

Stories to our Children: A Program Aimed at Developing Authentic and Culturally Relevant Literature for Latina/o Children

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Abstract

This article describes a unique program co-sponsored by a local public library, a university teacher preparation program, and a school district, created to support Latina/o parents as they produced authentic and culturally relevant literature representing multiple ethnic groups living in the Southwestern United States. A program like the one reported here could potentially lessen the gap existent in the availability of authentic literature written by Latina/os and could ignite a whole new group of readers and writers that can speak to the unique experiences they bring to this country—be it through a different cultural or linguistic lens or through the sharing of stories which would have otherwise gone unheard.

Key Words: family engagement, bilingual students, English learners, Hispanic families, community–university–school partnerships, Latina/o students, parental involvement, culturally relevant literature, Spanish, books

Background

“Literacy is at the root of a person’s ability to succeed, and the family is at the heart.” (National Center for Families Learning [NCFL], n.d., para. 1)

Family literacy programs aim to provide family members with opportunities to learn and grow together, to become lifelong learners, and to pass those skills on to future generations (NCFL, n.d.). Researchers have suggested that

guiding parents to participate in activities that involve children in reading and writing processes can become a powerful strategy to promote their interest and enjoyment of the reading process (De Gaetano, 2007). However, to nurture young readers and to garner their attention, stories ought to be interesting, meaningful, and cognitively accessible to them (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009).

Stories, researchers suggest, become cognitively accessible if the reader possesses the vocabulary and the background needed to comprehend them (Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005). For children for whom English is not their native language, also referred to in the literature as English learners, this vocabulary needs to be nurtured and built over time through a variety of means (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). One approach that has proven to be beneficial in developing both vocabulary and creating schema, or background knowledge, is by purposefully choosing stories that resemble authentic and culturally responsive situations, such as those describing everyday practices at home and family-related storylines, among others (Amaro-Jiménez & Semington, 2012). Also, stories that have been written in the language they most understand can help make those connections even stronger (Saracho, 2007), especially for those learners who have already built a foundation in their native language (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Consequently, authentic literature written in Spanish or English for Latina/o children can become a powerful component to teach them to read and to promote an interest in reading in their native or second language.

Currently, there are several well-known Latina/o writers that write with a Latina/o population in mind, such as Isabel Campoy, Alma Flor Ada, Francisco Alarcón, Sandra Cisneros, and Pat Mora, among many others. However, due to the myriad of linguistic and cultural backgrounds of Latina/o groups, it is nearly impossible to find authentic literature tailored to each individual cultural group. For example, a piece of literature for Mexican immigrants might be different than one for a second or third generation Mexican American or for a Latina/o child whose family background can be traced back to the first colonists in the American Southwest. Based on that complexity, it is difficult to claim that we can develop authentic literature for all Latina/o children in the United States. In fact, Pat Mora states, "Only about 2% of the 5,000 children's books published in the U.S. annually are by or about Latinos, a sad statistic that doesn't change as the statistics [below] do. How can you help change this fact?" (2014, para. 6). With the population of Latina/o students reaching nearly 24% of the public school student population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012), a more explicit effort needs to be made to ensure that literature for these students is available so that they will be able to connect to the sounds, smells, and tastes of their own experiences relived through printed words. However, there

is currently a scarcity of studies that can help uncover the extent to which this kind of culturally relevant literature is (or is not) having an impact on students (e.g., on their identity, on their academic achievement) and their families and the ways in which this literature could possibly be a window into providing more equitable educational opportunities for these learners and their families.

Based on these needs, the Stories to our Children Program reported in this article aimed to bring together members of the Latina/o community, with the majority being parents of school-aged children, who were interested in being part of an initial cadre of writers creating authentic literature for the Latina/o cultural groups represented in a growing and very diverse area in the Southwest. To do so, a local public library collaborated with a teacher preparation program and a school district to design a series of workshops that would motivate parents to create a new form of authentic and culturally relevant children's literature—literature generated by parents and written specifically for their children. This article provides a detailed analysis of the day-by-day implementation of the program as well as the ways in which teacher candidates/volunteers and parents were recruited to participate in the program. We also highlight some of the gains obtained by both the parents and the teacher candidates involved. Our hope in describing this program is that this article will serve as a catalyst for other teacher preparation programs and community agencies to spearhead similar initiatives in which personnel from schools, libraries, and community programs collaborate together to create authentic as well as developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate literature in their communities. Likewise, we believe that efforts like this program may also help reverse the gap existent in the literature that addresses the needs of a growing population in the United States by having families work together to pen their own unique stories.

The Program's Vision

Program Goals

The program was developed on the premise that sharing stories, in writing or orally, can create a lasting bond between parents and their children, regardless of one's ethnicity, first language, or socioeconomic status (Strommen & Mates, 2011). Too often, however, we hear the myth that parents reading to their children is a middle-class tradition, when it has been documented that it is not (Compton-Lilly, 2002). Unfortunately, for many Latina/o families, their cultural traditions and life experiences are not only not available on library bookshelves, but finding literature in their own languages is difficult, as was noted previously.

