A Classroom Storybook-Reading Program with Immigrant Parents

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Abstract

This article describes a project in which immigrant speakers who were developing proficiency in English language and literacy were invited to visit elementary classrooms to read aloud a story that they had shared with their own children. Researchers and teachers found that despite different levels of formal schooling in their own countries, different levels of literacy proficiency in their first languages and different levels of English proficiency, every parent participating in the project had a successful experience as a classroom storybook reader. The development of a classroom read-aloud program for parents of elementary students can provide opportunities for parents to learn about American schools and classrooms and for teachers to learn about the way parents share literacy with their children. As such, children are likely to benefit not only from the storybook reading event, itself, but importantly, from the reciprocal learning of the parent and the teacher.

There is wide agreement regarding the importance of home/school partnerships both on the academic achievement of individual children and on the interactions within the school community as a whole (Henderson 1987; Lareau 1989). In practice, however, even schools that have in place systems

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for facilitating parent involvement may instead confuse, frighten and disempower parents who are linguistically, culturally and economically different from the educators who serve their children. (Delgado-Gaitan 1991; Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba 1991; Harry 1992).

Our recent work with immigrant families in an intergenerational literacy program confirmed much of what has been reported in existing studies. The families with whom we worked consistently reported that their very reason for participating in the intergenerational literacy project was to support their children's academic success; yet, they routinely reported being intimidated by schools and teachers and confused by or misinformed about the experiences their children were having in school. In addition, these parents frequently indicated that they believed their responsibility was to monitor their children's school behavior, while that of teachers was to monitor school learning. As well, informal conversations with teachers in the elementary school about ways that parents participating in the intergenerational literacy project might be involved in classroom activities revealed a belief among many teachers that parents with limited English proficiency were limited in the ways they could support their children's academic learning or participate in classrooms. As a result, few efforts were made toward collaboration beyond routine parent/teacher conferences.

We decided to respond to the beliefs of both parents and teachers by building on what parents were learning to do at home: shared storybook reading. Working with teachers who were interested and willing to learn more about home/school partnerships, parents were invited to visit elementary classrooms approximately every other week to read aloud a story that they had shared with their own child.

Setting

The parents participating in this project were enrolled in an intergenerational literacy program in a small urban community abutting a larger city. The community is ethnically diverse (57% Latino, 20% Southeast Asian, 23% other), with a high proportion of residents who are recent immigrants to the United States and economically deprived.

The intergenerational literacy program, one component of a partnership between a private university and the public school system, began in 1989 and is housed in an elementary school. The program is open to community residents who are primary caregivers of at least one child under the age of 10 and who desire to improve their own literacy and are committed to engaging in literacy activities with their own children on a daily basis. Literacy classes are offered 3-4 days per week for 2 hours each day, and child care is provided for preschool-aged children of adult learners. Adults are a) provided instruction in reading and responding to literacy materials of adult interest; b)

provided a selection of children's books, strategies and ideas for use with their children; c) encouraged to share their children's stories and drawings and to discuss literacy events, and their importance, in their lives and the lives of their children. Emphasis is placed on family contexts for literacy use with specific emphasis on family storybook reading.

Participants

Because this was a pilot project, only the first six mothers of pre-school- and school-aged children who volunteered were chosen to participate in reading sessions. Five spoke Spanish and one spoke Vietnamese as the first language, and their levels of English proficiency varied from minimal to moderate. One of the mothers had a university degree from her country, three had completed high school and the other two had completed two years of high school. Over the course of the project, five mothers participated in storybook reading sessions in Spanish bilingual classrooms, while the Vietnamese-speaking mother read in monolingual English classes. Although Vietnamese bilingual classes exist in the school system, they are not offered in the school in which the program is housed. Of the five mothers who read in Spanish bilingual classes, two chose to read in both Spanish and English at different times, while the other three read exclusively in Spanish. Each parent participated in three to five storybook reading sessions.

The eight elementary teachers in whose classrooms storybook reading sessions were conducted were selected from a group of 15 who volunteered to have parents read in their classes. Those selected were chosen because their classes were conducted at least partly in Spanish (6 of the 8), because they taught the grades in which the parents wanted most to share stories, and because their class schedules meshed with those of the parents.

Implementation

Parents selected books in Spanish or English from the program library to take home and read with their children. They then chose from these the books they felt most comfortable reading in a classroom.

