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ABSTRACT

A study examined the nature of parent/teacher interactions when discussions and conferences were centered around artifacts of children's literacy learning in both home and school contexts. Four parent/teacher dyads in a small community where the majority of families are new immigrants to the United States were selected on the basis of the interest and willingness to participate of both members of the parent/teacher pair. Parents (who were participating in an intergenerational literacy program) and teachers were interviewed, parent/teacher conferences were audiotaped, and teachers' journals and portfolios documenting children's use of literacy at home were analyzed. Results indicated that the creation of a home/school portfolio may provide a starting point where teachers and parents can ground a discussion about children's developing literacy. As teachers and parents addressed the artifacts that children completed at home and at school, they began to see the connections between home and at school. Teachers saw how children practiced school literacy, and as well, how they practiced literacy behaviors that had not yet been addressed in school. Parents used the samples to ground questions that had been troubling them about particular assignments or about specific practices they had observed. Findings suggest that the process has the potential to affirm parents' awareness and knowledge of their children's learning, thereby including them as valuable informants in assessing children's performance and progress, and that the process has the potential to inform teachers about the ways parents and children engage in literacy. (Contains 15 references.) (Author/RS)

Shifting Boundaries in Home/School Responsibilities: Involving Immigrant Parents in the Construction of Literacy Portfolics

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Abstract

There is general consensus that parents play an important role in children's learning, but many questions remain about how to establish a collaborative relationship between home and school. With a sample of four families, this study examined the nature of parent/teacher interactions when discussions and conferences were centered around artifacts of children's literacy learning in both home and school contexts. Results suggest that the creation of a home/school portfolio may provide a starting point where teachers and parents can ground a discussion about children's developing literacy. As teachers and parents addressed the artifacts that children completed at home and at school, they each began to see the connections between home and school. Teachers saw how children practiced school literacy, and as well, how they practiced literacy behaviors that had not yet been addressed in school. Parents used the explicit samples to ground questions that had been troubling them about particular assignments or about specific practices they had observed. Researchers concluded that the process has the potential to affirm parents' awareness and knowledge of their children's learning, thereby including them as valuable informants in assessing children's performance and progress; as well, it has the potential to inform teachers about the ways parents and children engage in literacy, and may suggest ways for teachers to link events in school to routine events at home.

Shifting Boundaries in Home/School Responsibilities: Involving Immigrant Parents in the Construction of Literacy Portfolios

The importance of parent involvement in children's learning has long been recognized (Kellaghan, Sloan, Alvarez & Bloom, 1993; Schneider & Coleman, 1993). Despite the general consensus of beliefs in the importance of home-school collaboration, little is actually known about the processes that support effective partnerships. In fact, a good deal of the available evidence suggests that teachers' beliefs about parents' roles may actually restrict, rather that support, parent involvement. Lareau (1989), for example, describes the role that is designed for parents as one of complying with teacher's requests for help on school-based tasks. In a study of parent involvement in two communities, she observed that parents of lower socioeconomic status lack the resources and knowledge to support their children in school in the ways teachers expect, while parents of higher socioeconomic status not only possess the knowledge and familiarity they need to comply with teachers' requests, but also the confidence to question and challenge the teacher when they disagree with curricular decisions or teaching actions. Lareau's beliefs about the emphasis on compliance are supported by the work of Taylor (1991) who describes how a parent's attempts to inform a teacher about her child's learning strategies at home are

denied and disregarded by the school. Other researchers report that the development of effective home/school partnerships are restricted by parents' lack of English proficiency (Rumberger, 1987), as well as by their lack of understanding about the culture of American schools (Trueba, 1987; Moles, 1993).

Yet others suggest that the lack of a strong partnership cannot be explained by differences in socio-cultural understandings and values. For example, in a cross-cultural comparative study of parent-teacher interactions in three schools, Warren (1988) concludes that:

> ...relations between parents and teachers are complex, tentative, and stressful. Continuity in socialization values does not ameliorate differences. The institution cannot resolve the basic conflict between parental interest in the progress and life chances of a single child and teacher interest in the successful management of a group enterprise. (p. 156)

Finally, Delgado-Gaitan (1990) points out that, although research documents the positive effects of parents' support of children's schooling, "there is little research to explain and describe the process that parents undergo in participating in school" (p. 45).