As such, the program's goals were fourfold. First, the project sought to give Latina/o parents opportunities to share their language, traditions, and life experiences both in their home countries as well as in the U.S. through the creation of a special collection of stories written by parents for their children. It was believed that doing so would also help these parents recognize and validate that they are the first and most important teachers and role models for their children (Compton-Lilly, 2002). Second, the program aimed to motivate parents to make use of a variety of resources available to them in their communities, such as the public library, especially as it has been reported that some foreign-born Latina/o parents consider the library a place that is not accessible to everyone in the community (Amaro-Jiménez & Semingson, 2012). Thus the intent was that by participating, these parents would not only become aware of what the library and others in their community had to offer, but that they would both gain a sense of ownership for the library and of community services available to them. The third goal was to ensure that the teacher candidates who volunteered for the program would have the opportunity to make connections between theory/research and practice by directly working with families before they had their own classrooms and helping in the implementation of the project overall (Amaro-Jiménez, 2012). Doing so is critical given the great demand to prepare teachers who are content knowledgeable; well versed in research, theory, and practice; and ready to work with students from day one (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2013). Finally, the fourth goal was to continue strengthening collaborations between the public library, the neighboring school district, and the teacher preparation program by exploring ways in which they could jointly support the growing population of Latina/o students and families in the area.

In other words, the Stories to Our Children Program aimed to aid in the creation of authentic literature written by Latina/os that could potentially ignite and motivate a whole new group of readers and writers that could speak to the unique experiences they bring to this country—be it through a different cultural or linguistic lens or through the sharing of stories which would have otherwise gone unheard where it not be for a project like the one described here. In the next sections we describe: (1) the recruitment of parent participants and volunteers; (2) the specifics about the program's implementation, including information about each of the five training sessions provided; (3) the book publishing process; and (4) the reflections from the newest authors.

Recruitment of Parent Participants and Volunteers

Staffing the program was truly a collaborative activity between the three agencies involved (public library, teacher preparation program, school district)

as well the foundation that provided the seed grant to the city's public library. The funding obtained covered the costs of supplies and materials (e.g., binders, paper, pencils), printing and marketing materials, the individual published books, the compilation book of *Stories to Our Children*, the giveaway books that were given to the parents for attending the workshops, and the speaker/children's author who participated in the closing ceremony.

To recruit parents, the public library distributed flyers (in both English and Spanish) describing the program in four elementary schools in a local school district as well as in two family literacy programs within the same district. Family representatives from the partnering district as well as each school's family liaison helped with the distribution of these flyers as well as in the dissemination of the information through word of mouth. The flyers were targeted to parents whose children were ages 0 to 6, because the intention was for the published book to be among the first, if not the first, book that the child/ren would read. In fact, one of the flyers specifically stated that by participating they could actually "become the author of the first book that your child will read." Parents also learned on the flyer that they would get support throughout the entire story writing process ("We will guide you to write, edit, and add illustrations or pictures to your stories"). Ensuring that parents knew that they would receive support was necessary as many of these parents had the misconception that, as one of them indicated, only "certain people could become writers."

Two types of volunteers were sought to become involved in the project: college volunteers/teacher candidates and community volunteers. The former were bilingual education teacher candidates who were sought to support and guide parents in the writing process, making special emphasis on the accuracy of written stories. A call for volunteers was placed at a teacher preparation program in a local Institution of Higher Education (IHE) in North Texas given their heavy emphasis on providing teacher candidates with service learning opportunities in addition to their required field experiences for certification. Meetings at the IHE were scheduled to discuss the program. At these meetings, candidates were instructed to sign up as volunteers through the public library's website. Once the volunteers were identified, another meeting was scheduled to provide information about the program and to describe their role in the project. A total of 40 bilingual education teacher candidates served as volunteers in this project. These teacher candidates were placed at one of the sites depending on their availability. These volunteers worked with parents guiding them throughout the process, from helping identify possible topics for their stories to the actual editing process. The volunteers were also available for each of the one-hour workshops held.

Community volunteers, including 11 library staff, were recruited to help with the actual formatting and publishing of the stories. Because all of the stories were handwritten by parents, volunteers were recruited to type all 77 stories. Volunteers spent approximately one week typing all of these stories and transferring them to a publishing software. A community volunteer also was designated to organize the stories by training sites before they were entered into the publishing template. Volunteers also assisted with the scanning and formatting of all the pictures.

Two training days were offered to volunteers; they had the option of attending a Wednesday or a Friday training. The same training was given to all the volunteers on both training days to ensure they were all being consistently trained in how to help the parents with their stories. Volunteers were told that they were there to help the parents bring out the scenery, smells, and feelings to depict a picture in each story. It was emphasized that volunteers should not change the families' stories or their voice in their writing but mainly help with editing any grammatical errors.

