

Santo Remedio

Latino Parents & Students Foster Literacy through a Culturally Relevant Folk Medicine Event

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Caretakers teach young children how to enact particular cultural practices (Heath, 2002). It is in this way that the three- or four-year-old Mexican-American child quickly learns from teachers and peers about the types of behaviors and practices that are valued at school, as well as those that are not valued. Rapidly the child comes to learn about the high status assigned to English and how standardized testing will regulate their learning. These factors directly impact a young child's self-concept and academic performance (De Civita, Pagani, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2004).

When researchers examine issues of literacy concerning Latino parents and young children, many of the resulting studies indicate that the literacy experiences of Mexican-American children who come from low-income homes are very different than their White middle class counterparts (Lopez, Barrueco, Feinhauer, & Miles, 2007). However, caution is warranted when researchers undertake their examination of Mexican-American parents' style and nature of engaging literacy in the same way they would study middle class-based literacy practices (Casper, 2009). Such studies are not inclusive and do not provide information about the types of literacy in which parents and children of Mexican heritage actually engage.

When studies fail to examine lit-

eracy through a multi-modal perspective, findings tend to emphasize deficit views of the literacy practices of language minority groups. Seminal works such as Heath (1996) and Scribner and Cole (1981) have defined literacy as *more* than just what occurs in school. Additionally, recent findings indicate that each family has culturally-specific ways of engaging literacy (Espinosa, 2010) and researchers have identified the multiple literacy activities that Mexican-American children engage in on a daily basis (Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003).

Many educators have begun to reconsider their curricula, acknowledging that family involvement greatly influences early literacy skills (Arnold, et al., 2008). As educators share school literacy expectations with parents (Riojas-Cortez, Flores, & Clark, 2001), they also become responsible for examining how parents and other family members engage young children in literacy events, and can then create critical home-to-school connections for parents. At the same time, parents may be unaware that they are indeed promoting literacy development when family-based cultural practices occur seamlessly as everyday events (Riojas-Cortez, Soto Huerta, Flores, Clark, & Perez, 2008). In this vein Cairney (2000) proposed that reciprocal understandings can be forged when parents and schools learn how each defines and values literacy.

Parental and Family Involvement

Unfortunately, schools remain an intimidating place for many Mexican-American parents. Mexican-American parents distance themselves from schools when they feel they have been assigned a deficit status as parents. This limits or eliminates opportunities for parental engagement with schools (Valdés, 1996).

By contrast, schools that view Mexican-American families and learning through a multi-modal lens, one based on social capital theory for example, are schools that are equipped to perceive the interdependence between academic and social learning (Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001). These schools build upon the *funds of knowledge* represented within Latino¹ communities (Moll et al., 1992).

These funds represent knowledge that is shared or exchanged within a family's social network, and function to ensure that both parents and children thrive. Educators can only learn about a family's funds of knowledge by creating opportunities for parents to share their own cultural practices (Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2009).

Culture and Folk Medicine

Possessing knowledge of medicinal herbs has historically contributed to the funds of knowledge of the Mexican-American community. Within the Mexican-American culture, the medicinal effects of herbs is valued knowledge that is transmitted through the generations. *Remedios caseros* (home remedies or folk medicine) are defined as "cures" that are widely used by Latinos to treat minor illnesses and to prevent serious illness (Becerra & Iglehart, 1995).

When a particular malady is cured, Mexican American parents may comment that the herb was a *santo remedio* (a God-send). Background knowledge about medicinal herbs, however, has not typically been considered instrumental to school literacy development, yet it should be viewed as a cultural fund of knowledge that can be used to promote literacy and create a reciprocal learning activity between school, child, and parent.

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Culturally Appropriate Literacy Practices

The sharing of knowledge among family members is a valuable resource for children's emotional and social growth and development and can clearly involve literacy (Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001). Mexican-American parents often share their knowledge of medicinal herbs with their children either through first-hand experience and observation or through storytelling.

Mexican-American parents use *cuentos típicos* (culturally-relevant stories) to teach children about the medicinal benefits of certain herbs. These stories have valuable literary elements. The intent of the *cuento*, for example, is to communicate something important; therefore, credibility of the *cuento* is pivotal. The *cuento* aims to create a real world connection for the listener through oral storytelling, and must therefore take a realistic narrative form that does not necessarily utilize the familiar structure of "Once upon a time..."

