

Text Matters

Mexican Immigrant Parents Reading Their World

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Sólo tengo una pregunta por hacerle: Nos podría proporcionar una lectura por cada 5 días?

I just have a question: Could you give us a new reading for each day of the week?

What teacher would not like to hear this sort of request from a student? Alba, the woman who asked for the extra readings, was involved in a parent literacy project at her children's elementary school in a city in the Southwestern United States. The class for parents that met one evening a week was designed to invite Spanish-speaking parents' involvement in school-based literacy. The above entry from Alba's reflective journal signals to the fact that she was highly motivated and even wanted more than the one reading per week that was assigned in the class.

This type of request is a far cry from the stereotype of the Latino immigrant parent that is prevalent in media and even educational literature. Commonly held assumptions based in deficit thinking posit that parents like Alba are not interested in their children's education, do not have literacy skills necessary to help their children with schoolwork, and do not spend time reading with their children at home.

Through our interactions with the twelve parents involved in this after-school literacy project we found that regardless of their level of formal education, parents were highly motivated to read with their children, to engage with related assignments, and they even requested more readings, sometimes—as in the case of Alba—more than we were prepared to offer! In our experience, the key to such high

levels of engagement related to matching parents with culturally and personally relevant reading material, what we are calling: *texts that matter*.

Texts that Matter

Before we continue, it is important to clarify why we have chosen to identify the parents as Mexican immigrants. While terms like "Latino" and "Hispanic" would also potentially work, and may sound more inclusive, we want to avoid the danger of implying that all Latinos are one monolithic group. We use the term Mexican immigrants to refer to the parents in this study because all of the parents who participated were originally from Mexico.

We contend that their transactions with the specific readings were related to their backgrounds as Mexican immigrant parents. This does not mean that other people will not be able to glean important or useful information from this text that could be adapted and applied in other contexts.

A growing body of scholarship in the area of literacy views reading through a socio-cultural lens (Gee, 1990). This view of reading goes beyond technical skills of decoding sound-symbol relationships and highlights the importance of cultural, historical, and political contexts for comprehension. Teaching and learning in this framework, therefore, must draw on funds of knowledge (Moll, Gonzalez, & Amanti, 2005) based in the background knowledge, life experiences, and linguistic practices of the students and their communities.

Based in a constructivist paradigm, socio-cultural views of literacy place a high degree of importance on how students connect to what they read. This means that instruction must follow constructivist principles and allow ample opportunity for discussion and learner-centered activities. In addition, this framework requires careful attention be given to text selection. Since readers construct meaning by connecting

new material with prior knowledge, it is important that learners have opportunities to engage with texts that reflect their life experiences and their cultures.

"Culturally responsive teaching" (Gay, 2000) is a term that is often used to describe the powerful teaching-learning potential when school-based objectives are bridged to students' cultural backgrounds. One potent source for culturally relevant materials can be through quality multicultural text that focuses on groups that have been historically marginalized in most literature. This offers readers from diverse backgrounds an opportunity to see their own lives reflected in pages and can therefore encourage and foster reading engagement (Ada, 2003; Cali & Bishop, 1994; Rogers & Soter, 1997).

Adults as well as children can benefit from potent learning experiences when engaging with culturally relevant texts. Packard (2001) told of the benefits of family literacy practices for adult immigrant parents and their children that can occur when texts connect to the rich cultural resources and practices of families and their communities. In addition to culturally relevant texts, theories on adult learning principles point to the need for learning that is self-directed and respects the life experiences and personal goals of the learners (Knowles, 1984).

The after-school parent literacy project that is described in this article used a socio-cultural framework to view literacy practices. The parent group meetings were designed using constructivist learning principles and drew heavily on the belief that learning is a social process. The texts that the adults used were selected based on notions of culturally responsive teaching and adult learning principles.

