

Promoting Family Literacy Among Latino Immigrant Parents: *A Concept Mapping Experience*

Ahora entiendo que leer no es leer por leer –Alicia
*[Now I understand that reading is not just reading for
the sake of reading]*

**Leer me transporta a otros lugares, tiempos o
personajes. Me encanta!! –María**
*[Reading transports me to other places, times, or
characters. I love it!!]*

Alicia and María (pseudonyms) were two of the parents involved in a parent literacy project designed to help Latino immigrant parents learn about the school-based literacy objectives their children were experiencing in elementary school. The comments of these two mothers echo the sentiments of the larger group who engaged in studies of reading comprehension strategies over a 12 week time period. Both mothers comment on issues relating to reading comprehension. Alicia explains how her involvement in the project has changed her understanding of the reading process. She now understands that reading is more than pronouncing words but also about constructing meaning from text. María discusses her love of reading because of the power text has to transport the reader to other times, places, and even identities. These parent-participants came to new understandings about reading comprehension as well as the power of reading with their children after engaging in social interactions around important texts, texts that mattered to them, and scaffolded strategy instruction.

In this article we describe the parent literacy project and highlight the potential of efforts to involve parents in meaningful ways with their children's literacy development. Through our workings with Latino immigrant parents we found that parents, even with low literacy skills and not much formal schooling, have desire and capacity to help with their children's literacy development. The parents were eager to help; they just needed tools.

Background

Research suggests that traditional forms of parental involvement, such as Parent-Teacher-Associations

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(PTA's), classroom volunteering, and attending back-to-school night, are not effective for successfully engaging minority and low-income families (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Instead, such research advocates different forms of parental involvement that address the cultures and needs of the diverse populations represented in the schools. However, traditional approaches continue to be cultivated as the main forms of involvement in minority and low-income schools (Olivos, 2006; Quezada, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2003).

We propose the implementation of family literacy as an alternative to involve parents in more meaningful ways. Family literacy is a term used to describe how multiple generations learn together and how they use and value literacy (Weinstein, 1998). It refers to literacy instruction designed for adults that include literacy activities involving their children—in other words, literacy instruction that benefits the adult and the child. Through family literacy practices, parents are able to provide their children with support and guidance to be successful in school. Parents acquire tools and learn strategies that they can use with their children while practicing literacy (Jimenez, Filippini, & Gerber, 2006; Paratore, Melzi, & Krol-Sinclair, 1999). This can be particularly useful for immigrant parents who may not be familiar with the style of instruction their children are experiencing in U.S. schools (McCarthy, 2000; Quezada, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2003).

It is widely agreed that the involvement of parents in their children's literacy development positively affects children's academic performance and school achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001). For example, the dialogue and interaction that happens between the parent and the child when they read together promotes the development of language skills in general and the development of children's oral language in particular (Jimenez, Filippini, & Gerber, 2006; Cutspec, 2004;

Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003). Such language development is key for students' academic achievement.

Method

Context

The After School Literacy Project took place at Main Street Elementary (MSE), a public school located in an urban area of central Texas. The school has a sizable population (approximately 900 students, Pre-K to 5th grade) and contains bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) support on 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).

Participants

Parents were recruited through the school. A letter was sent home inviting all parents of children in the bilingual education program to participate in the After School Literacy Project. As a result, 18 parents elected to participate. The data presented in this article come from 12 focal participants, 11 females and one male. They were selected on the basis of attendance (they attended at least 85% of the sessions) and the fact that they provided consent to participate in the study. All of the parents involved 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.

Procedures

The project was held after the regular school day for two hours once a week and utilized two classrooms of MSE. One classroom was used for the parent meetings and in the other childcare was provided. The project lasted for 12 weeks during the spring of 2007. In order to facilitate the parents' understanding of the language arts activities that take place in their children's classrooms, the After School Literacy Project emphasized hands-on learning where the parents engaged in the reading process and studied strategies for reading comprehension. The reading strategies used for the implementation of the project included: Think aloud, K-W-L, Preview-view-review, Concept mapping, and Cubing.