Many of the issues raised by these researchers concerned us as we worked with immigrant families in an intergenerational literacy project in an urban community. After the first four years of implementation, it became clear that, despite the

fact that the project was housed within an elementary school, interactions between parents and teachers were few and seemed to be influenced by many of the factors described in the studies cited: language and cultural differences; parents' lack of familiarity with the culture of American schools; and inability by parents to accomplish the tasks teachers asked of them.

Our attempt to forge a more meaningful home/school collaboration was influenced not only by the research in home-school partnerships, but also by our interest in literacy assessment. In the schools where we were working, many teachers were beginning to implement some form of portfolio assessment. Since new understandings of literacy suggest the importance of collecting samples of children's literacy learning in a variety of tasks and contexts (e.g., Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991), it seemed reasonable to include the ways children use literacy at home as part of the child's literacy profile. We hypothesized that constructing a literacy portfolio could become a collaborative activity by teachers, parents and children. As such, it had the potential to provide teachers with valuable information about children's uses of literacy at home, and could also establish a common ground for parent-teacher discussions. As well, each participant would bring a certain level of expertise to the discussion: the teacher as the expert on the child's classroom literacy and the parent as the expert on the child's home literacy. The resulting shared expertise, we hoped, would

provide parents the confidence to both present and seek information about their children's academic learning.

Design of the Study

This study examined the nature of parent/teacher interactions when discussions and conferences were centered around artifacts of children's literacy learning in both home and school contexts. With the collaborative portfolio as the context, the following questions were posed: (1) What are parents' beliefs and understandings about their role in schools? (2) What are teachers' beliefs and understandings about the role parents play in their children's schooling? (3) What is the nature of the interactions between parents and teachers during incidental meetings and during parent-teacher conferences?

Setting and Participants. The setting for the study was a small, urban community where the majority of families are new immigrants to the United States. In the school population, approximately 60% of the families are Latino/Latina, 15% are Southeast Asian, and 25% represent Caucasian and other ethnicities. The Intergenerational Literacy Project in which the families in the study participated was in its fifth year of implementation at the time of the study. The project serves parents who wish to improve their own English literacy and language and who wish to become familiar with ways to support their children's education in American schools. Parents attended classes four days per week for two hours each day in a classroom located within an

elementary school. Preschool children received free child care while their parents attended class. During the weeks of the study, all members of the class were introduced to the practice of keeping a portfolio documenting their children's developing literacy.

Four parent/teacher dyads participated in the study. Subjects were selected on the basis of the interest and willingness to participate of both members of the parent/teacher pair. The parent participants included three mothers and one aunt who had primary child care responsibility[1]. Each of the parents in the sample spoke Spanish as a first language and each is described by her literacy teacher as having moderate oral proficiency in English. Three of the parents had completed high school in their own countries. One held a bachelor's degree from a college in Puerto Rico. Residence in the United States ranged from 3 to 11 years. Places of origin included Puerto Rico, Honduras and El Salvador. The parents did not receive a stipend for participating in the project.

Of the four teachers, two were bilingual in Spanish and two were monolingual in English. Two were teachers of Spanish-bilingual classrooms (first and third grades) and two were teachers of monolingual-English classrooms (first and fourth grades). One of the bilingual teachers was a native of Puerto Rico. The others were Anglo-Americans. Years of teaching

[1]For ease and clarity of writing, each reference to 'parents' from this point on will include the aunt.

experience ranged from 1 to 18. One of the bilingual teachers had taught for 10 years in Puerto Rico and for the last 8 years in the United States. All of the teachers volunteered to participate in the project. Each teacher received a $50.00 voucher for books from a local bookstore as a stipend for participation.