The following story of the after-school parent literacy project highlights the characteristics of the readings that served as potent learning tools and engaging discussion starters. There were many differences

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between the readings that included fiction and nonfiction, poetry and plain prose, and a range of reading levels. However, one characteristic that all of the readings seemed to share was that they were texts that for one reason or another genuinely resonated with the immigrant parents involved in the program. The texts were powerful because the texts mattered.

After-School Parent Literacy Project

The data in this study were drawn from a literacy project that was designed as an effort to help immigrant Latino parents to learn about the educational system their bilingual children are attending by familiarizing them with the types of literacy learning activities that are common in schools in the U.S. The project was held after the regular school day and utilized two classrooms of Main Street Elementary (pseudonym). One classroom was used for the parent meetings and in the other childcare was provided.

Main Street Elementary (MSE) is a public school located in an urban area of central Texas. The school has a sizable population (approximately 900 students) and contains bilingual and ESL (English as a Second Language) support at each grade level. The school is considered to be low socio-economic status (SES) based on the fact that 94% of the students receive free or reduced priced meals. At MSE, 90% of the student body is Latino and 50% of the students are English Language Learners (ELL). The Parent Literacy Project lasted for twelve weeks during the spring of 2007.

The data in this article are a subset of data from a larger qualitative study that focused on literacy interactions of twelve Spanish speaking Latino parents and their bilingual children. All of the parents are from Mexico and were between the ages of 30 and 50 at the time of the study. They had attended an average of six years of schooling, and all had some degree of literacy in Spanish, their native language.

As stated above, the after-school sessions were designed to familiarize the immigrant parents with the educational system their children were experiencing and specifically focused on literacy-related issues of reading comprehension. In order to facilitate the parents' understanding of the language arts activities that take place in their children's classrooms, the after-school meetings emphasized hands-on learning where the parents engaged in

the reading process. Two different sets of readings were used in the project.

The first set included readings specifically for the parents to read and practice various comprehension strategies. These readings were selected by the instructor (first author) and focused on topics that she felt would be of interest to the parents.

The second set included readings for children and was used to encourage parents to teach comprehension strategies to their children through interactive readings. It is the first set of parent readings that will be the focus of this article as we examine the high-level of engagement that ensued when participants engaged with texts that matter.

Examples of Texts that Matter

The following three examples are representative of the types of reading we did with parents. Each illustrates the response of the parents when engaging with texts that resonated with them for one reason or another.

Curvy Hips and Skinny Trees: Connecting to Personal Life Experiences

Two readings that resonated with the mothers were chapters from Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (2003/1984 original printing). Cisneros, who is Mexican American, infuses her cultural roots into her writing. In the examples of "Hips" and "Four Skinny Trees," the chapters read by the participants, Cisneros treats topics that were directly connected to the life experiences of the participants.

Both chapters are short in length but rich with voice and imagery. In the case of "Hips," the chapter focuses on preadolescent girls' perceptions, and misconceptions, about their developing bodies. The author playfully recounts an interaction from her perspective as a child. In "Four Skinny Trees" Cisneros poetically compares herself to the trees. Both may appear weak and as if they do not belong in the alien and harsh environment where they find themselves, but beneath the surface are strong roots and strong determination to survive.

The parents responded enthusiastically to both of the readings. "Hips" stimulated lively and often humorous discussions. In a previewing discussion that took place before the reading, one of the male participants activated background knowledge based on the story title. He said: "*Bueno, de eso yo si sé pero mejor no digo nada*" [okay, I do know about this topic but I better not say anything].

His comment was received with laughter from the predominantly female group and one mother responded saying: "*Si mejor que no lo diga. Ya sabemos lo que ustedes miran cuando uno camina*" [Yes, it would be better if you do not say what you are thinking. We already know what men look at when we walk]. Her response initiated another chorus of laughter.