Cuentos will cast known individuals as characters. These are usually family members. The settings are also familiar to the listener, and the plot may be recurring. The art of delivering a *cuento* is also a critical element since it may convey a cautionary message in the form of advice (*un consejo*).

Another critical element of a *cuento* is that it always aims to provoke a broad range of emotions, such as fear, curiosity, intrigue, and mystery. These story elements, combined with the craft and credibility of the storyteller, guide the listener to learn information explicitly, to draw analogies, and to make inferences from the information conveyed. To accomplish this, the listener must actively engage and attend to both explicit and implicit cues within the *cuento*.

Our study was inspired by the literary elements of *cuentos típicos*. The book *Prietita y la llorona* (*Prietita and the Ghost Woman*) written by Anzaldúa (1995) is a good example of a *cuento* that provides information about medicinal herbs and also includes *consejos* (advice). The plot stems from a well-known Mexican story that is traditionally told orally and passed on through generations. Reading this book validates the parents' background knowledge of medicinal herbs and provides a forum for their animated discussion, enthusiastic contributions, and elaboration of shared information. This context thus inspired a community of learners, which

in turn facilitated the parents' participation and performance of the protocol-based literacy tasks we assigned them.

Theoretical Framework

The Family Institute for Early Literacy (FIELD) is housed on two university campuses in Texas. The Institute is based on the theoretical framework of Moll's funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, et al., 1992), Rodríguez-Brown's (2009) work with Latino families, and Epstein's (1995) six-pronged model of family involvement, with specific attention paid to parent interactions in formal settings. FIELD seeks to examine how multiple literacies from home and school interconnect to increase support for the literacy development of young children. In this study, Mexican-American and Mexican immigrant parents were invited to attend a weeklong workshop with their three-to-four-year-old child.

At the participating Title I school, parents were guided through different literacy-related activities to better understand how family literacy supports the academic literacy development of their children. FIELD primarily seeks to hear what parents' perceptions are about the type of learning that the school requires for their young child as well as to identify specific family cultural practices that could support academic learning.

Methodology

Description of the Community and Participants

This FIELD study was conducted in an urban elementary school. The school serves a Mexican-American and Mexican immigrant community located in one of the poorest sections of a large metropolitan city in South Texas. Surrounded by government-subsidized housing, the school provides low-income families with a dual language immersion program where Spanish and English are systematically used for instruction with the goal of fostering high levels of biliteracy (Pérez, 2004).

Within this sample of 64 parents participating in FIELD all were of Mexican heritage. The majority had recently immigrated (54, or 85%) and spoke only Spanish. The rest of the parents in the sample had lived in the community for at least two generations. This latter subgroup was bilingual, with the majority speaking English as their first language. These English-speaking families were

highly engaged and frequently asked for translations during times when presentations were primarily conducted in Spanish. It was apparent that this parent group valued Spanish, and this was further substantiated by the enrollment of their children in the dual language immersion program. A third, smaller group of parents were not literate, as evidenced by their writing of "X" to signify their signature.

Procedure

Remedios caseros was shared in one session of the weeklong parent-child institute. To initiate the session, parents were first greeted and then asked by one of the researchers for a show of hands from those who had knowledge about *remedios caseros*. The researcher next presented a brief power point presentation in Spanish about medicinal herbs, translating the content in English as needed, and then read aloud *Prietita y la llorona* (*Prietita and the Ghost Woman*). A discussion about the book followed.

In a forum format parents were then asked to share their knowledge about medicinal herbs. This continued for approximately 15 minutes with the majority of the parents eager to share their knowledge of *remedios* (cures) because, as one parent stated, "Es que a nosotros los doctores no nos escuchan" (Doctors do not listen to us). The parents were then informed that their child would join them and that they would receive a bag with herbs, a magnifying glass, and a booklet. Parents were instructed to guide their child to view each herb and to use their senses to describe their observations. Parents and children were invited to record their ideas in the booklet. University students assisted parents with the writing tasks as needed, including taking dictation.

Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedures

The data collected through FIELD for this qualitative study included field notes and audio recordings of the interactions that resulted between the researchers and the parents. These included discussion among parents after *Prietita y la llorona* was read aloud, interactions between parents and their young children, and finally the completed written products from the assignments.

The audio recordings were transcribed. These data were organized and read as recommended by Creswell (2006). Open coding generated broad categories associated with

parents' performance of literate behaviors. Interconnecting categories were then identified, correlated, and subsumed. Thereafter, selective coding from these data generated the following four themes: scaffolding and modeling, vocabulary, phonemic awareness (manipulating sounds), and interactive writing (sharing the task of writing).