Procedures. The following steps were initiated to involve parents and teachers in a collaborative portfolio process. In the Intergenerational Literacy Project class, parents were introduced to the idea of keeping a portfolio documenting their children's uses of literacy and were asked to become co-researchers and ethnographers in examining their children's developing literacy. Strategies for observing and documenting their children's literacies and for sharing the information with their children's teachers were discussed. The researchers discussed the developing portfolios with parents throughout the period of the study, often asking parents to share examples of what they were collecting and sometimes suggesting other uses of literacy that might be documented. Elementary teachers were informed of parents' involvement in constructing a literacy portfolio. They were asked to invite parents to share the contents of the portfolio at parent/teacher conferences. Generally, this happened at regularly scheduled conferences mandated by the reporting system already in place in the school system. On occasion, teachers scheduled special conferences to provide parents an opportunity to share the information in the portfolio.

Parents and teachers were also asked to participate in the following research activities: (1) interviews with the researcher at the beginning of the project; immediately following the parent-teacher conference, and at the end of the study. Interviews were conducted in the language of choice by the parent. In most cases, this was Spanish, although in one case the parent chose to codeswitch between Spanish and English throughout the interview. (2) an audiotaped parent/teacher conference; (3) a journal of "incidental" parent/teacher interactions, reflections on parent involvement and reflections on the parent/teacher conference and the use of the portfolio during the conference. One of the researchers contacted each of the participating teachers regularly to monitor entries in their journals and to record anecdotal comments about their interactions with parents or about the portfolio process in general. Despite frequent visits to teachers' classrooms, only rarely did a teacher share comments or anecdotes about her interactions with parents. Very few entries were actually made in the journals. All data were collected between the months of September to December.

Data Sources. Research procedures yielded the following data sources: (1) parent and teacher interviews (audiotaped, transcribed and translated when necessary) (2) parent/teacher conferences (audiotaped, transcribed and translated); (3) portfolios documenting children's uses of literacy at home; (4) researchers' self-memoranda documenting instructional episodes related to constructing home portfolios, anecdotal

comments about parents' participation, and their own reflections on the portfolio process; (5) teachers' journals recording their thoughts and reflection on their interactions with parents.

Data Analyses. Two types of analyses were conducted: within case and across case (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Data from the individual case analyses were folded into a multiple case and cross-case analysis. Cross-case analysis was conducted using a variable-oriented strategy (Miles & Huberman, 1994), as we looked for recurring themes and patterns across as well as within cases. During various steps of the analyses, data were sorted into as many as 54 separate categories, and eventually reduced to the following categories: (1) parents' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities in children's learning; (2) teachers' perceptions of the roles and responsibilities parents can and should assume in children's learning; (3) teachers' beliefs and understandings about home literacies; (4) parents' beliefs and understandings about school literacies; (5) teachers' attitudes toward the home portfolios; and, (6) parents' attitudes toward the home portfolio.

Results

Four major findings emerged from the data analysis: (1) Parents initially perceived their role in their children's learning as primarily related to monitoring behavior and overseeing homework. This responsibility dominated their

initial interactions with teachers. Over the period of the study, however, they seemed to develop increasing confidence in their ability to support and comment on other aspects of their children's learning. (2) Teachers generally perceived the parents' role as that of 'cooperating' with them, by monitoring children's school behavior and by supporting the completion of homework tasks. Over time, this view didn't necessarily diminish, but teachers seemed to develop a broader understanding of the range of ways that parents support their children's academic learning. (3) Teachers were surprised at the content of the portfolio and affirmed the positive effect it had on the climate of the parent-teacher conference and the contribution it made to their understanding of children's literacy knowledge. (4) Parents viewed the portfolio as a way to both create a more interactive climate and also "deepen the discussion" with teachers about their children. In the section that follows, each of these findings is addressed and discussed. English translations are reported throughout. In cases where the Spanish phrase carried a specific connotation, that phrase is included.

