Chapter 9

Mi Familia: Authentic Parent–Child Writing During Literacy Night

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the results of a writing activity during Family Literacy Night at a predominantly Hispanic, Title I school in the Southwest. This study, based on Socio-Cultural Theory (Moll, 2013), demonstrates the efficacy of asset-based approaches for instruction and assessment versus more traditional deficit models of minority education. As an analytic, the researchers applied the six Capitals from the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model (Yosso, 2005) to the children’s writing samples. This framework revealed a variety of strengths common to Latino and bilingual households including the metalinguistic skill of translanguaging. Data was processed through Holistic Content Analysis (Lieblich, 2005) followed by thematic analysis (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005) supported by CCW. Results underscore the importance of out-of-school literacies and their affective impact on children from underserved communities. Moreover, results argue for more home- and community-based writing assignments to reveal student values, desires, and emotions, which encourage the joy of writing.

INTRODUCTION

Educators are challenged to find practices and activities that foster literacy development in students at all levels. This is especially so in schools with large numbers of English language learners from marginalized communities. Their rich cultural wealth (e.g., music or dance [Iyengar & Smith, 2016]) or linguistic practices and skills (e.g., translanguaging [Garcia, 2009]) are often ignored or disparaged within the school curriculum. Though most schools have some parental involvement activities, even these tend to be prescriptive and vapid (Greenfeld, Epstein, & Hutchins, 2013). While they may connect with the home
or community in some cursory way, ultimately what drives the literacy experience is the prefabricated curriculum. Just as problematic, schools too often ignore the countless culturally contextualized ways and spaces in which children may acquire literacy.

At their places of worship, young devotees may engage in literacy practices around a variety of texts including: the Bible, Torah, or Vedas (liturgy). Recitation of the Quran or the chanting of slokas (hymns) also contributes to literacy development. Cultures with performing arts (e.g., folk songs, corridos, hip-hop, Bharatanatyam) utilize alternative forms of literacy to communicate feelings and ideas.

In the same way, students interact with labels and signs in their community and learn popular songs that permeate their home and neighborhood. Even newspapers or advertisements that are perused and recycled make a contribution to the learner’s understanding of literacies and their possible uses. When shopping—at a mall, a “superstore” or the neighborhood grocer—individuals must contend with stickers, brand names, measurements and prices. Restaurants with menus or signs promoting “La especial del día” (special of the day), like hotel direction signs (e.g., Lobby, Front Desk, Pool) or bus schedules, all create an awareness of and help to refine the students’ literacy abilities. We argue that such culturally framed spaces present a wealth of information and should be incorporated into school literacy practices for joyful, meaningful engagement with the linguistic modalities of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The authors propose that literacy instruction in schools would become more productive and more enjoyable if it were re-cast. This presupposes a fundamental need to expand choices of modalities of expression, modify purposes for assignments, alter the modes of evaluation and legitimize the content of the texts to reflect the community cultural wealth. In lieu of a constraining focus on formulaic structures, pre-determined vocabularies, artificial audiences (e.g., Class, write a letter to King Lear… or Use the adjectives from this to make sentences to describe Princess Padmimi), and monolingual, English-only compositions, lessons should be designed to leverage all of the students’ lived experiences and perspectives during literacy instruction.

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory clearly establishes the interstitial nature of a child’s multiple worlds and their effect on learning (Jeronimus, Riese, Sanderman, & Ormel, 2014) and presumably, their literacy development. The scholarship on early literacy reveals that young children before formal schooling are able to create and engage around text in meaningful ways (e.g. Atwell, 1987; Clay, 2005; Goodman, 1984). In the same way, countless studies document the contributions to literacy development that lie outside the formal writing curriculum (Iyengar & Smith, 2016; Flores & Riojas-Cortez, 2009).

Literacy development is not within the sole purview of the teacher. When families facilitate literacy events around text, (e.g. stories, letters, word games, temple epics [e.g., Mahabharata, Ramayana], gadegalul/dichos [adages]) they increase the likelihood of the child developing a “life-long love” of literacy. Some efforts are more intentional and may imply economic means. This includes purchased storybooks, theater experiences, and visits to local bookstores. Economic means notwithstanding, there are many kinds of literacy experiences that can be just as powerful. No less impactful are free reading events at the library, story time in the park, shared family stories on long drives (in the car or on the bus) greetings cards from friends and family, and emails, texts and letters from near and far.

The position of the researchers is not that teachers should abdicate their responsibilities to present formal instruction to their students. Their view is that teachers need to consider the socio-cultural nature and context of writing in order to instruct more effectively and, just as importantly, to discover the strengths that exist within the students’ communities. With this perspective, literacy is treated as a naturally occurring cultural tool, which mediates communication and relationships.
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