Although a total of 64 parents² participated in the institute, we have included here select excerpts that provide evidence about and are representative of each theme identified. The analysis generated by the written products will be discussed first, followed by an analysis of the transcribed audio recordings.

Results

Written Products

Parents were asked to write about their knowledge of using *remedios caseros* (folk medicine) in the booklets provided. Field notes indicated that the parents valued recording their ideas this way. Their knowledge had been validated by the read-aloud session and they were inspired to write for the audience of their young child. In Figure 1, for example, one parent drew a storyboard, providing illustrated instructions for preparing *manzanilla* (chamomile tea). This parent explained each step to her child as she wrote and drew.

The analysis of the transcriptions also indicated a variety of literate behavior exhibited by parents during the writing task. The following excerpts provide evidence for each theme: modeling, vocabulary, phonemic awareness, and interactive writing.

Scaffolding and Modeling

Parents provided scaffolding by drawing attention to real world connections to sustain their young child's engagement throughout the writing task. In the following excerpts, parents use examples and recall previous experiences, making the writing task relevant and authentic. This enabled young children to construct meaning using literacy as well as learn about the medicinal attributes of a particular herb.

SEÑORA ARIEL: ¡Oh! Bravo...¿Cómo se escribe? Es con /z/, ¿verdad? Man - zanilla. La manzanilla es con /z/. A tí te la daban cuando estabas bebida.

(Super!...How do you write the word? It has a /z/, right? Man-zan-nilla. You write 'manzanilla' with a /z/. We used to give it to you when you were a baby.)

SEÑOR RAÚL: ...la sábila es buena para las quemadas.

(The aloe vera plant is good for burns.)

CARMEN: Yo tengo una aquí, ¿verdad ma'?

(I have one here, right, ma?)

SEÑOR RAÚL: Sí, y te curamos también.

(Yes, and we also cured it.)

SEÑORA CAROLA: A la mejor te cura las ronchas, ¿no?

(Maybe it'll cure rashes, no?)

As Señora Ariel supports her child's attempt to write the letter /z/, and explains why a /z/ is needed, she also explicitly draws a real world connection between the benefits of the herb and the child as they co-construct a text. This made the writing task relevant and authentic to both parent and child. In the next excerpt, both Señor Raúl and Señora Carola use dialog to make the writing task authentic for Carmen and to extend her current knowledge through elaboration.

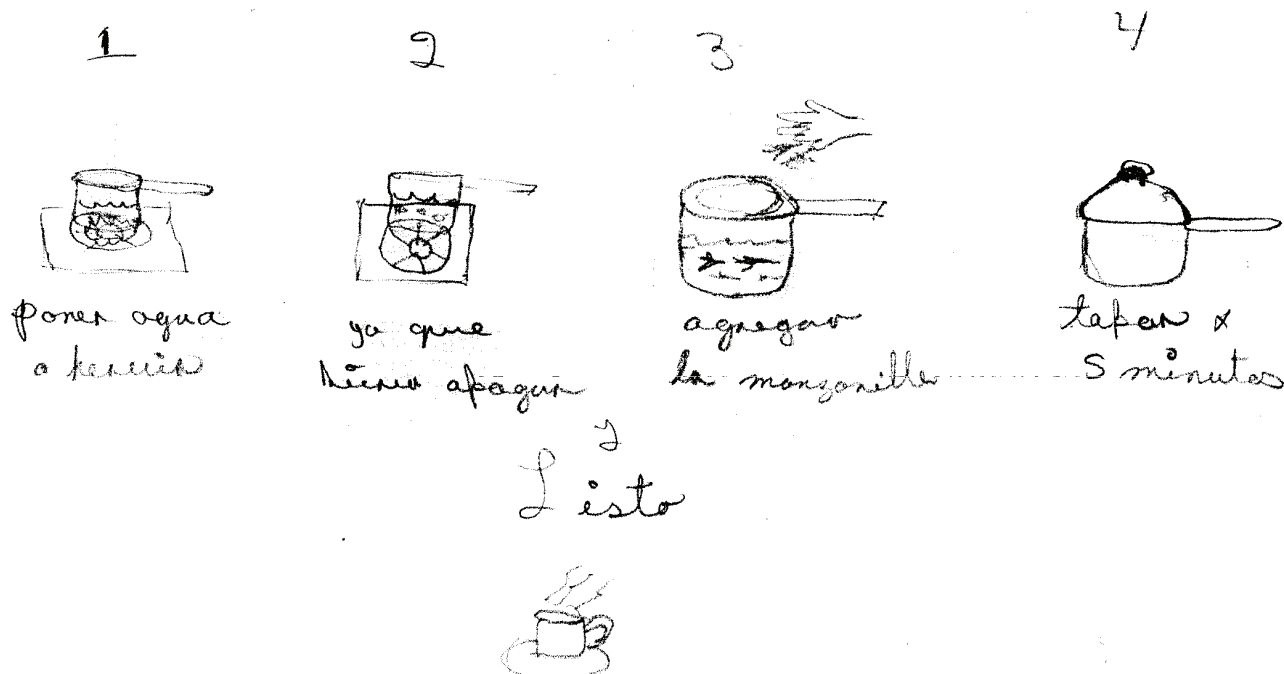
Modeling is a method that provides some specific forms of scaffolding. In the following excerpts, parents model through a dialogic approach, negotiating meaning with their young child for the purpose of writing.