Parents' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities. In order to understand parents' views about their role in their children's schooling, we began with their views of education, itself. In the case of each parent, we found confirmation of the ideas that have been reported by other researchers (e.g., Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Moll & Diaz, 1987), the notion that in the Latino culture, "una persona educada", an

educated person, is both socially and academically educated. In its most common use, it is a person who behaves in a socially acceptable way, showing respect, care and 'simpatía.' Simpatía involves showing empathy for the "feelings of others, that safeguards the dignity of the individual by showing respect, and that strives for harmony." (Marín, p. 25) One parent stated:

> [Para mí] educación, no necesáriamente es...tu...leer un libro y aprenderte ese libro de memoria. Para mí una persona educada es una persona que este...viene desde pequeños...educar...moral, viene la moral, viene como ellos se comportan socialmente, viene...entonces viene eso más toda la, cómo se dice eso, conocimiento que adquieren de los libros. Pero no necesáriamente adquieren de los libros, porque casi siempre adquieren la educacación...en general de las personas que viven alrededor de ellos. Porque si, como te digo, si un niño ve...si un niño ve maldad lo que va a aprender es maldad. Entonces, aunque el niño lee en un libro - no se hacen cosas malas, porque eso es malo, no se hacen cosas malas porque eso es malo- no se puede matar; pero si lo está viendo matando a cada momento allí en alrededor de ellos, es eso lo que va a aprender, a matar, y nada de los libros se le va quedar en la cabeza. Y más cuando son chiquititos, uno grande

puede aprender ...uno sabe la diferencia entre el mal y el bien, pero un niño no conoce esto y entonces sólo se lo pueden enseñar los padres y toda persona que está involucrados con ellos.

(For me, education, not necessarily you read a book and you memorize it. For me a person that is educated is a person who...um...it comes from very early on...to educate...moral...it the moral comes into play...how they behave socially comes into play, so then how do you say that all the knowledge gained from books comes into play. But not necessarily you gain from books, because almost always they acquire education...in general from the people that live around them. Because if, how do I tell you, if a child sees...if a child sees evil what he is going to learn is evil. Then, even though the child reads in a book -- you will not do evil things, because it is bad, you don't do evil because it is bad--you cannot kill; but if he sees someone kill every moment in their surroundings, it is that what he is going to learn, to kill and nothing of the books is going to stay with him. And especially when they are tiny, one that is an adult can learn ... one knows the difference between evil and good, but a child doesn't know

that and it can only be taught by the parents and all those who are engaged in their life.)

With these ideas as the foundation for their views about education, parents seemed to believe that their roles and those of the teachers were clearly bounded. The parents were responsible for developing children's behavioral and social skills and practices, while teachers were responsible for developing academic abilities. This meant that parents should monitor their children's behavior in school and at home, monitor and support homework completion, and teach children a certain respect for schooling and for teachers. These beliefs influenced the interactions that parents had with teachers. As one parent said, "Good behavior in class is essential for learning, and for taking full advantage of school." Consistent with these beliefs, the opening questions of a conference most often addressed children's behavior. At times, when the discussion would depart from an explanation of the child's behavior, a parent would redirect it, asking the teacher to return again to commenting on the child's demeanor in class.

Homework, too, represented a major influence on the ways and reasons parents interacted with their children and in all of the families studied, it provided the primary connection between home and school. As one parent noted, "homework maintains relation [sic] with the school." When parents did not understand either the content or the purpose of a particular homework assignment, they would often contact the

teacher or raise a question in a conference. The following description was representative of the process parents believed was appropriate:

> Like when the teacher gives homework, she gives homework, the mother has to be there and ask if the teacher gave them homework, so that they can complete it. She has to be overseeing and ask. Second, leaving them to do the work by themselves, it is the only way that they will learn. Third, when they finish, when they finish, well then they should ask where they had difficulties in doing the work. Then it is there where the parents should act, they sit with them and they explain what the children did not understand, and it is the only way that when the students stumble upon the same problem, they will know, and if the parents do not understand, the most appropriate person to ask is the child's teacher.

One parent explained that the homework the teacher had assigned her third-grader became a model for the activities she did with her 4-year-old daughter:

> I have learned a little bit too from the games. I make games now for Angie, I make number games from 1-10 for her. I put the numbers on envelopes and mix them up for her. She has to put them in order. Sometimes I put the vowels or letters. I also make games for her to find shapes and vocabulary words.

As well, parents used homework as a window on what was happening in the classroom and often used it to judge the

quality of instruction children were receiving. One parent said: "One looks at the papers that the child brings home, to see if they are on grade-level, to see if they are progressing."