In this article we focus on interactions that occurred during the teaching of one of these strategies, concept mapping, as an illustrative example of the typical interactions we observed during the twelve-week family literacy project. Although concept mapping was the strategy being addressed, the particular reading

strategy was less important than the types of parental interactions that were promoted by our family literacy model.

Concept mapping is a strategy that employs the use of graphic organizers to help readers visualize important information from text(s) and the relation of the specific information with other important points from the reading (Grabe, 2009). Using this strategy, the parents and their children worked with concepts and propositions as opposed to rote memorization of facts. Concept mapping is a strategy commonly used in language arts classrooms because, "applying graphic representations to organize text information leads to improved recall of information and significantly better comprehension" (Grabe, 2009, p. 213).

Concept mapping was taught over the course of three weeks. Initially, parents were given a handout explaining the main features of the strategy. We, the lesson facilitators, went over the handout to teach parents how to create a concept map from a text. Next, we provided examples and opportunities to practice the strategy in small group settings. Parents were asked to practice the literacy strategy with their children at home only after they had mastered the strategy and were given ample time to practice in class with other parents. In later meetings, parents and their children practiced the literacy strategy together so that the facilitators could observe and help them by giving further direction.



Parents learning about literacy strategies.



Parents practicing literacy strategies together, before introducing them to their children.



A mother practicing a literacy strategy with her child.

The parents learned the strategy of concept mapping while reading a chapter from, *El Hombre Más Rico de Babilonia* [The Richest Man of Babylon], a book by Georges Clason (1996). The chapter entitled *Los Siete Medios de Llenar una Bolsa Vacía* [The Seven Ways to Fill an Empty Pocket], although somewhat difficult for a number of the parents, proved highly engaging for the group. Even though the text was longer and on a more difficult level than previous readings, parent motivation was high for this text that discussed the topic of personal finances and included tips for saving money.

After reading and discussing the chapter, parents worked in small groups to identify the main idea and supporting details. The parents recorded their findings on index cards. Next, parents worked individually to create poster sized concept maps of the chapter that they later presented to the others in the group. Figure 1 shows an example of one of the concept maps created by a parent and presented to the group.

Parent-made concept map for *Seven Ways to Fill an Empty Pocket*

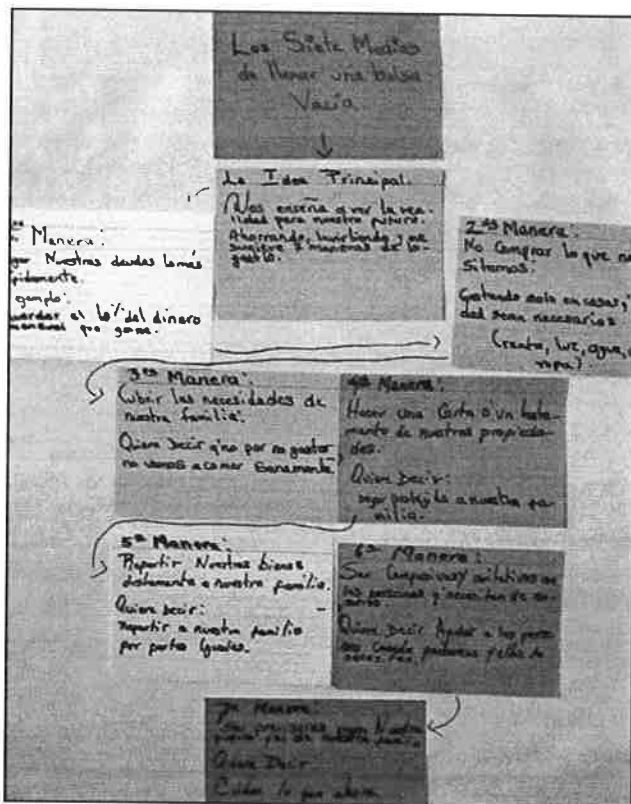


FIGURE 1

The next step after parents presented their concept maps to each other was for them to practice the strategy with their children. They were given another reading ("Bats") to take home to read with their children and work together to prepare index cards with the main idea and supporting details. In the following