Program Participants

As a result of the recruitment effort, 65 adult participants agreed to be part of both the program and an ongoing research study that aims to identify the strengths and challenges these parents see in their children's education and the ways in which teachers could be better prepared to meet their needs. Though participating in the study was not required (i.e., they could participate in the book authoring and not in the research component), they all agreed. Of program participants, 4% ($n = 3$) were male, and 96% were female ($n = 62$). Table 1 details some demographics of the adult participants. The program described here was implemented in a growing and diverse community of approximately 375,000 residents, according to the 2010 Census. This community is part of a large metropolitan area with over 6 million residents. In this specific community, about 54% of the population is considered minority, which follows the same trends of population growth as other large metropolitan areas. Approximately 19% of the population is foreign-born, and about 32.3% of those 5 years and above speak a language other than English at home.

A survey that adult participants completed at the end of the program showed that there were six Latina/o cultural groups represented in the stories: Mexican Americans (various generations), Mexican immigrants, Colombians, Salvadorians, Texans, and Peruvians. Most of the participants were long-term (10+ years) U.S. residents. The majority of the parent participants had only completed high school, with middle school being the second largest group being represented. Although the majority of participants had one parent that

attended representing the family, others assisted in their story writing. For instance, one family had the father write the story, and his wife created the illustrations. For another family, the mother wrote story and had the children do the artwork. In another family, a mother wrote the story and had pictures sent from Mexico to embed in the story. Two adult caretakers also participated because the children that they were caring for attended one of the school sites. We also had grandparents who dropped off their grandchildren at school and then joined in the workshops. It should be noted that though the program's intention in the recruitment process was to recruit parents so they could become empowered to see themselves as writers, we found that many children were modeling the parents' writing at home and wanted to follow in their footsteps. A decision was made to include those children who were interested in either writing their own stories or coauthoring stories with their parents.

Table 1. Other Demographics of Authors/Parents

Schooling Completed	<i>N</i>
University	11
Community college	1
High school	18
Middle school	16
Elementary school	5
Level of English Proficiency	
Native speaker	5
Almost native	1
Proficient	13
Very limited	15
Don't speak English	16
Don't write in English	1
Level of Spanish Proficiency	
Native speaker	34
Almost native	0
Proficient	13
Very limited	2
Don't speak Spanish	1
Don't write in Spanish	1

Program Implementation

The program was implemented over a six-week period (April 9, 2012–May 19, 2012). A series of five one-hour training sessions or workshops were scheduled twice a week in each location with the exception of one—the latter group met once a week, but they met for an hour and a half on Saturdays. See Table 2 for sites and times available at each location. Some elementary sites offered workshops in the morning (8:30–9:30 a.m.), while others held workshops in the afternoon (2:00–3:00 p.m.). In other words, at some sites parents could come to the morning session after they had dropped off their child/children at school, and at others they could come right before picking up their children from school, while the literacy program offered Saturday workshops.

Parents who participated in the program did not get a stipend or monetary compensation; instead, they received a copy of the book with all the stories compiled. To encourage parents' participation, workshops were held at their children's schools. As such, most of the sites were within walking distance from families' homes so they did not have to incur any costs to go to/from the sites. The program also ensured that childcare, literacy activities, and snacks were provided for the children who accompanied their parents and for the parents themselves.

Most of these workshops took place in Spanish given the language proficiency level of the participants. For English dominant and monolingual English-speaking parents, the university volunteers provided translation and individualized support and coaching in each of the sessions. In these training sessions, parents planned, wrote, illustrated, and refined their stories. Colored pencils and art supplies were also on hand for illustrating their stories. At the end of the program, about 95% of the parents who initially expressed interest in participating completed the program.

Table 2. Scheduling at Sites

Site	Dates	Times
Elementary 1	4/9, 4/11, 4/16, 4/18, and 4/23	8:30–9:30 a.m.
Elementary 2	4/9, 4/11, 4/16, 4/23, and 4/25	2:00–3:00 p.m.
Elementary 3	4/10, 4/12, 4/17, 4/19, and 5/1	8:30–9:30 a.m.
Elementary 4	4/10, 4/17, 4/24, 5/1, and 5/8	2:00–3:00 p.m.
Literacy Program	5/14, 5/21, 5/28, and 5/5	1:30–3:00 p.m.

Book Authoring Training Sessions

Due to the third author's background in bilingual education and her position at the library, she designed the lesson plans to be implemented and was responsible for training all the volunteers to implement the program. To ensure consistency across sites, all volunteers and trainers were trained with these materials and were required to use the same exact materials for the sessions. Daily lesson plans were shared with the university volunteers ahead of time to prepare for the implementation of each session's objectives, as detailed next.

Session One

The goal of the first workshop was to empower parents to become literacy role models for their children through the writing of stories and through the sharing of their personal and life stories orally. For the first workshop, the public library invited a local Latino author to read one of his stories (Rosado, 2008) and to describe how he was able to draw on his personal experiences to write a story with his child and the child's grandmother in mind. He attended all but one of the first sessions. After reading the story, the author described the process he underwent for writing it, the challenges he faced, and how he finally arrived at the final version. That same day personnel from the library provided each participant with a writing notebook with divided sections for each stage of the writing process and plenty of space for drafting and pencils.