SEÑORA BEATRIZ: ¿Tú puedes con el lápiz? Pero agarra el lápiz de aquí... afloja tu manita, afloja tu manita.

(Can you handle the pencil? But hold it from here... hold your pencil gently, soften your little hand.)

SEÑORA MARTA: ...¿Cómo haremos la matita, chaparra?

Figure 1
Showing Remedios Caseros Sequence through a Storyboard



(How should we draw this plant, shorty? Shorty is a term of endearment as in 'Little Bit')

TATIANA: *Con un palito, mami.*

(With a stick.)

Señora Isabel writes the word: *sábila*.

(aloe vera)

ESPERANZA: *¿...mami, onde lo pongo?*

(...mommy, where shall I put it?)

SEÑORA ISABEL: *Aquí...vas a dibujar una hoja grandecita en todo este pedacito en una sola hoja.*

(Here...you will draw a good-sized leaf on this single sheet of paper.)

The performance of each of the parents simulates appropriate developmental approaches to literacy instruction as they could occur in an early childhood classroom. Señora Beatriz asks a question with the intent to encourage, adding a diminutive, "little hand," in order to convey such encouragement. Señora Marta fully offers encouragement to her child by asking the child how she planned to draw the particular herb they are viewing. This question elicits a relevant oral response from Tatiana. As Señora Isabel writes the word *sábila* on the page, she also provides Esperanza with information concerning directionality and placement of text on the page.

Vocabulary

In this exercise, parents used terms associated with elementary science curricula. Their use of content-related vocabulary such as *examinar* (examine), *inspeccionala* (inspect), and *crystalino* (translucent) sparked critical thought as children examined the various herbs.

SEÑORA RAMONA: *Vas a **examinar** esta hierba.*

(You are going to examine the herb.)

SEÑORA ELENA: ***Inspeccionala**, se siente ¿fresca o seca?*

(Look at it closely, does it feel moist or dry?)

SEÑORA ELSA: *...es **crystalino**.*

(It's translucent.)

CRISTINA: *Yo la quiero **tocar**.*

(I want to touch it.)

SEÑORA SOCORRO: *Tócala con la mano.. **huélela, tócala, agárrala**.*

(Touch it with your hand...smell it, touch it, hold it.)

When Cristina asks permission to touch an herb, Señora Socorro reinforces the child's curiosity by encouraging the child to do so. She also extended the ex-

perience by offering further suggestions to "smell it, touch it, hold it." The parents are instrumental in using vocabulary that prompts young children to discover, gather information through observation, and generate descriptive language.

SEÑORA PATI: *...ábrela, ¿Qué se siente en tus manitas? ¿A qué huele?*

(...open it. How does it feel in your hands? What does it smell like?)

IRENE: *...se siente rasposa.*

(...it feels rough.)

TOMÁS: *...se siente agüada.*

(...it feels squishy.)

MAYA: *... se siente suave.*

(...it feels soft.)

MARÍA: *¿pica?*

(Does it have stickers?)

RUBÉN: *...es en forma de un cono.*

(The shape is like a cone.)

Phonemic Awareness

Parents also assumed the role of literacy coaches. Parents guided children to hear and manipulate spoken language by identifying the sounds in words for them, further segmenting these words into sounds. Children were responsive apprentice-scribes when tasked with taking dictation.