Concept map of "Bats" made by parent and child

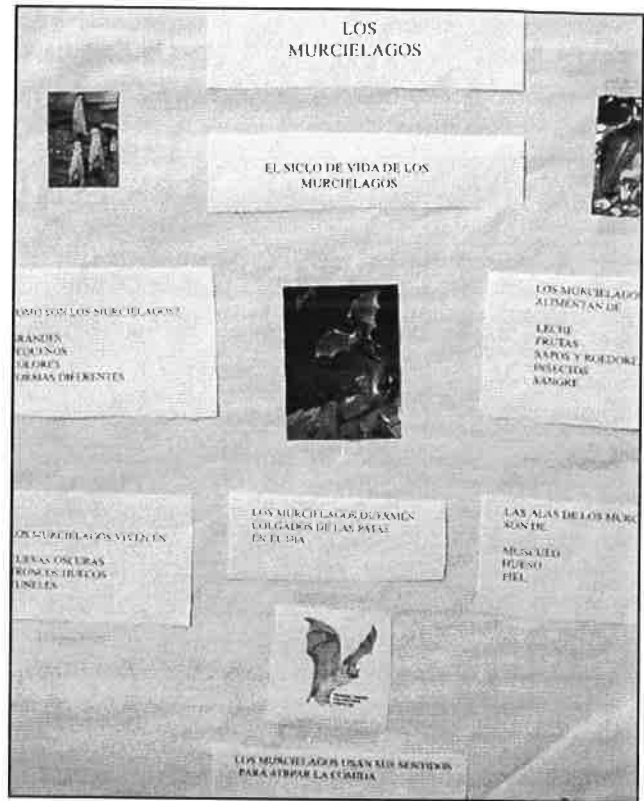


FIGURE 2

after-school session, parents worked with their children to create concept maps from the story using the information from their index cards. Figure 2 shows an example of one of the concept maps created by a parent and child based on the passage about bats.

"Bats" is an expository essay, one page in length, that uses simple language to describe the different types of bats, their life cycle, their appearance, what they eat, and how they live. This topic created opportunities to connect children's experiences with this animal and motivate their curiosity, making the parents' task easier when guiding their children to apply the concept map strategy. Isabel said the following:

My son went on a field trip this Friday and went to see the caves where there are bats. We had a lot to talk about and a lot to learn. My son and I talked and he found what bats eat to be very interesting. For me it was very interesting to watch my son be so enthusiastic about an animal.

Results

As mentioned before, many of the parent participants did not have high levels of education and reported a lack of confidence in their literacy abilities. A number of the parents were shy about presenting their work to

the other adults present especially because, for most of them, it had been a long time since they participated in any school related tasks involving reading, writing, group work, and oral presentations. Parents reported that the practice helped them gain confidence not just with the comprehension strategy but also with presentation skills. For example, Isabel mentioned:

When I presented my work last week I did not think it was that difficult. I received some suggestions for next time. I need to make my writing bigger, read towards my peers and not cover my mouth with the paper when I read. I will keep it in mind.

In addition, the activities seemed to increase parents' understanding of the reading process. Through the interactions of the group, parents experienced the social nature of literacy and the importance of interacting with the text and other people in order to reconstruct meaning. Rocio shared that:

This reading was interesting. I finished reading at home and the discussions in class clarified many things. I realize now how important it is to have dialogue to better understand the message.

Learning the comprehension strategy, discussing the reading, and presenting their ideas in front of other adults helped these parents realize how capable they were and helped them gain confidence with literacy practices. In turn, this exercise gave the parents momentum and background knowledge useful when working with their children. Alicia corroborates this point stating:

Having the discussions in class with other parents helped me a lot to understand how to implement the strategy. This helped me to have the dialogue with my daughter at home. I knew what to expect and how to help my child to understand the activity.

Alicia's words sum up perfectly what we were aiming for in terms of family literacy practices with the After School Literacy Project. Rather than a top-down model that viewed parents from a deficit perspective, with literacy specialists "teaching" so-called "uneducated" parents about reading comprehension, parents viewed the interactions of the group as dialogic. Alicia's comment underscores the importance of the parent discussions and interactions as key to the learning process. The dialogue that began with parents discussing comprehension in relation to their own reading led to parent-child interactions based in the same literacy practices.