Parents views on education and schooling and the respect they tried to instill in their children also influenced the ways they interacted with the teachers. Parents established a serious, working relationship with the school, not a social relationship. Even in the case of a parent who was a neighbor of her child's teacher, the relationship was formal and business-like. In response to queries about the climate of the school toward parents, one parent explained:

> ...the manner, the behavior of the people is so nice that one feels like coming back to the school, but one can not go whenever one wants because if so, one is going to interrupt both the teachers and the students. And the students at the same time that they are interrupted, they lose total concentration.

While parents felt strongly about the need to treat teachers with respect and deference, two parents, particularly, stressed their responsibility to be vigilant and active in monitoring the effectiveness of the instruction their children were receiving. This belief seemed to emerge from their earlier experiences in American schools:

> ...This is what I have learned, from experience I have learned that now I don't have to wait until the teacher

calls me, if I myself realize, I, myself, when my son comes home from school, I ask him things: What did you do ...

Finally, parents commented on the importance of the form of the communication between parents and teachers. They agreed that the teachers with whom their children were currently learning welcomed them to school: "¡...lo reciben a uno con buena cara!" ("...they receive you with a good face!") This, they believed, was essential. One parent explained: "... it is the only way for the parents and teachers to solve the problems in the future with their children...with their students."

Teachers' perceptions of parents' roles. The teachers believed strongly in the importance of the parents' role in their children's education, but they defined that role largely as being responsive to the teacher. In response to a direct query about the parents' role in their child's schooling, one teacher said:

> To help me discipline. To let them [the children] know how important it is to, um, control yourself at school. That it's not just my job and I also let the parents know it's not just my job, it's their job also that if a child's misbehaved, they need to, at home, talk to their child, or take away Nintendo or take away the television or something, so let them [the children] know that school doesn't end

just at school...if they misbehave at school, they will also receive some kind of consequence at home. This teacher elaborated:

> [Not cooperating means thinking that it is] just the teacher's job...and that goes from not showing up at PTO meetings to not helping their child with their homework. And...how do I say...how would I say this...that it's just not my job as a teacher to educate them but it's also their job as a parent to help me educate them and that they are ...a detriment to the child if they don't help also.

Teachers described ways that they tried to encourage parent involvement. One explained that she sends work home frequently so that parents can see what their children are doing in school. She also assigns homework tasks that ask for some form of parental participation. For example, she said, the students were asked to take home a set of math problems for their parents to complete and for the children to correct. For parents who are unable to come to school, she issued teacher-parent journals in which she records her observations and her comments about their children. The purpose, she said, was to get into "direct" contact with parents who won't come to school for a visit or a conference. Another said:

> By asking like, help with the parties. Asking them or calling them up and saying your child needs to study these vocabulary words. Ask them, when the homework is to have something read, they have to

sign it. I want them to know that I want them to be there with their child when they do their work.

Another teacher explained that she provides parents very explicit ways to help their children at home:

> First of all, Beatriz had the problem that she was confusing d, p, and b, so I made a game board and she is using it with her mother and she is doing it, you know, with her sister too. So it is not just helping her it is helping the other kids in her family....

Teachers also commented on the school climate toward parent involvement. There were few patterns in these responses. One teacher viewed her school as open and nonthreatening to parents, a place where teachers were clearly focused on improving home-school connections. Another, a bilingual teacher, described parents as being intimidated and frightened by the school: "They want to get involved in the classroom but they are afraid to, to not understand what the teachers are doing there." She believed they relied on her, a teacher who shared their culture and their language, to mediate for them. Another explained that she tries to make parents feel welcome by writing a letter home at the beginning of the year inviting parents to come in if they have problems or questions. But, she observed, only some parents appear interested.

Over time, the view that parents' primary contribution to their children's learning is one of reacting to the school's requests didn't necessarily diminish; however, as teachers

listened to parents present and discuss the home portfolio samples, they did seem to develop a broader understanding of the range of ways that parents support their children's academic learning. In the next section, data related to this finding are discussed.

Teachers' reactions to the home portfolios. The sharing of the portfolio influenced parent-teacher interaction in several ways. First, it seemed to restructure the official nature of the home-school connection. Teachers approached the portfolio project with some skepticism, perhaps best described in the comment of one teacher:

> I wasn't sure how I would feel at first, I wasn't sure, I thought ... at first I thought, "Is her folder gonna show up my folder?"...I thought that if she has more as a parent than I do as a teacher, how's that gonna look?

