



NCWWI Bilingual Traineeship Program: Legacies & Lessons Learned

October 2008 – September 2013

© September 2013

National Child Welfare Workforce Institute

A Service of the Children's Bureau, a member of the T/TA Network



Acknowledgements

This publication represents a collaborative effort by the partners of the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI)—University at Albany/SUNY, the University of Denver, Fordham University, University of Iowa, University of Maryland, Michigan State University, University of Michigan, Portland State University, and University of Southern Maine. Thanks to Sara Munson and Sharon Kollar for editing and Rea Gibson, Jordan Institute for Families, UNC Chapel Hill, for design assistance.

NCWWI is funded through a cooperative agreement with U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau, Award No. 90CT0145. Special thanks to Randi Walters, Children’s Bureau Project Officer, and Robert Lindecamp, Child Welfare Program Specialist (CB/ICF), for their support.

Principal Author(s):

Maria Ortiz, LMSW
College Assistant Professor, BSW Field Coordinator
New Mexico State University
School of Social Work

Madeline Gillette, LISW
Senior Program Manager, Southwest Institute for Family and Child Advocacy
New Mexico State University
School of Social Work

Recommended citation:

National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. (2013). *NCWWI Bilingual traineeship program: Legacies & lessons learned*. Albany, NY: Author.

For more information:

Please visit the NCWWI website at www.ncwwi.org

© 2013, National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, University at Albany, Albany, NY

The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Children’s Bureau.

This document may be reproduced in whole or part without restriction as long as the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute is credited for the work. Upon request, NCWWI will take appropriate steps to ensure that this publication is made accessible to members of the community with disabilities.

Table of Contents

	Page
I. Introduction.....	4
II. Determining Bilingual Proficiency.....	6
III. Finding & Selecting Child Welfare Materials Written in Spanish	7
IV. Selecting Child Welfare Topics for the Course	8
V. Recruiting Spanish-speaking Field Instructors & Site Supervisors	9
VI. Conclusion.....	10

I. Introduction

Social workers in the southwest are very likely to have clients who are monolingual Spanish speakers or who speak some English but are more comfortable speaking Spanish. For example, U.S. Census data show that 36% of persons over the age of 5 in New Mexico speak a language other than English in the home. Similar rates are seen in other southwestern states, as compared to 20% for the U.S. as a whole. Despite the prevalence of Spanish-dominant speakers, child welfare service providers frequently are not prepared to provide these clients the same level of services that are offered to English speakers.

Since 1964, Title VI of the Federal Civil Rights Act has required that: “No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.” Yet many social workers are monolingual English speakers and many of their clients are not English speakers, creating a situation where adequate access to services might not be provided to monolingual Spanish speakers. State agencies have access to interpreters by phone and that service does provide an avenue of communication between social workers and clients, however the interpreter on the phone cannot assess the understanding of the client and the social worker might find it difficult to engage the client in a trusting working relationship if direct communication is not possible.

The child welfare system is meant to help families experiencing crisis. Families who are involved in the child welfare system often face multiple issues ranging from poverty and unemployment to mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction, family violence, incest, and child abuse and maltreatment. The relationship that a child welfare social worker needs to develop with a family whose children come into the care of the state is already strained by the fact that the family has lost, or is in danger of losing, custody of their children to the state. Social workers need to be able to work with biological parents, foster parents, and children in a way that will ensure the safety and wellbeing of the children. In most cases the goal of the social worker is to work with the family to address the issues that justified the removal of their children from their home, so that the children can be safely returned to the family. Under regular circumstances this kind of work is very delicate and requires a lot of tact and understanding of the family’s circumstances and ability to resolve the issues given the right kind of assistance. When a family is going through this kind of situation, and is also not able to communicate their needs to the social worker, the challenge is more than just a language barrier: it is a cultural divide that can lead to miscommunication, misunderstanding, and mistrust, all of which can have a negative impact on the family’s outcomes.