In addition to creating opportunities for parents to observe and talk with children about topics of interest to them, the parent-child concept mapping activity provided parents an opportunity to observe their own children participating in an academic setting. For many parents the only time they are invited to school to observe their sons and daughters is when there are extracurricular events or behavior problems. In contrast, the collaborative concept mapping activity allowed children to use school-based language arts learning in the authentic purpose of jointly creating a map and presentation with their parent. Implementing the concept map strategy helped the parents establish an "academic connection" with their children. Maria commented about this:

I was surprised when I saw my son presenting with me because I saw how sure of himself he was. I think that he enjoyed it very much. I thought that he would get embarrassed but now that I had the opportunity to present with him I was able to see that he likes to express himself in public.

Parents and children were motivated to invest time and effort on doing the work we assigned as part of the family literacy project. The structured assignments with readings of interest promoted at-home literacy practices that moved beyond the basic comprehension strategy being taught. The following comment by Marisol highlights the ways in which this simple assignment was extended during parent-child interactions:

This week's homework was interesting for us. My son asked me to read the story a couple of times and he would share the types of bats there were. We made several drawings of bats. He asked if I could be given more stories like this one because he thought it was interesting. And he even asked if the character of Batman was the same as the bats from the reading.

Discussion

As language arts teachers we hope to encourage our students to love reading and other literacy related tasks. We also recognize that parents are our students' first teachers and remain important role models for their children throughout their educational careers. The interactions between Marisol and her son are precisely what we as teachers hope for when we ask students to read at home with adults. Rather than simply sending home readings with children and perhaps asking parents to sign a reading log as evidence of their child's completion of the task, we believe that establishing literacy-based relationships with parents will yield much more fruitful results. As was demonstrated in the case

of the concept mapping activities, providing parents with tools to work with their children on literacy tasks that are aligned with the school's curriculum seems to produce promising outcomes.

Through the use of comprehension strategies and text that matter to the participants in the project, we promoted a "dialogic approach" to literacy (Fallon, 1995; Freire, 1970). In such an approach, all participants are engaged in a genuine, two-way conversation. In this project, parents and facilitators listened to each other's ideas, interpretations, stories, and questions about the readings and this helped us experience the essence of dialogue. In other words, we had the intention to communicate, anticipated a response, created knowledge about each other's world, and developed what Freire and Fallon call generative themes.

Generative themes are different from learners' interests because they "resonate with students and using these themes as the basis of literacy education helps them [the learners] to connect with the written word" (Fallon, 1995, p. 143). Generative themes "contain the possibility of unfolding into . . . many themes, which in their turn call for new tasks to be fulfilled" (Freire, 1970, p. 102). Generative themes are complex topics, central to learners' lives that serve as the medium for the learners to express their views of the world and their realities. Immigration, personal finances, and culture are examples of the generative themes we addressed throughout the readings. Regardless of the educational level of the participating parents these themes provided a rich context for true dialogue to happen. As we know, true dialogue "...can move people to wonderful new levels of knowledge; it can transform relations; it can change things" (Wink, 2000, pp. 47-48). The careful selection of the readings and topics to be discussed in a literacy project like the one we are describing here is crucial for fostering literacy practices and dialogue between parents and children (Larrotta & Gainer, 2008).

In the context of this literacy project, dialogue promoted a sense of community among the participants. The participants in this study are living in a country that is foreign to them, and their children are studying in a school system that is also foreign. Before the After School Literacy Project, the participants of this study were individuals with little contact with their children's school. In time, the interactions among the parents in the context of the after-school family literacy project, helped them feel more engaged in their children's literacy education and also feel more confident and welcome in the school setting. We started as a group of individuals who did not know much about each other. However, through the project

participants built new relationships and made connections; we built a community.