SEÑORA IRMA: *Ma, ma, manzanilla.*

ENRIQUE: *Ma, ma.*

SEÑORA IRMA: *Za/za/za/ la /z/ la de zapato.*

SEÑOR PEDRO: *Se siente fresco, /f/ /r/ /e/ /s/ /c/ /o/, fresco, fresco...es bueno, es...es...buena...bu - /e/ - /n/ /a/ para /p/ /a/ /r/ /a/ para las ...*

(It feels fresh, fresh, fresh...it is good... it is...it is...good for, for...)

SEÑORA CRYSTAL: *La /i/ de inglés, la /ll/ de lluvia, escribe dos palitos. Hazlos más grandes, para arriba...no tan grandes. Ahora escribe la /a/ otra vez.*

(Write /i/ as in English, the /ll/ as in rain, write two sticks. Write them larger, go up...not so big. Now write /a/ again.)

SAMUEL: *La /a/ de avión, mami.*

(/a/ as in airplane.)

In the first excerpt, Señora Irma uses segmentation to cue Enrique to listen for the syllables in the word *manzanilla*, which is an appropriate phonemic awareness task aligned with the language system of Spanish. Señora Irma also casts an analogy, which provides the child with an additional

opportunity to draw connections to a familiar word that is also written with /z/.

Señor Pedro uses clauses to express a thought before isolating each sound of the target words. This enables the child to first understand the intent of the thought and then to draw inferences about the relationship between spoken and written language. Señora Crystal follows in the same vein, isolating sounds of particular words, but also guiding the formation of letters. Samuel registers his engagement by calling out another word that also begins with /a/.

Interactive Writing

Parents initiated interactive writing by discussing a particular herb with their children and then guiding each to write about it in their booklets. Interactive writing was valuable to emergent writers when parents shared "the pen" with their child in order to compose the text.

SEÑOR MARCOS: (Father dictating)...y *luego suave punto y ¿para qué es buena la sábila?...*

(then write 'soft,' use a period; and what is aloe vera good for?)

ISMAEL: *Para las quemadas.*

(For burns.)

SEÑOR MARCOS: *Ok, ponle aquí las quemadas.*

(Ok, write here 'for burns.')

ISMAEL: *Tu escríbelo pa'.*

(Pa, you write it.)

SEÑORA IRENE: *...para cuando los bebidos tienen cólicos se les da de tomar, se pone a hervir agua y se le pone...*

(so if a baby has colic you give them this to drink, you boil water, and you add...)

AIZA: *Pa'que se la tome y...*

(So they can drink it...)

SEÑORA IRENE: *Que hierva...*

(Until it boils...)

AIZA: *Y se la tome el bebé...*

(And the baby drinks it...)

SEÑORA IRENE: (Mother writes) *y se la damos al bebé si tiene cólicos la.... Se le da...*

(...and we give it to the baby if it has colic...we give the baby...)

AIZA: *¡Manzanilla! Mami, mami, manzanilla!*

(Camomile! Mommy, mommy, camomile!)

Interactive writing became a strategy that facilitated parents to model sound-let-

ter connections and spelling patterns for their children, and it also enabled the children to see how a message is constructed word by word. When the task seemed overwhelming for Ismael, for example, the context that interactive writing created allowed for the exchange of the “pen.”

In Señora Irene’s approach, open-ended clues and the repetition of these clues enabled Aiza to draw relevant information from memory in order to produce the correct response. This approach prompted the child to attend to the clues while the positive response she received sustained her engagement.

Discussion

The results of this study indicated that parents of Mexican heritage performed and shared a range of literate behaviors in relevant and authentic ways with their young children. While the findings are limited to this specific sample of parents and young children, the results highlight the distributive effects of using culturally-relevant literature to validate parents’ background knowledge.

By utilizing their background knowledge of *remedios caseros* and by providing an opportunity for discussing and writing about the knowledge they possessed, parents gained an understanding of the important interconnections between home and school literacy.

The literacy event also provided opportunities for parents to share their knowledge with their children by participating in the co-construction of text. In addition, the sessions made parents aware that everyday experiences form part of their *funds of knowledge*, and that this information could promote the critical thinking, oral language, and the writing development of their young children.

Consequently, young emergent-writers attended to a shift in their parent’s role as literacy guides. Ultimately, the young children benefitted from these culturally-relevant modes of literacy, previously limited to their home settings, within the context of the school and classroom.

Note

¹ Moll, Amanti, and Gonzalez use the term “Latino” in their research to designate those families identified in the U.S. Census as being of “Hispanic” descent.

² All parent names used in this article are pseudonyms.

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