In 2010, New Mexico State University’s School of Social Work received Children’s Bureau funding through the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute to develop a traineeship project to help bilingual social work students develop their bilingual skills in child welfare settings. We recruited students who already had some Spanish-speaking ability, because we wanted to focus on increasing their social work related language skills including medical, legal and psychological terminology as well as their ability to explain those concepts to clients who are Spanish speakers. Developing a successful bilingual/bicultural

child welfare project was a challenge for a variety of reasons. Some of the most relevant challenges included determining bilingual proficiency, finding and selecting child welfare materials written in Spanish, narrowing down the most salient child welfare topics that should be covered in a course and enlisting the assistance of social workers who could provide our students the opportunity to work with Spanish-speaking families.

II. Determining Bilingual Proficiency

Determining bilingual proficiency can be a challenge because Spanish-speaking ability varies widely in the southwest and there are no standards for bilingual social workers. Residents of the southwest vary in their Spanish language abilities and speak, read, and write both English and Spanish to various degrees of proficiency. Child welfare workers serve a range of clients, including new immigrants who speak (for the most part) Mexican Spanish, people who were born in this country but speak more Spanish than English, and people who speak only English. Many people in the southwest speak some Spanish but are not confident holding conversations outside their familial networks while conversely we have others who call themselves bilingual, but in reality have many difficulties holding a full conversation in one language or the other.

The main goal of our child welfare traineeship project was to identify those students that met two requirements. First, students needed to be interested in child welfare. Child welfare is a challenging area of social work and we wanted students who were committed to the safety and well-being of children and families. Second, they needed to be able to hold a conversation in Spanish and have some reading and writing ability even if they were not entirely proficient. The students we recruited agreed to take a course in Spanish dealing with child welfare issues, complete two semesters in a Spanish seminar during their field practicum, and take a child welfare job upon graduation.

The screening process included having students complete an application and interview that required them to answer some child welfare questions in Spanish both verbally and in writing. The goal of the written and spoken Spanish skills assessment was not to include only those with the most Spanish proficiency, but to select those students who would be able to function sufficiently well in Spanish to benefit from a course that is taught completely in Spanish. One student made the following observation after completing the project, "I thought this would be really easy because I considered myself highly bilingual, but I actually learned a lot." This student was one of our most proficient Spanish speakers which helped assure us that we are actually increasing the bilingual skills of our participants.

III. Finding & Selecting Child Welfare Materials Written in Spanish

Social work as a profession has a wide range of possible fields of practice; from school settings to the military each setting has specific language, knowledge base and essential skills. The Hispanic Child Welfare Project was meant to help students who had some Spanish-speaking ability increase their bilingual capabilities by having them learn specific child welfare terminology in Spanish. As social workers, we need to find a way to establish a positive working relationship with every client. If our client does not speak our language, we need to find a way to effectively communicate with him or her. Using interpreters is helpful but not ideal. Engaging with a client in a meaningful way, especially in a crisis situation, requires not only understanding the words being spoken but understanding the nuanced cultural meanings underlying the words. In this project, we wanted to focus on the language, knowledge and skills necessary to work with Spanish-speaking clients in the child welfare system.

A big challenge we encountered in developing a bilingual child welfare program was finding contemporary child welfare materials that addressed the specific intricacies of the United States child welfare system written in Spanish. The first Spanish child welfare class we offered was painfully pieced together with an array of materials that related to social work in the child welfare system. There are no textbooks about child welfare written in Spanish. A few chapters of a casework social work textbook from Spain (*Trabajo Social Con Casos* by Tomas Fernandez Garcia) were used, but it was too expensive for our students and child welfare is not the central topic of the book. There were some child welfare materials from Spanish-speaking countries, but each country has its own child welfare system. Information from child protective services in Mexico is not pertinent to the needs of child welfare workers in the United States because their system is structured very differently. There is a small book on overcoming the pain of child abuse by Dr. Gil that is written in Spanish, but nothing that directly addresses the needs of social workers working with current victims of child abuse and maltreatment.