While the story "Hips" inspired a mostly humorous response from the parents, the discussion about "Four Skinny Trees" took a serious tone. The parents read this story at home with their children and the symbolism in the story inspired some intense parent-child conversation. During a group discussion, one mother recounted the reaction of her child. She said, "*Mi hijo se puso muy triste y dijo: pobrecita la niña de la lectura, está muy triste!*" [My son became very sad and said: the poor girl in the story, she is so sad!].

Another parent expressed the feelings of the group when she explained the way this text resonated with their life experiences: "*La lectura es como cuando llegamos a vivir a este país y no sabíamos ni porque queríamos quedarnos si todo era tan diferente; el clima, la gente, el inglés tan complicado*" [The reading is like when we arrived to live in this country and we didn't even know why we wanted to stay here if everything was so different; the climate, the people, English which is so complicated].

The discussion by the parents revealed that they connected to Cisneros' short story and that the reading of the story inspired a great deal of discussion at home with their children. Many of the parents commented that they were surprised at their children's abilities to articulate their own thoughts relating to their family roots, immigration, and feelings of isolation inspired by reading the story.

The work of Sandra Cisneros has the elements of culturally relevant text. The fact that her writing resonated with the Mexican immigrant parents (mostly mothers) came as no surprise. Cisneros is a gifted writer who draws on her social, cultural, and gender identities in her narrative style. The fact that the parents engaged with the texts and with each other during discussion is testament to the importance of text selection and multicultural literature. The fact that the readings also inspired deep conversations between parents and their children points to the power that texts hold not only to reflect our life experiences but also to springboard important dialogue.

Nopalitos:**Connecting to Background Knowledge through Culture Specific Content**

"El Cacto—Una Planta del Desierto" (Cactus—A Desert Plant) is a bare bones expository essay written for educational purposes. This one-page passage, similar to something you might find in a commercially produced test prep packet, uses simple language to describe three different types of cacti. The essay was selected with the purpose of having the parents practice strategies of comparing and contrasting.

Surprisingly, this essay initiated an animated response by the participants. The parents contained a wealth of background knowledge about cactus in general and specifically nopales (prickly pear). The essay was the catalyst for an array of responses that positioned the parents as the experts/teachers.

First, after reading the essay the parents communicated knowledge to their children. Alba emotionally recounted how the essay awakened memories of her hometown in Mexico where the nopal cacti are cultivated for consumption. Her eyes were distant as she recounted the sights and smells of the countryside filled with rows of cactus as far as the eye could see.

It was as if she was transported into another time and place when she described the mouthwatering flavors of nopalitos prepared stewed, fried with eggs, and in salad. She recounted to the class how the essay led her to share these strong memories with her daughter who was born in the U.S. and has never had the opportunity to visit the hometown of her mother.

Alba said, "*Mi pobre niña no ha podido ir, cómo nació aquí. Yo le conté lo bonito que es allá. Y por eso me pregunta, 'y porque los que estan en el jardín no se comen?' Ella no sabe la diferencia*" [My poor daughter has never had the opportunity to go since she was born here. I told her how beautiful it is there. And that is why she asked me, 'and why don't we eat the ones in the garden?' She just doesn't know the difference].

The essay, as simple as it was, opened a space for this mother and daughter to interact and discuss a part of the mother's life of which her daughter was not familiar. Not only did the mother proudly describe her hometown, she also shared botanical expertise with her daughter who was eager to learn. These are just the types of textual responses that educators hope to inspire in schooling.

Alba's daughter was not the only beneficiary of the cultural knowledge of these parents. Our discussions of the

cactus essay, and especially the culinary qualities of the nopal, led to rich discussion that celebrated the knowledge of all of the parents. The parents seemed to delight in the fact that they knew much more detailed information on the subject than the passage offered. Through their discussions they became the teachers informing their instructor and each other about the many varieties of prickly pear cactus and the multitude of culinary options for the plants.

The group discussion that stemmed from the reading developed into a conversation about favorite recipes. The week following our discussions on nopales, Inés brought a pot of nopales guisados (stewed cactus) for the class to share. This is notable because the reading and ensuing discussion motivated a parent to go beyond the written print and extend her response to the reading using culinary arts to bring culture alive in the classroom.