Parents were then asked to brainstorm possible ideas and write those on the paper provided. For the introduction, parents were asked to jot down two to four sentences to describe the setting (time and location) of the story as well as to write an introduction that would be interesting to entice the audience to keep reading it. Parents were also asked to write in details about the story involving the five senses—what they felt, how it smelled, what they heard or saw, and so on. At the end of the session, most parents had been able to identify a topic for their writing. Some of them even developed a rough draft. An important element was that some family members worked together, while others decided to work independently. As a result, in some cases, family members produced more than one writing sample. Parents were asked to work on their writing at home (create an outline) and bring their writing to the next meeting.

Session Two

At the second meeting, parents were to organize their ideas and begin to craft a well-developed, focused story. Parents came with ideas better defined and with a draft of what they had been writing. Using the outline previously developed, parents began writing the events of the story. They were instructed to concentrate on the content, not on grammar. Parents talked about their

stories, and the college and community volunteers provided input and help with the writing process. Parents continued developing the stories while the volunteers remained on site providing additional guidance with ideas to improve the stories. Volunteers instructed the parents to use detailed description of the events and activities portrayed in their stories. Parents were once again asked to use descriptions appealing to the human senses, describing colors and sensations to add realism to the story and to develop their unique writing style.

By the end of the second training session, most parents had developed a complete draft of their writing. Lack of proper grammar or logical progression of the narrative was noticeable in most writings. However, no attempts were made to correct them at this stage. Parents were asked to continue improving the story at home and to bring ideas to illustrate the story during the third session. The stories were written mostly in Spanish. Table 3 presents examples of stories written in Spanish, unless otherwise noted.

Session Three

The objective of the third workshop was to develop the draft into a full story with appropriate illustrations. Using the draft previously developed, parents continued writing the events of the story. Once finished, college volunteers began helping with the editing, while parents began integrating illustrations within their stories. Some participants brought ideas to develop illustrations, while others brought completed drawings and pictures to support the stories. Artist volunteers made suggestions on the type of illustrations needed and demonstrated individually how to improve the illustrations. Some of the parents finished the story and the illustrations, while others continued finishing the stories. For those parents who had finished their story, they were instructed to review them at home and make changes as needed based upon the suggestions provided that day. Similar instructions were given to those parents who were still writing the stories.

Session Four

In the fourth session, parents were asked to incorporate volunteer feedback into their writing and to develop the final version with illustrations. Parents were asked to give their final approval of the story, as someone else was going to be approving the overall layout prior to publication. Parents were also asked to include a dedication in their story. Parents took their final draft home for final editing and changes and were asked to come ready to share their stories with the rest of the group during the final session.

Table 3. Sampling of Story Titles

<i>Short Stories Original Title</i>	<i>Translated Title</i>
Mi Felicidad	My Happiness
Mi Abuelita y Yo	My Grandma and Me
El Gato	The Cat
Recuerdos Para Mis Hijo, De Sus Abuelos y de Mí	Memories for My Children, From Their Grandparents and Me
A Qué Jugaba Mamá	Games That Mom Played
No Existen Límites	There Are No Limits
La Historia de Mi País y Sus Culturas	The History of My Country and Its Cultures
El Árbol Blanco de Navidad	The White Christmas Tree
La Casa de Mi Abuelo	My Grandpa's House
Es Hora de Ir a Dormir	It's Time to Sleep
Un Poco de Mi Vida	A Bit About My Life
Historia de Mi Vida	Story of My Life
Disfrazándonos para "Halloween"/ Dressing Up for Halloween	English/Spanish version
Fasting in Ramadan	English version only
Mother's Love	English version only
Barbie Princess Charm & Asima	English version only
<i>Poems Original Title</i>	<i>Translated Title</i>
I'm Mommy's Superhero ¡Soy el Super Héroe de Mami!	Two versions—English and Spanish
I Am Both. I Am Neither Yo Soy Ambas. Yo Soy Ninguna	Two versions—English and Spanish
Historia de Gemelos—Story About Twins	Two versions—English and Spanish
Explorando un Mundo Nuevo	Exploring a New World
No Existen Límites	Without Limits
Es Hora de Dormir	It's Time to Sleep

Session Five

In the last workshop, parents came together to share their story and their experiences with the rest of the parents. Each parent read his or her story to the group. Parents were guided to notice details of the story, ask questions, and provide final comments on each story's content. Some of the parents made revisions to their stories as a result of the input from the audience. At the end

of the workshop, parents turned in their revised versions of their stories and watched a video of a nationally recognized author who would visit them when the book with all the stories had been published.

The Book’s Publishing and Celebration

Using a free publishing program, university volunteers, four community members, and personnel from the public library typed the stories, added the corresponding illustrations, and prepared the document for printing. The 77 stories were organized in a book format based on the location of training sites. Nine of the stories were poems, and four of them had Spanish and English versions. A total of 11 stories written/cowritten by and with children were also published in the book. The final version of the book had 272 pages. See Table 4 for a snapshot of the stories written. As can be seen, most of the stories were written in Spanish only. See Appendix A for a few pages from one of the 77 stories with its corresponding English translation.