Reading sessions were arranged two days in advance. Parents would take home books to choose from and then tell their adult literacy teacher in which classroom they wanted in read. In many instances, parents felt especially comfortable with one book and chose to read it in two or three different classrooms in subsequent weeks. Correspondingly, some parents felt especially comfortable in a certain classroom and sought out books that they felt the students would enjoy. After parents made their preferences known, their literacy teacher then met with classroom teachers and set up a schedule for reading sessions.

On each day that read-alouds were offered, training/practice sessions were held for approximately one half-hour just before the scheduled reading times. On the day that parents were scheduled to read, they met with their adult literacy teacher and the other parents who were reading that day to discuss the book they had chosen and their ideas for sharing it with the class. Parents chose whether to read in Spanish (for those reading in Spanish bilingual classes), in English or both. Members of the group offered suggestions, and the teacher modeled read-aloud strategies. Initially, focal read-aloud strategies were identified based on evidence of effective storybook reading (Mason, Peterman and Kerr 1989; Hoffman, Roser and Battle 1993; Martinez and Teale 1993; Teale, Martinez & Glass 1989). In later sessions, demonstrations were based on needs identified during observations of the read-aloud sessions. Read-aloud strategies presented and discussed in these sessions included suggestions for pre-reading, during reading and post-reading activities; questioning techniques; using text structure to support comprehension; facilitating retelling by students; and generating predictions before and during reading. Just before entering the classroom, parents rehearsed the book by reading it aloud to the family literacy teacher and other participants.

On each day in which read-aloud sessions were held, one to three parents led storybook reading sessions scheduled at half-hour intervals. Generally, the parents scheduled to read that day sat in on each other's sessions. The parent introduced herself to the teacher, and the teacher introduced the parent to the class. In most of the classrooms, the students were seated on a rug in a story corner at the beginning of the session, and the reader sat or stood in front of the group. In the other classrooms, students were seated at their desks, and the reader stood in the front of the classroom. Big books were generally used during the reading sessions.

Parents began each session by showing the children the book cover and reading the title and author. They asked students to comment on the title or cover picture or make predictions about what they thought would happen in the book, and each student's suggestion was acknowledged or repeated.

During the actual reading of the story, the parent invited participation on the part of students, building upon their comments and answering questions as they arose. Because many of the books chosen (e.g.,*Here comes the cat*, *Una estrana vista*) were repetitive and predictable, parents encouraged students to say the words along with the reader.

After reading the book, parents asked the students to retell the story, using a variety of methods. Some parents routinely paged through the book a second time, inviting comments about each picture and occasionally asking questions about what was happeningor how the characters felt. Other parents focused on narrative structure, asking students about setting, problem, solution and consequences of the story. Invariably, readers asked the students what they liked about the story. Before leaving, the parents would give

the teacher several small copies of the book for the children to read to themselves over the following week.

Following each reading session, the parent met briefly with her literacy teacher. The reader discussed how she felt the reading had gone and the students' reactions to the book, and the literacy teacher provided feedback on various aspects of the storybook reading session.

What We Learned

We have found that several positive outcomes occur when parents who are new immigrants to the United States become classroom storybook readers. Since effective read-aloud strategies can be practiced in any language, parents with limited English proficiency were able to make important contributions to children's acquisition of literate behaviors by introducing or reinforcing important storybook reading strategies in their first languages. The techniques utilized by parents in the read-aloud sessions provided an extension of what was being presented on a regular basis by classroom teachers, offering the children additional opportunities to interact with stories. For those parents who chose to read in their first language, the storybook reading project provided a powerful affirmation of the value of first language literacy and the importance of effective storybook reading practices in developing literacy in both first and second languages. In the section that follows, six specific outcomes are presented and discussed.

1. ***Both parents and teachers believed that read-aloud sessions by parents were beneficial to the students with whom they read.*** Over the course of the project, all six of the participating parents reported at least twice on the positive effect they perceived the reading sessions were having on the students. Readers noted that the students were enthusiastic about the readings and eager to participate. For example, Elena commented (translated from Spanish), "When I read the book, the children listened and said a lot about the book. This is good because they are learning how to pay attention to a story and they like to participate in the story."

Melba stated:

> I like to read this book to the students because this is a nice experience. I could share with the student a moment of happiness in their lives. I like to see when they put a lot of attention in everything I said to them. They show interest in the pictures in the book. I feel happy because they are youngest person, but they had a lot imagination. I enjoyed with the book. I believed the student too.

Tien said:

> When I read the book to the children in class, before reading I was nervous, but after finish reading, I felt happy because the kids enjoyed and they excited. They make me happy and we work each other very good, because they liked the book which I had read to them.