This summer (2013) was the fourth time the course was taught, and the number of learning materials used in the course that are written in Spanish or translated into Spanish has substantially increased. The class instructor translated a few relevant articles and several materials from the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. Several Spanish articles and information sheets from the Child Welfare Information Gateway were added to the course reading list. While the intent and basic format of the course has remained, the content has evolved into a proper child welfare course in Spanish. Students are able to read, write, give presentations, discuss child welfare policies, and engage in child welfare related role plays completely in Spanish.

IV. Selecting Child Welfare Topics for the Course

Since the original intent of the project was to give students the opportunity to develop their Spanish-speaking ability to effectively work with families in the child welfare system, we wanted them to gain familiarity with specific medical, legal and psychological terminology in Spanish. The child welfare system is guided by federal, state, and local policies that often involve the criminal justice system and when children come into custody their medical and psychological needs must be met while in state custody. Therefore, narrowing down the most salient child welfare topics that could be covered in a course was not an easy task. When a family only speaks Spanish and has to learn about their rights and responsibilities to advocate for themselves, or to work with the state to be reunited with their children following a placement into custody, they need someone who can clearly explain to them what they need to do and the resources available to them.

The social worker assigned to the case needs to have an understanding of the family's cultural background and community support system to successfully engage the family in the intervention process. If that social worker is able to speak the client's language and explain to them that the goal of the state is to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the children and their rights as parents cannot be taken away without due process, the family can more effectively work towards reunification. If parents don't get essential information from the beginning of their case, it diminishes their ability to effectively work with the system and regain custody of their children.

Additionally, children who come into custody and are monolingual Spanish speakers will experience greater anxiety from not knowing what is happening to them and not being able to connect with their social worker. Therefore, at a minimum, we wanted students to be able to explain to parents and children the role of the state, the legal rights of the parents, and the aim of the intervention as well as get any medical information needed to make sure children get the medical care they need.

V. Recruiting Spanish-speaking Field Instructors & Site Supervisors

Although social work providers often deal with Spanish-speaking clients, enlisting the assistance of social workers who would provide our students the opportunity to work with Spanish-speaking families was not an easy task. Since social workers in New Mexico are not highly compensated for having bilingual skills, and there is no bilingual certification process, the range of bilingual abilities within the social work field is difficult to determine. Some social workers prefer not to say they are bilingual, while others say they are bilingual but their skills are limited. Despite being capable speakers, some social workers are self-conscious of their Spanish-speaking abilities and thus will hesitate to use their Spanish skills unless absolutely necessary. This creates a challenge as the student does not get to hear child welfare vocabulary being used by the supervisor in Spanish.

In order to ensure field supervision in Spanish, the School of Social Work developed an affiliation agreement with the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department, whereby BSW and MSW students are placed throughout the state in foster care, adoption, in-home services and child protection programs with Spanish speaking supervisors.

VI. Conclusion

As the last year of this project approaches, we have learned that this project was worth our effort. Bilingual students are becoming bilingual social work practitioners, the child welfare materials written in Spanish are more appropriate and our local child welfare office has praised the contributions of our students in their work with Spanish-speaking families. Some of the issues that still need to be addressed include proper compensation for the additional skill set bilingual social workers bring to an agency, a certification process to make sure that bilingual social workers have a minimum skill set to work with families, and addressing the need to make a clear distinction between being a bilingual social worker versus a Spanish/English translator and interpreter.

A bilingual social worker is someone who is able to use his/her bilingual skills to engage with clients as a social worker. Social workers who are able to use their bilingual skills to provide the family the proper information to succeed in the intervention process are valuable resources that need to be considered an essential component of culturally and linguistically appropriate social work practice. While translators and interpreters have an important role to play when social workers are not able to communicate with clients, translators are not responsible for treatment outcomes. Bilingual social workers bring two distinct skills sets to the helping process and their ability to engage with the client in their own language provides an avenue for appropriate social work services in a linguistically and culturally proficient manner. Our hope is that this traineeship project has made a difference in our community by increasing the number of social workers who are both bilingual and committed to providing effective social work services to families in the child welfare system.