Table 4. Snapshot of the Stories Written

Analysis of the Stories Written	Numbers at a Glance
Total number of stories written	77
Stories using a poetic format (Poems)	9
Written by parents	64
Stories written in Spanish only	52
Stories written in English only	13
Stories written in two languages	5
Stories written by child authors in English	9
Stories written by child authors in Spanish	1
Stories written by child authors in two languages	1
Number of families who wrote more than one story	5
Stories with more than one adult author	3
Total female authors (including children)	68
Total male authors (including children)	10

With support of a local merchant, the public library organized a celebration for the new authors with a special guest, renowned Mexican American author Pat Mora, to present the book to the public. In total, 250 people participated in this event—65 of them were the book’s authors. The library’s staff and volunteers transformed the space into a colorful wonderland for families celebrating their stories (see Figure 1).

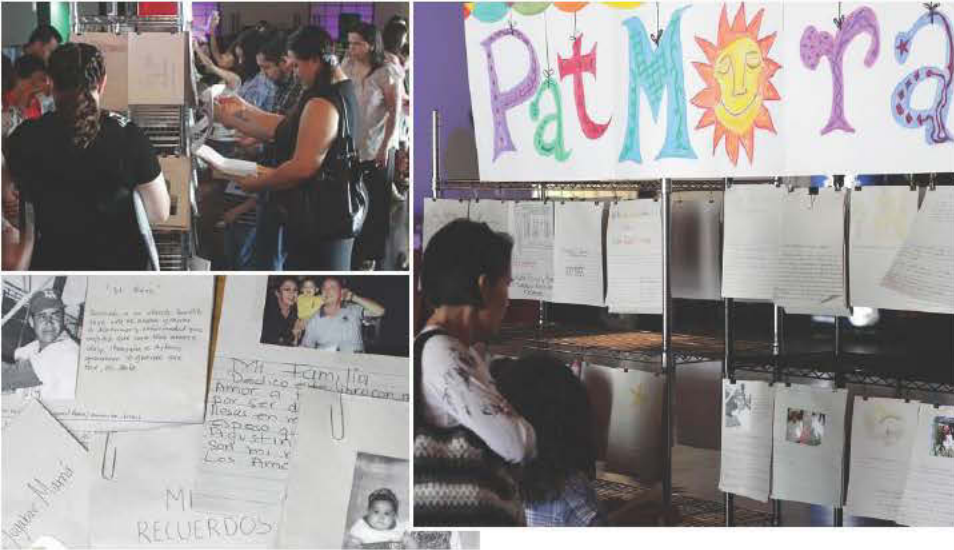


Figure 1. The Celebration

Posters of all the original handwritten stories were placed strategically around the room for attendees to read and enjoy. Copies of the book containing all the stories were also made available for public viewing. Refreshments were available for adults and children. The first author of this article, who was the motivational speaker on the first day of the training, was invited back to speak to the audience. He congratulated them for their work and encouraged them to continue writing their stories. The author was presented with a copy of the book. He requested that each of the authors sign the book, and most of the authors complied with pride. Many wrote a dedication, which made the book unique. As seen below, some of the dedications were particularly moving:

Muchas gracias porque gracias a sus palabras me motivé a escribir mi libro. [Thank you very much; thanks to your words, I got motivated to write my book.]

Muchas gracias, Dr. Rosado, por ser una inspiración para nosotros, los padres, para escribir nuestras historias para nuestros niños. [Thank you, Dr. Rosado, for being an inspiration for us, the parents, to write the stories for our children.]

Le agradezco la hermosa historia que compartió con nosotros. Muchas gracias por su inspiración. [I'd like to thank you for the special story that you shared with us. Thanks for your inspiration.]

Mil gracias por darme el empujoncito para escribir. [Many thanks for giving me the little push to motivate me to write.]

As part of the closing ceremony, Pat Mora shared some of her own experiences as a writer. She congratulated the authors on their achievement and encouraged them to continue their literary pursuits. She read one of her Spanish short stories. In her blog of June 8, 2013, Pat Mora summarized the experience in the following way:

Many of the moms...felt so proud that their families were at a party to honor these new writers. The room was decorated, the food line was popular, but what made the event unique was that mothers were proudly carrying the stories they'd written and illustrated. (para. 1)

Reflections From Some of the Newest Authors and Initial Findings

Individual authors received a copy of the book. Parents, now authors, signed each other's books and congratulated each other. Copies of the book were placed in circulation at the public library. All of the authors were excited about their accomplishments and were keen to share their thoughts on the program. Some shared that their children were inspired to explore the world of books through a new lens and even to write their own stories. Some of them wrote:

It impressed me that people like us could write stories, just like the *real* writers.

I never thought that I could tell my life story in a book in this country and meet an author as famous as Pat Mora.

I liked [the program] a lot, and I'd like to do it again. It's an achievement, something I never imagined I'd be able to do. Thanks for the motivation.

It fascinated me. I loved the way that they guided us step by step, and to meet an author that is recognized—to meet her and get to know her story, get to dialog with her, and to feel that we're equals gave us the opportunity to dream that "Yes we can!"