In all cases, the discourse during the conference became notably more friendly and interactive. The teacher who worried that the home portfolio would outshine her own commented that the conference was "probably the most productive parent-teacher conference I have ever had." She noted that the portfolio seemed to change the balance of power in the conference: "Since she [the parent] had something to contribute too we came in on a more even level."

Second, three of the four teachers commented that the portfolio influenced their understanding about the child's literacy learning. One teacher commented that "Her [the

parent's] folder made me see the progress of his work more than mine." Another reacted to the contents of the child's portfolio by saying to the parent:

> We have not even gotten to this yet. I am glad that he is doing it at home. It is being a long year. We have not done a lot yet. This is wonderful. Excellent. ..I am glad he is doing this at home.

Third, teachers learned about the ways parents were supporting their children at home. One teacher noted that the home portfolio provided evidence that the parent was following through on the activities the teacher had recommended. Another commented that many of the portfolio samples related to the child's homework and that "I really found it to be quality ... it was very telling". Another believed that the portfolio had improved the child's attitudes toward school work. She was surprised at the quantity of writing that the child had done in his home journal which was evidently more that he had done in class. And the fourth commented in her journal that:

> The portfolio was very interesting. It seems as though his [the child's] writing correlated with our creative Halloween stories. It was great to see him carry over the school work into his home.

Fourth, teachers used the portfolios to gain insight into the ways parents support their children at home. One teacher noted in her journal,

> I really liked how she [the parent] concentrates on reading and writing. Angel is a smart student, and it is definitely attributed to the care and hard work his mother takes in maintaining his education.

Another said in an interview:

> ... it gave me a whole new view of what she does at home. I mean I would've never thought ... I was, I was glad to know that she was doing that at home but I would've never thought that she would have done that extensively on her own.

More than any other participant, this teacher began to view the parent as an integral partner is the child's learning. She commented that the child had been making excellent progress and had recently gone into a slump of sorts. She said that she was anxious to meet with the parent to examine the contents of the home portfolio for clues about the child's performance. She specifically wondered if the child was, perhaps, doing less at home, and if the lack of home practice was partially responsible for his diminished performance in school.

In summing up what she had learned from the portfolio, a teacher said, "I felt like she [the parent] left with more information and I left with more information which is what a productive parent-teacher conference is to me." Yet, not all teachers agreed on the benefits of the home portfolio. Despite positive comments during the conference with the parent and in her journal, where she commented that "It is inspiring to see Marta's enthusiasm and care for her son's work," during the

follow-up interview, one teacher indicated that, although she liked the portfolio and particularly liked seeing a list of books that the child had read and the anecdotes about him reading to his sister and brother or teaching them the alphabet, she "wasn't surprised" at what she saw. She had, she said, already known him to be a good reader and writer. She also commented that she thought that more attention had been given to the portfolio than to what the child was doing *in school* and that conferences are important to discuss children's progress in school. This was consistent with this teacher's view at the start of the project, which she reiterated at this point, that the parent's responsibility is "to support outside the classroom whatever happens inside the classroom." Therefore, for this teacher, the portfolio that displayed children's general uses of literacy at home seemed to hold little meaning for constructing a profile of the child's literacy knowledge.

Parents' reactions to the home portfolios. Parents viewed the portfolio as having benefits for their children, who they saw as invested in their home portfolios; for themselves, as teachers affirmed the work they were doing at home; and for the teacher, as they became more fully informed about the children.

On the role the portfolio played in encouraging children to engage in and share literacy, one parent commented:

> He starts working, he comes and he writes a little paper. He writes like this, scribbles, but he

> tells me like he wants to give me a message. "This letter is for you: 'I love you.'

Another parent said:

> When one keeps a portfolio, the child wants us to share it with everybody, not only in the home. They want us to share it with the teacher because she spends more time with them. She is like a second mother to them.

