanish speakers without a translator to assist. Some of these verbal interactions took place in the classroom (during drop-off or pick-up or the Family Celebration) and others took place at the bus stop. For example, on the first day of camp, Ria drove to the bus stop to meet and

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greet the families. The director journaled “When I pulled up, Ria was already there, talking with two moms. There were five parents there with their six children. Everyone appeared happy and comfortable.” On another day, the director journaled about her verbal interactions with family members at the bus stop:

There was a new child at the bus stop. Her mother only spoke Spanish so Nicholas translated for me. He also translated for me as I thanked the mothers [who were native Spanish speakers] of the peer mentors. I wanted them to know how helpful their children were and how highly we regarded them. I was so comfortable talking with these parents because Nicholas was with me. It made it so easy.

Because of their abilities to translate, peer mentors served a unique role in facilitating conversations with families. The peer mentors helped us show families that we valued their ideas and that what they had to say was important, thus fostering their emotional health.

The Family Celebration that took place in the classroom on the last day of camp provided another opportunity for engaging in verbal interactions that could foster families’ emotional health. Each camper’s family was invited to attend. During this time, children sang songs they had learned that week, shared artwork they had created, and enjoyed snacks prepared by the campers. Families visited with one another, campers, and camp staff. Ria noted in her reflective journal:

The invitation sent to the parents [to] come to see what their children have done in the last few days was very important. I believe having them come was a great opportunity for them to see firsthand and experience what we are doing. One of

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the moms came to me and said, ‘My daughter have told me really nice things about the camp. I hope she can do it again next year.’

This celebration with families contributed to the community created throughout the week and was filled with positive verbal interactions that foster families’ emotional health.

**Written communications.** In addition to nonverbal and verbal communication, fostering emotionally healthy families was potentially supported through written communications between teachers and families. For example, teachers asked children and families to complete a page for an “All About Me” book that explains the origin of the child’s name. At the end of camp, the research team designed a parent survey to elicit their feedback about the camp experience. The day before the last day of camp, letters were sent home thanking families for their participation in the camp, praising their children for all they inspired in us, and inviting them to attend a Family Celebration. In these ways, validating the families as experts and soliciting their input and participation in the camp through written communication provided opportunities to support the emotional health of the camp families.

It is important to note, that while we cannot confirm a causal relationship regarding the positive interactions between families, teachers and research participants, and the fostering of the families’ emotional health, the data does suggest that these types of interactions have the potential to support the emotional health of families. Through nonverbal, verbal, and written communications, teachers and research participants were able to engage families in a variety of positive interactions that may have ultimately

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supported their emotional health - an important facet of community.

### **We Developed a *Sense of Community***

In order for a community to thrive, it must feel like a community. There must be a “common vision,” a respect for and a celebration of heritage, the development of social relationships, and the desire to share information (“Eleven Components of a Successful Community,” 2014, p.1). The sense of community was palpable among the camp participants. We posit that relationships developed among campers, peer mentors, teachers, and researchers contributed to the strong sense of community that was cultivated in the short time that the camp participants spent together.

The sense of community was evidenced as the teachers collaboratively planned curriculum and worked with children and peer mentors. For example, Ria explained in a journal entry, that she was happy to work with “a group of individuals that were looking to make this project succeed and help our kids from the community to have a week of fun and learning.” Additionally, on most days, Ria was present at the bus stop in the morning. She conversed with the children’s parents, further cementing the feeling of community.

The sense of community extended into the classroom. Ria noted in her reflective journal that the children worked together “on projects, supported each other, and shared their work and stories.” For example, Matthew, a native English speaker, was working in the art center when he called out “¡mira!” to Ria, because he wanted to share his work with her. Further data support Ria’s observation that children wanted to share with each other, as one researcher recorded in her observation journal: “Four children were playing in the block center, creating a house together and seamlessly sharing blocks and wooden dolls.” Photos of artwork by children decorated the walls of the classroom. Data indicate

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that the children, at some level understood that they were the experts. The children and peer mentors were honored during the camp.

The peer mentors were an integral part of the community as well. Instead of simply supervising activities, they joined in; they played with the children and translated when necessary. Furthermore, data indicate the peer mentors felt like they were a part of the community. Nicholas asked his mother (also the camp director) if he could ride the bus with the campers. Adriana illustrated her caring nature when Salvador fell and scraped his knee one morning before boarding the bus. Immediately, Adriana came over and began to console Salvadore. She blew on his knee and talked to him in Spanish.

The children formed a tight-knit community with the adult participants as well. David, when creating his “All About Me” book, shared that he lost his sister to cancer before she was born. Lisa, struggling to understand exactly what David was telling her, asked Nicholas to help translate. Very quickly, Nicholas indicated that David was indeed sharing about the death of his sister. The candor of the children, disclosing deeply personal stories after knowing the teachers for such a short amount of time, indicates that a strong sense of community was shared by all participants. Not only was the sense of community established quickly, the children did not want to leave the community. On the last day of camp, one of the children asked the teacher why they were not able to come to camp anymore. He went on to explain that he had so much fun and enjoyed making new friends.