Conclusions

In this article we have highlighted the example of Latino immigrant parents' engagement in an after-school literacy project. The focus on concept mapping as a strategy to foster reading comprehension served as the backdrop to show a case where parents were welcomed into an urban school and provided a forum to dialogue and explore literacy practices as their children experience them in the school day. The data presented in this article support notions that parent involvement, especially among often-marginalized populations such as Latino immigrants, is desirable and feasible. The parent participants in this study may not have had high levels of education, they could not speak English—the dominant language of U.S. society and schooling, and they did not enjoy affluent economic living conditions. However, when given the opportunity to help their children succeed in schooling, they were eager to participate, they engaged deeply in the literacy practices at hand, and they reflected on their own learning as well as that of their children.

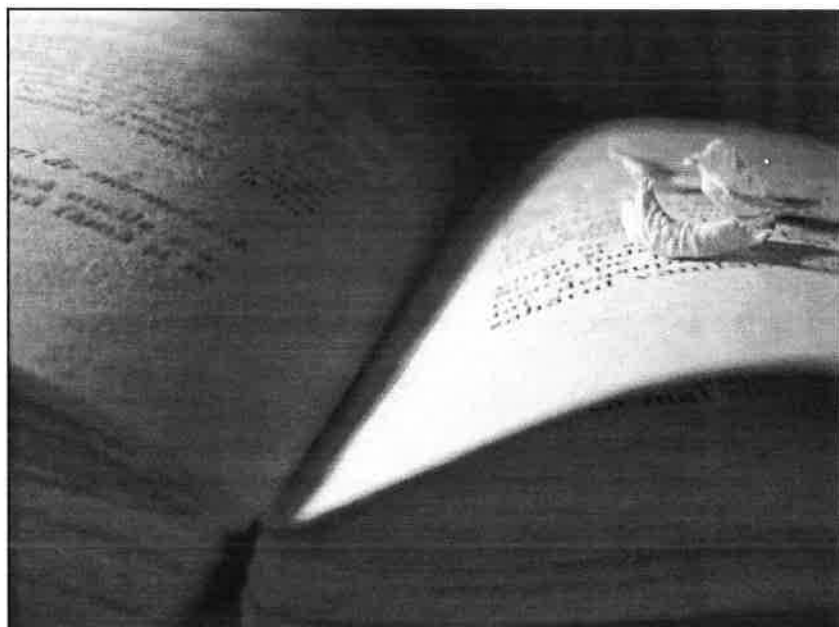
The fact that this article focuses on the literacy strategy of concept mapping is less important than the context in which the learning took place. Concept mapping was just one of a host of strategies that were addressed in the after-school sessions with parents at MSE. What seems most significant, and this is corroborated by the statements of the parents involved, was the dialogic approach to parent involvement that followed a family literacy model. Providing parents with opportunities to come to their children's school to learn about the literacy instruction their children are experiencing is a powerful way to invite parents to work alongside teachers in the literacy development of students.

The parents involved in this family literacy project were all Latino immigrants; this is especially important for three reasons. First, since none of them had experienced schooling in the U.S., the family literacy sessions provided a forum for them to learn about the school system and specific ways to help their children achieve academic success. Second, the dialogue that transpired among parents and the facilitators provided a social network for parents to engage in issues and questions related to their children's schooling. Finally, the high level of enthusiasm and engagement displayed by the parents in regard to their children's literacy learning serves to counter prevalent stereotypes of Latino parents as uninterested in their children's education and unwilling or unable to be involved with school related academic activities.

We began this article with a pair of quotes from parents (Alicia and María) that highlighted how their views on reading changed as a result of the family literacy project. We conclude with one more quote—one from another parent participant, Alma, who reminds us why we did the project in the first place. Alma's words do not only speak to her learning but to the collaborative literacy learning she experienced with her child. We also see Alma's words as a metaphor for all of our efforts as literacy educators who are interested in creating conditions of equity and excellence in our nation's schools. She said (and we concur): "We had a wonderful time doing our project because both of our topics were very interesting to us. We did the best that we could."

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*No matter how busy
you may think you
are, you must find
time for reading, or
surrender yourself to
self-chosen ignorance.*

— Confucius