Preliminary analyses of the study have revealed that the parents wrote greatly about the pride they felt in having been program participants—several used the words "a gift" to describe how they felt about having had this opportunity. Parents described that writing about their lives "back home" and being able to relive those experiences through printed words with their children was invaluable, as they often felt they "could not talk openly about their experiences now that they were in the U.S." Likewise, many of the parents talked about how much they had appreciated the opportunity they had to "convivir" or share their own experiences with other Latina/o parents while they wrote their stories, as well as to share cultural types of things such as important events from their childhoods, the foods they ate, and the customs each family had.

Ongoing analyses also show that parents found great comfort when reading and listening to each others' stories as they had the opportunity to feel they were part of a larger community, one in which each was committed to becoming the "best kind of parent I can be" for the well-being of each child. Doing this was important, as many (78%) indicated they felt schools were not always understanding of the needs their children and family had. The penning of a book, they thought, could be used as "one mechanism for schools to learn about the lives of the children who are entering their schools" as well as their families. The parent participants also indicated that they see a great need for parents to become involved in activities like the book authoring project. They felt that the sense of closeness that participating brought among all the parents could indicate to school personnel and others that parents do want to be involved in their children's education, thus removing common misconceptions and barriers between them.

Many of the parents also provided feedback about what could be done to improve the program. For instance, many wished the program could have been extended beyond the six-week period. They felt six weeks was not enough time to write and revise their work, and they felt that having more time would have allowed them to write "longer and longer stories, like with chapters." They also thought that their stories could have been greatly improved content-wise had they had more time to brainstorm and to write. Many of the parents also felt that the childcare provided could be extended for those who felt they needed more time during each session to finish writing their drafts or even completing their illustrations. The parents also thought that more participation in the program could have been achieved if the program would have started earlier in the year, or as one of them suggested, "start early, schedule early in the spring to start in the fall." And some had nothing but praise for the program as shown in some of the excerpts below:

"Everything was perfect! Thank you!"

"I loved everything about this project. Having the opportunity to write our own story to be part of the library was the best."

"They cheered for us. They made us feel and think and know that we are writers."

"I loved the program. I really did. The motivation they provided was great."

"I liked that we were able to write about what we wanted. Anything we wanted."

"I loved that I was able to write my own story and create a book for MY GIRLS."

Conclusion

As was mentioned in the introduction, one of the key goals of family literacy programs is to provide a foundation, or support an existing one, that allows family members to create a culture in which learning is nurtured and passed from one generation to the next, all while learning together (NCFL, n.d.). Through this program, a group of 65 Latina/o parents came together to explore the possibility of becoming a book author and left the program with a renewed sense of agency, cultural and linguistic identity, and pride (Strommen & Mates, 2011). One of the most significant accomplishments of this program is that participants became writers. As one of them said, “It impressed me that people like us could write stories, just like the *real* writers.” At the beginning, many of the parents who participated seemed to feel intimidated by the idea of writing, apparently not feeling they could be “real writers.” However, through the guidance of the committed volunteers, parents learned how to explore and develop their ideas at deeper levels while getting hands-on experience with the writing process. For the parents, any hesitation or uncertainty they may have had about becoming published writers even as they wrote their stories changed into a “Yes we can!” attitude when they saw the fruits of their labor in the form of a book—a very cherished one.

The gains of this project were many. The library gained a book containing a group of authentic literature that is impossible to develop commercially. Now, the library has the first book of stories written by parents from North Texas written for their children and for other parents and children to enjoy. Along these lines, parents appear to have received a boost in their self-esteem because they learned that writing for their children was an achievable goal, all while also earning the admiration of the community and their children (De Gaetano, 2007). Parents also created authentic literature for people to read and value which in turn provided them an outlet to have a voice and be heard (Amaro-Jiménez & Semington, 2012). The children, on the other hand, were exposed to the benefit of reading authentic literature written not just by someone who spoke their same language, but by their parents (Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005). Through these writings, the children not only got introduced to or practiced the writing process, but they concurrently learned about their family’s culture and language and those of others (De Gaetano, 2007) as they saw how their parents penned their own stories. The children also felt the pride of having the work of their parents recognized publicly.

The university students/teacher candidates also benefited from working with this project. The students were all bilingual education majors, which allowed them to work with children and parents who only spoke the Spanish

language. Due to their involvement in the project, they were able to complete service learning hours as well as reflect on their experiences by drawing specific connections between what they were learning in the classroom and what they were doing every week with the families. In these reflections, the teacher candidates indicated they had gained additional hands-on experiences as they helped the parents write, edit, illustrate, and revise their stories in Spanish, and some even honed their translating skills when they assisted in the translation of the stories into English. Teacher candidates also indicated that they had learned about different cultures, foods, languages, dialects, and even new vocabulary from different parts of Latin America just by helping parents write their stories.

Through the Stories to Our Children program, family members were empowered to write about their life experiences, passing on family and cultural traditions and providing a window from the past to the future. This project also led family members to come together and to learn from one another. Parents worked on their stories at home, modeling the reading and writing skills they practiced in the sessions. The families shared the unique experiences they bring—some through a different cultural or linguistic lens or through the sharing of stories often unheard were it not for a project like the one described here. These types of activities can create lasting bonds across generations as well as ignite a whole new group of readers and writers.