The sense of community was shared among children, peer mentors, and teachers, but also extended to other participants. Specifically, researchers felt a deep connection with those that they were observing. For example, the director noted in her reflective

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journal, “I woke up in the middle of the night, thinking about these children and how sad I am that our time together is coming to an end. I really wish we had more time.”

Likewise, another researcher discovered that one of the children, Vincent, wanted to be a policeman when he grew up. The researcher called her husband, a policeman, and asked him to come talk to Vincent that day at camp. Vincent was able to talk to the policeman and ask him questions. One day, one of the children, Matthew, walked up to a researcher and asked her to draw with him. She closed her laptop and walked over to the art center. Once Matthew and the researcher were seated, Jacenia, pulled up a chair. Matthew informed the researcher that she needed to add a person to her drawing. Upon hearing the response “I don’t know how to draw a person,” Jacenia leaned over and helped the researcher draw a person. Wanting to play and work together and helping without being asked further illustrates how a feeling of community was woven throughout the day.

While the sense of community often started at the bus stop, before the children entered the classroom, it also extended beyond camp dismissal. On the last day of camp, Mercedes’ family was not there to meet her at the bus stop and take her home. The bus driver called the camp director who was with peer mentors en route to a celebratory lunch. Joaquin and Nieve knew where Mercedes lived and explained that if the director could take them to the bus stop, they would walk her home (the director did not have parental permission to transport campers in her car). They drove to the bus stop; the three peer mentors hopped out of the car and walked with Mercedes to her home, laughing and talking all the way. The feeling of “we belong to each other” was felt by all.

## **Implications**

The lessons learned from our camp experience have important implications for the field. First, our findings suggest that school leaders must value the cultural heritage of students and families and understand its relevance to student learning. They must provide teachers the time, training and tools they need to effectively get to know each of their students and families. Second, teachers and administrators must assume the role of lifelong learner and engage in long-term professional development. Belonging to a professional learning community where they can ask important questions and learn from each other is essential to the establishment of community. Third, fostering healthy families through positive interactions empowers them to be active developers of and participants in the community. Fourth, engaging in shared leadership develops community. When administrators, teachers, families and students all assume leadership roles together, a sense of belonging and purpose connects the group members. Finally, lack of time cannot be an excuse or rationale for the absence of a community. Given the presence of the components described in our findings, a strong, thriving, meaningful community *can* be built, even in a short period of time. Future research could include a focus on the impact of interactions between bilingual peer mentors and emergent bilinguals as well as what can be learned from a more long-term emergent bilingual camp.

### **Conclusion**

Our camp journey was not void of challenges. Two months prior to the start of camp, we only received six applications. We were hoping for twenty campers. The director wrote, “I should have known better. Why would they trust this situation? They don’t know [the university lab school], [the university], or me. They are afraid to

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complete the application with personal information. I am an outsider.” With some very targeted recruiting efforts by elementary school personnel, by the time camp began, we had sixteen applications, but the challenge to recruit was substantive.

We also struggled with the fact that while we wanted the camp to strive towards culturally sustaining teaching practices, as a team (teachers and researchers) our awareness and understanding of this work was limited and the minimal exposure researchers provided teachers through readings (see Appendix C) was not enough. Originally, our hope was to meet children and families prior to camp starting so that we could begin getting to know the children and families. As mentioned above, recruitment did not run as smoothly as predicted, which prevented teachers from making connections with children and families before camp and impacted their ability to plan the meaningful curriculum we envisioned.

We grappled with the reality that while we wanted the camp to be a place where children’s cultures were recognized, honored and sustained, the camp only ran for five half-days. The director acknowledged this challenge before camp began when she journaled, “It is very difficult to plan curriculum when we don’t know the children. How can we be culturally relevant when we only have the children for 5 days and won’t know anything about them beforehand?” In addition, our time together was too short. We felt it. The children felt it. The families felt it. At the end of the week, the children were asking to come back. Families expressed the desire for a longer camp session the next year. Teachers explained that they hoped the camp would run longer in the future. We needed the camp to extend beyond five half-days so that we could get to know the children more deeply and ultimately become more culturally sustaining in our practices.

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Many areas around the United States have experienced over 200% growth in the number of emergent bilingual students in schools (de Oliveira & Athanases, 2017). Therefore, it is vital that educators develop understandings of best practices for emergent bilingual students immediately. Developing a sense of community (Nash, Panther, & Arce-Boardman, 2017) by building on student strengths, positioning students as cultural and linguistic experts, and fostering healthy families can encourage students to develop their voices and sustain their cultures (Alim & Paris, 2017).

Although the emergent bilingual literacy summer camp only lasted one week, participants walked away as members of a newly formed community and having learned life lessons. As evidenced by the quote from the mother of a peer mentor, *“Thank you for everything you inspired in me and my children because I can know that there are still people with a big heart. God bless you and your family forever. This is from me and my family,”* intentional focus on the constructs outlined in this article can allow people of all ages, races, ethnicities and languages to form a community, to belong to one another. Even in a relatively short period of time.

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