Parents perceived the storybook reading project as having a strong and lasting impact on the elementary students' interest in reading and understanding of stories. Diana stated (translated from Spanish), "It is a very good program because we are doing something to stimulate the mind and to help them be more intelligent and get good grades." Marta noted (translated from Spanish), "Their interest will increase every day and they will always want to hear stories read, and at the same time they are being entertained and learning."

Teachers also noted positive effects of storybook reading sessions by parents. Comments such as the following were highly typical:

> *Here Comes the Cat* was read on 11/4. Children were left with two student copies of the book to read at their leisure. They loved it!! They sat alone often and read *Here Comes the Cat* all week! Even fought over it because everyone wanted to read it. Thanks!

Another teacher commented:

> It was exciting to have one of the children's mothers read to my students. I'm sure it will inspire other youngsters to go home and invite their parents to do the same. [Maria] and my students know each other. Therefore, good rapport was created immediately. Her fine voice quality and warm way with the children made the event more pleasurable.

2. ***Parents reported that their participation in storybook reading sessions had a beneficial effect on their literacy interactions with their own children.*** All six of the participants reported that they were planning to or had already successfully implemented some of the strategies used in classroom read-alouds when reading with their own children. For example, Elena said (translated from Spanish), "When I read this book with my son, we just read the book. Now I want to read it again with him and talk more about it when we read." Tien noted, "Before I read a book with my child I try to read all the pages first. Now I see to talk about everything with my child." Diana

stated (translated from Spanish): "When I took the book home last night I showed my nephew the cover and read him the title and asked him what he thought the book was about. He said, 'The tree wants leaves.' I was very surprised that he could make a prediction like that. When we read the book, he was happy because the tree got leaves."

After re-reading a book with her children in preparation for a classroom read-aloud, Maria reported (translated from Spanish), "I read this book with my children last year. This time I asked them a lot more questions and they talked a lot more when we read it." At the conclusion of her participation in the project, Marta said (translated from Spanish), "This experience in the class helps me with my children because I read more with them and we talk more about the books when we read." Melba reported that, since beginning the classroom readings, "I like to try new ideas when I read with my children like look at the book again and let my children tell the story after I read."

3. ***Training in read-aloud strategies helped parents to implement effective storybook reading behaviors.*** In the training sessions, we introduced strategies that would be beneficial to children during storybook reading both at home ant at school and examined the data to see if those strategies were then used by parents as they shared storybooks with children in classrooms. After only one training session, parents participated in their first read-aloud session. During these first sessions, we observed wide variability in implementation of effective read aloud strategies, with some parents encouraging students before, during, and after the read-aloud to make comments and respond to words and events in the story, while others sped on through the reading permitting participation only at the end. In general, the longer parents had attended the Intergenerational Literacy Program, the more likely they were to invite children to interact with the text in meaningful ways, suggesting that they were building not only on the specific training in classroom storybook reading that they received in conjunction with this specific project, but also on strategies that were being used in their own literacy class during book discussions.

In subsequent sessions, training had a direct and immediate impact on the interactions between parents and students. In 17 of the 18 read-alouds, parents incorporated strategies that had been introduced in the practice sessions and continued to use them in subsequent sessions, suggesting that they were aware of their effectiveness and chose to integrate them on a routine basis. Diana's experience is typical of the continued effect of training in strategy use. In her first reading session, Diana asked students to name the animals on each page as she read but offered no opportunities beyond simple labeling. The training sessions before her second reading focused on encouraging children to make predictions before and during the reading. During Diana's second reading, she asked the students what they thought would happen

next on each of the first five pages of the book. In her two subsequent reading sessions, in which training focused on supporting comprehension and responses through retelling, Diana continued to ask students to predict. In her third and fourth sessions, Diana asked students to make predictions about the book both when discussing the title and cover picture and throughout the actual reading.

One concern that we had upon initiating the project was whether the training sessions might lead parents to be robotic and machine-like in their practice. We found, however, that parents brought important personal styles and practices to the read-aloud event, and training did not diminish or change those individual behaviors and characteristics. For example, during each of her five read-aloud sessions, Melba first questioned the students about the picture on each page and then read the text, a practice not demonstrated or discussed, but one the children enjoyed and Melba therefore continued to use and to share with other parents. Tien, on the other hand, received good response from children when she first read the words on each page and then asked questions about the illustrations in each of her three sessions. She, too, continued to use this practice. Diana, Maria, and Marta alternated in different sessions between discussing the illustrations and reading the text upon turning to each new page. Some readers consistently employed key phrases during the read-alouds. Tien repeated the phrase, "Let's see what will happen" several times in each of her reading sessions after asking for predictions. Similarly, Melba said, "Vamos a ver" ("Let's see") before turning to a new page at least twice during each read-aloud.