Another parent remarked on the child's awareness of the connection between the portfolio and her own literacy classes:

> That, too, encouraged him to write more. Since he knew that I was doing a school project....well, then he would ask me for papers to continue doing it...to help...And so he would work more...and now he writes me little papers. And he folds-he folds the letters for me, yesterday he gave me one but I don't know where I put it. He makes me, he has made scribbles, he folds it for me and says to me 'Read it. Read it.'

Another parent emphasized that the portfolio had enhanced the child's self-esteem and motivated him to study harder. She said that the child viewed the portfolio as an effort from both the parent and the teacher to help him succeed in school The child's response was to work harder at his school assignments and to talk about school more: "Es estimulado." ("He's stimulated by the project.") Another parent commented very

simply: "It helped me also, because there I am noticing all the progress that he has made."

Addressing the role the portfolio played in the interaction during the parent-teacher conference, one parent contrasted this conference with one she had earlier:

> He [her child] had gone with me the first time but she just gave him a book and she told us, you know, how he was and the level he was at. But now there was more conversation since I showed her all this, she noticed... where he started that he didn't know anything and he progressed, he progressed a lot...it helped me...because there was more communication with me talking to her and her having more to tell me about him...a conversation, because the other time, well she showed me that little paper and then I went. Not now, now we got deeper [nos metimos más a fondo] in the work that he is really doing...we were deeper, you know, the conversation of knowing exactly his progress.

Another parent spoke with concern about how sharing the portfolio lengthened the conference:

> ...I spent a lot of time with her. I knew I spent more time than I was supposed to. I think 35 minutes is too much...She [the teacher] was sort of interested in talking more with me, but I thought I had taken too much of her time. I know that everybody has something else to do.

Finally, in comments consistent with those of the teachers, the parents, too, noted the potential the portfolio had for creating common ground and for informing the teacher about literacy behaviors and practices that teachers could not otherwise observe:

> For me it was good. Because, you know, when I went to the classroom I had something to show the teacher. Something to show her. About what he can do because maybe in the classroom the teacher doesn't know the things that he does because ...there they are doing what she tells them to do...not what comes from him to do. Here he is doing, making his own ideas. And doing what he wants to do.

Another parent was asked specifically how the teacher was helped to know the child better and she said:

> ...because she learned what were the things my child liked, what his favorite things were, like my son likes the Ninja Turtles, the turtles, the majority of the things that appeared were turtles and dinosaurs. She learned that my son likes dinosaurs and turtles. [Now] when she when my son behaves well in the classroom and when she is going to give him a book, she gives him a dinosaur book. Because she knows that my baby likes dinosaurs.

As she elaborated, the parent explained that because the teacher has so many other children to attend to, she cannot

meet the needs of everyone. "But if the portfolio is in between, she can see it, she can have questions, she can ask the mom questions, she can get to know the child better."

Discussion

The data from this study confirm the findings of several existing studies regarding parent-teacher interactions and provide some promising evidence about one way to develop beneficial interactions. At the outset, parents perceived their role in their children's learning as one that focused primarily on instilling positive attitudes about schools and learning, monitoring children's school behavior and supporting their homework activities. As well, teachers defined parents' responsibilities as primarily helping children to carry out school activities. They revealed little awareness of the literacy events unrelated to the classroom that parents and children may be engaged in on a routine basis. As other researchers have found, they interpreted low attendance at school functions as a sign that parents were disinterested in their children's learning. With the exception of one of the bilingual teachers, they also assumed that since many parents spoke English as a second language, they were restricted in the ways they could support their children.

At the start of each conference, these attitudes prevailed. Parents inquired about children's social behaviors and teachers responded; teachers reported children's academic behaviors and parents listened. The exchange often seemed rote

and formal. The dynamic changed, however, when the discussion shifted to a focus on the portfolio. As one parent noted, "the conversation deepened." As teachers and parents addressed the actual artifacts that children completed at home, they each began to see the connections between home and school. Teachers saw both how children practiced school literacy (as in the example of the Halloween stories), and as well, how they practiced literacy behaviors that had not yet been addressed in school (as in the examples in which the teacher commented that the class hadn't "gotten that far yet" and in the case where the teacher noted that the child writes far more extensively at home than in school). Parents were able to use the explicit samples to ask questions about how to do more. Parents also had a specific context in which they could ground questions that had been troubling them about particular assignments or about specific practices they had observed. With the child's home samples as a context, teachers were able to make explicit suggestions about ways parents could support and extend children's learning.