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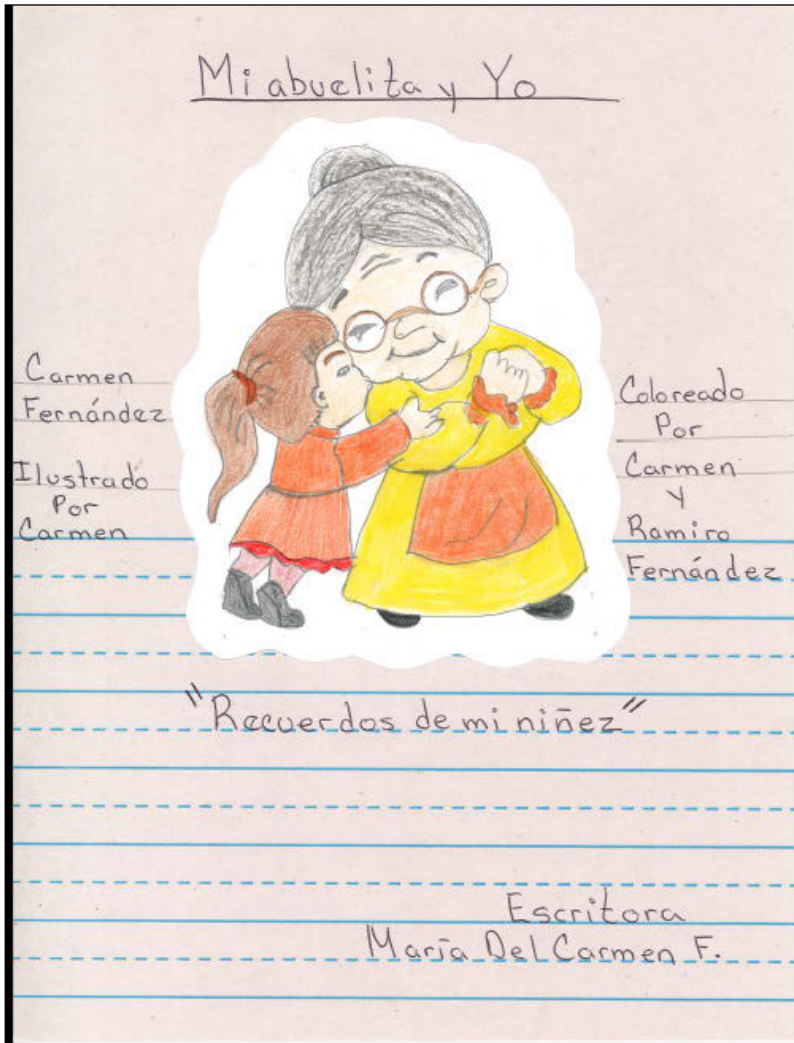
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Appendix

(First three pages; entire book is available from the authors upon request)



Title: My Granny and I

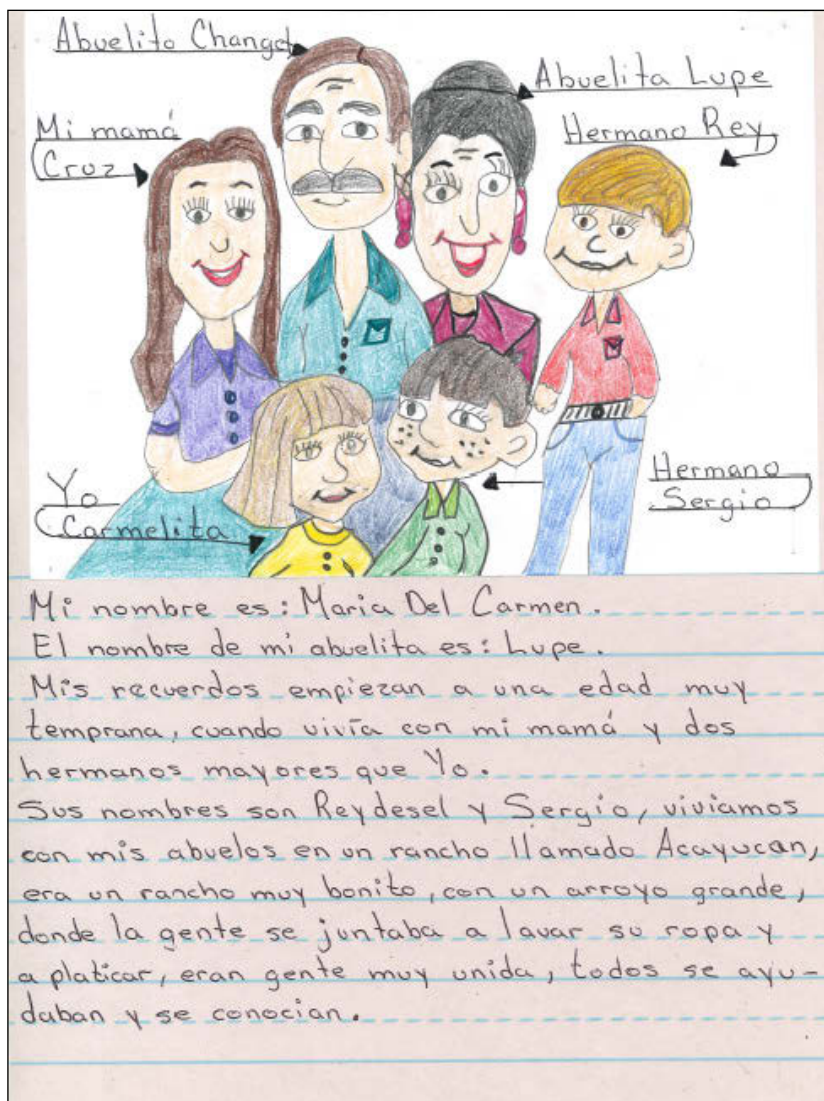
Subtitle: “Childhood Memories”

Author: María Del Carmen F.