This is even more impressive given that Inés was the quietest student in the group. Although she always attended the meetings and did the assignments, she was extremely reserved and rarely offered her opinions. The day she brought the stew however was different. On this occasion she enthusiastically explained how she prepared the dish and eagerly sought our impressions of her cooking.

This event marked the beginning of what became her breaking out of her shyness, and from this moment on Inés became an active contributor to group discussions. It was as if this opportunity allowed her to highlight her perceived strengths and gain the needed confidence to become a serious contributor to the meetings.

Los Siete Medios de Llenar una Bolsa Vacía: Connecting to Immediate Economic Needs

The reading, *Los Siete Medios de Llenar una Bolsa Vacía* [The Seven Ways to Fill an Empty Pocket], is a chapter from a book by Georges Clason (1996). This eleven-page essay is written in a philosophical style that made the text slightly more difficult than the other selections we used with the group. However, the length and difficulty level did not deter parents from high-level engagement over a three-week period.

The text and our ensuing discussions focused on saving money, cutting expenses, and investment opportunities. An interesting point is the fact that many men joined their wives and participated in the after-school sessions on the weeks we covered this particular reading. We attribute this increased participation to the content of

the text—something that the families, men and women alike, viewed as relevant and essential to their wellbeing.

The length and difficulty of the text was not the only reason that it took three weeks to cover. The parents read over the material with a fine-toothed comb and their discussions required the extra time. For each of the seven suggestions offered in the reading parents questioned, discussed, and even challenged assumptions made by the author.

The parents, like many recent immigrants, have struggled to make ends meet. They read with a heightened sense of purpose hoping to glean strategies for increased economic opportunity. In their discussions they addressed each of the seven steps, trying to devise ways to apply the advice to their real life economic situations. They often started discussion with questions. The following are some examples of the sorts of questions they asked:

- ◆ *¿Qué quiere decir guardar una décima parte de las ganancias?* [What does it mean to save one tenth of your earnings?]
- ◆ *¿Cómo puedo yo controlar más mis gastos si yo ya los controlo lo suficiente?* [How can I control my expenses more if I already control them enough?]
- ◆ *La lectura aconseja comprar vivienda, ¿es eso posible si uno no tiene papeles?* [The reading advises to own a home, is that possible if I don't have my legal documents?]

All of the questions led to rich discussion full of personal connections to the text. Some questions were quickly answered, but many functioned more as a means to challenge the simplicity of the author's argument and provided a vehicle for parents to discuss their economic situations and share their own ideas on how to manage money.

By the third week of working with this reading every parent had built a conceptual map/graphic organizer poster to present to the class using the main ideas of the text and sharing their individual examples of how the content of the text translated into their personal plan to do some savings. The students were very attentive and even though it would have been easier to give up, they persisted.

Their own pressing economic needs and the hope that the essay would have something of value to offer motivated

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them. Because of the high level of engagement on the part of the parents as they read and discussed this text, we consider it to be a good example of a text that matters in the context of this particular after-school program.

Conclusions

The goal of this family literacy project was to create a space for Mexican immigrant parents to practice reading comprehension strategies that they could implement while reading with their children at home. The program was designed around constructivist learning principles that positioned the parents as active learners who directed their own learning through discussion and other interactions in response to their readings.

The texts that were selected were intended to draw on the parents' funds of knowledge as well as to connect to their immediate daily lives as adults and as immigrants in the United States.

While the readings varied greatly in their content and style, we found that they each had elements that made them serve well as springboards for further learning. The parents showed high levels of

engagement with the readings that led to lively and informative discussions. While the readings were geared mainly towards adults, we found that the parents were often so excited by their high-level discussions that they ended up sharing these literacy related discussions with their children.

We conclude with the assertion that fostering adult literacy practices, as well as those of children, requires careful attention to the selection of relevant text. Text matters!

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