Parents seemed to feel that a mutual exchange occurred: teachers were learning about the many ways that parents tried to help their children academically. At the same time, parents did not lose sight of the many obligations teachers have, and at least one parent came away with concerns about how much time she had spent with the teacher.

It is troubling, however, to note that even as one teacher viewed what she, herself, described as a rich,

informative record of a child's literacy uses, and observed the parent's enthusiasm and excitement in sharing her child's work, she questioned the relevance of the portfolio for the child's school learning. In so small a sample, generalization is not possible, but this teacher's reaction does raise questions about how other teachers might respond to such a process.

The development of a home portfolio not only influenced attitudes and actions of parents and teachers, but also affected children's attitudes toward literacy. Parents reported that children were more excited about their own literacy, and that they increased their uses of literacy both by themselves and with their siblings. It seems that at least two factors influenced children's responses: the addition of the teacher as an audience for the child's uses of literacy at home and the awareness that the parent was constructing the portfolio as part of her own school experience.

There are other patterns and trends in the data as well, though not quite clearly defined at this point in time. First, as teachers and administrators work toward the goal of building congruence between home and school, understanding the ways parents view literacy and the ways children use literacy at home is important. The types of artifacts parents collected and shared raise questions about each of these areas. Throughout the period of the study, parents were frequently invited to share their children's portfolios in their Intergenerational Literacy Project classes. The types of artifacts they collected were discussed, and particular

attention was paid to those samples that documented the ways children used literacy during the course of daily routines. Parents were encouraged to observe and document children's uses of literacy "to get things done," as well as the ways children practiced school-related literacy tasks. Despite frequent modeling and discussion of how parents might document non-school-related uses of literacy, much of what was contained in the home portfolios related in some way to children's homework or to topics of study in school. Is it the case, as Moll and Diaz (1987) found, that, in these families, little print literacy occurred within the context of daily life and that homework "set the occasion for literacy to occur" (p. 202)? If so, the frequency and type of homework tasks teachers assign become enormously important to children's developing literacy.

On the other hand, it may be the case that parents chose to document only those events which they believed would interest the teacher. If so, efforts to broaden parents' understanding of the importance of children's routine uses of literacy failed, and the resulting portfolio achieved only part of its purpose: it helped us to understand how parents supported school-related uses of literacy, but it didn't help us to understand the full range of ways children used literacy at home. This understanding ultimately will help us to build congruence between home and school, and needs further exploration.

A second question that arose as we examined the data related to the influence of the process of building a portfolio

on parents' own acquisition and development of English literacy. There is some indication in our data that the practice of documenting children's uses of literacy at home may help parents to acquire a broader view of literacy, and their new understanding may influence not only how they direct and support their children's learning but also how they perceive and understand their personal uses of literacy. This was not an area that we had intended to explore when we first formulated the study, but the conversations with parents seem to raise it as an issue to examine. Since this study was implemented within the context of an intergenerational literacy program, the influence of the development of home portfolios on parents' own literacy learning is important and an area that is now being explored in greater depth.

Conclusion

There is general consensus that parents play an important role in children's learning, but many questions remain about how to establish a collaborative relationship between home and school. Existing literature centers primarily on helping parents learn about schools. Few studies have focused on how teachers can learn more about families. Though the sample of four families permits only exploration, this study suggests that the creation of a home portfolio may provide a starting point where teachers and parents can ground a discussion about children's uses of literacy at home and at school. The process has the potential to affirm parents' awareness and knowledge of their children's learning, thereby

including them as valuable informants in assessing children's performance and progress; as well, it has the potential to inform teachers about the ways parents and children engage in literacy, and may suggest ways for teachers to link events in school to routine events at home. Finally, in homes where print literacy is not part of the fabric of everyday life, it has the potential to create a setting in which parents and children can share literacy in purposeful ways, thereby supporting the acquisition and development of literacy by both the child, and when appropriate, by the parent.

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