Colored by: Carmen and Ramiro Fernández

Illustrated by: Maria del Carmen

(Picture of Grandma and the child)

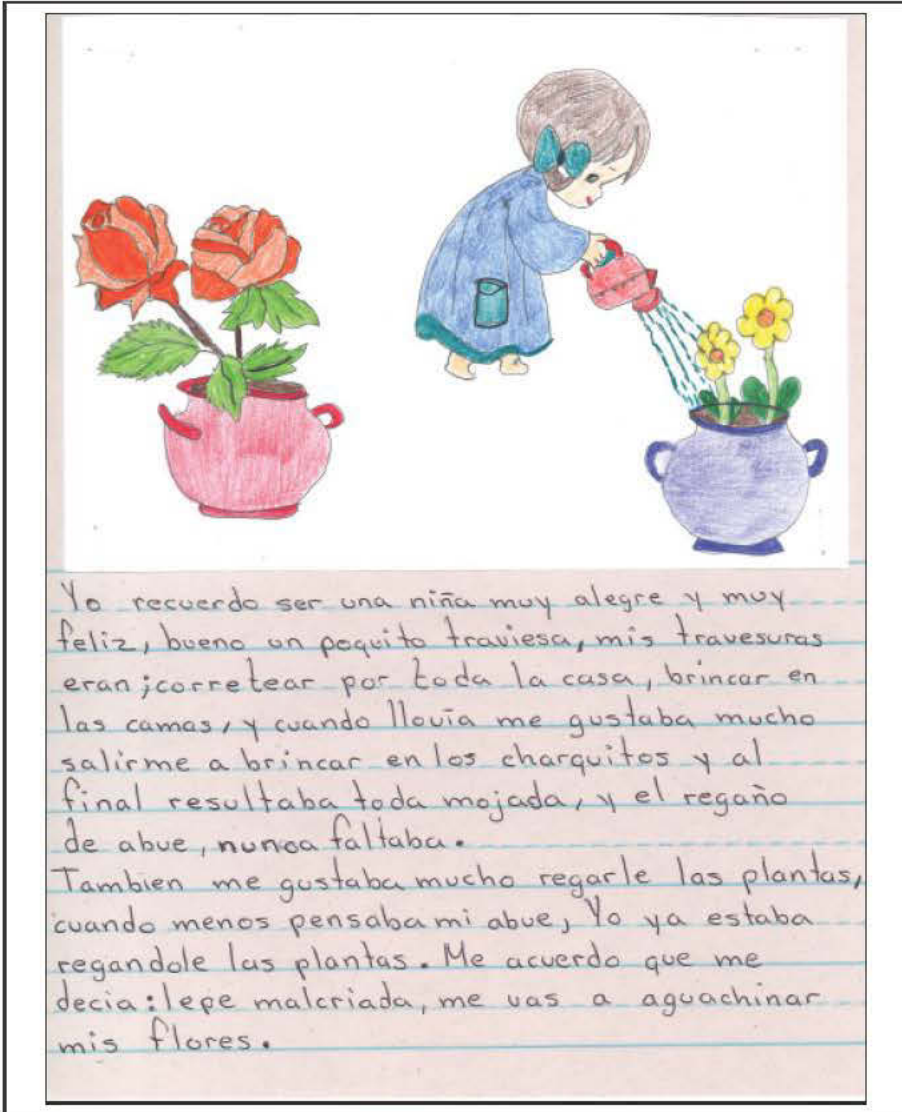


Drawing:

Grandpa, Changel; Granny, Lupe; My mother, Cruz; Brother, Rey; Me, Carmelita; Brother, Sergio

Narrative:

My name is: María Del Carmen. My Granny's name is Lupe. My memories begin at a very early age, when I lived with my mother and my two older brothers. Their names are Reydesel and Sergio. We used to live with my grandparents in a ranch called "Acayucan". It was a very pretty ranch, with a big creek, where people got together to wash their clothes and talk. People were very united; everybody helped each other and knew each other.



Picture of the girl watering the plants

Narrative:

I remember being a very cheerful and happy girl, well, and a little mischievous. My mischiefs were: running around the house, jumping on the beds, and when it rained I liked to go out and jump on the little puddles, and at the end I got completely soaked. Granny's scolding was always there. I also liked to water Granny's plants. When she least expected it, I was already watering her plants. I remember she used to tell me: "Lepe, you spoiled girl, you are going to drown my flowers."