Just as repeated readings have been found to be beneficial to children, (Samuels 1979), they were also found to be beneficial to parents as they learned to read to children. The value of rehearsal was clear in examining the differences in interactions when parents used the same book in more than one session. In later sessions, the interactions between parent and students were richer and elaborated. For example, Marta read *La Chivita de Cebollar* (*The Goat in the Onion Patch*) in two second-grade classes in subsequent weeks. During her initial session with the book, Marta asked the students to describe what they saw in each picture after she read the words on the page. She then turned to the next page. The following week, she consistently reinforced the students' comments by saying, "Si, bueno . . . " ("Yes, good . . .") and repeating what individual students had described on each page. Tien read *Here Comes the Cat* in two different kindergarten classes. Although Tien felt uncomfortable about the second reading because the teacher did not interact with her at all, she drew the students in by reading with the exaggerated pronunciation that she had used in the previous session with this book ("Here comes the caaaaat!"). As she had in her earlier reading, Tien asked students to predict what would happen after discussing the cover, to describe the pictures on each page, to read the words along with

her and to retell the story after reading. In addition, in this second session with the book, she incorporated prediction throughout the telling of the story. Melba read *El Arbol Que No Tenia Hojas* (*The Tree That Didn't Have Leaves*) three times, in a kindergarten, a second grade and a first grade in successive sessions. In the three readings, she adjusted her interactions to the level of the students: in the kindergarten she drew the children's attention to the colors throughout the telling of the story; in the second grade, she asked the students to reflect on how the characters felt and why they acted as they did; in her final reading with the first-grade class, Melba incorporated both Spanish and English into her questioning (having used only Spanish in previous readings) and sequenced the questions that she asked (e.g., "Why did the tree feel sad at the beginning?" "How did he try to solve his problem?") so that the students retold the story with little intervention on her part.

Through their participation in classroom reading sessions, parents gained valuable insight into how elementary classrooms operate. Participating in classrooms as storybook readers provided parents with an opportunity to learn about the culture of American schools and classrooms. For most of the parents, whose involvement in their own children's classrooms had been limited to parent-teacher conferences, the storybook reading project provided them with their first look at a classroom in operation. Several noted the contrast between their observations and their previous experiences with schools in their own countries. Diana reported (translated from Spanish):

> I never saw a class like that before. All of the children were doing different things, and they were all having fun, but they were learning. When I first came in, I thought this is not good, it is not school, but I saw that the children were learning and I think that it's good.

Visiting several classrooms demonstrated to the participating parents not only the types of activities common in elementary schools; readers were also afforded the opportunity to make comparisons between different classes and teaching styles and to draw conclusions concerning what they perceived as effective instruction. Marts noted (translated from Spanish):

> This class is different from the other ones because the students sat in their desks. I think it is better when they sit on the floor because they can all see the book, but different teachers have different plans.

Elena commented (translated from Spanish), "I like very much how the teacher treats all the students in the class equally." Sometimes, what parents

learned confirmed or increased their concerns about their own children's placements, but also made them realize that such a circumstance might not be representative of the school in general. Tien reported:

> I don't like go to my daughter's class because the teacher is bad to me. I like to see this class because I can see how it is and what the children doing. I see the teacher have a plan for all the day to teach many things.

Some parents attended specifically to social interaction in the classroom and commented on the importance of other students' input in children's learning. Tien noted:

> In the class the students learn from each other. When one student say something, many other students say the same thing. They listen to other and they learn more. My daughter at home learn only from me.

All six participants reported that they understood more about ways in which children learn to read. Parents commented on the similarities in the strategies used by elementary students and adults in reading and understanding a story. Melba noted, "It was a nice experience for me because I could see the youngest children listen the same as do adult people." Marta said (translated from Spanish), "I was surprised that the students knew how to predict what happens in the story." Some parents observed how specific practices helped children learn to read. For example, Diana noted (translated from Spanish), "The students think about the book before we read it and tell the story after, and they know much more what the story says. I think they can learn how to read the story themselves better if they know what happens before reading." Elena said (translated from Spanish): "When I read the story, the children wanted to read to me. When they said the words of the story when I read, they were practicing to read." María commented (translated from Spanish), "I see that when I ask the students about the setting, problem, solution, and consequence of the book that they can understand. This will help them to understand everything they read."

The support of classroom teachers made a difference in the success of storybook reading sessions in the classroom. Our findings indicated that the attitude and actions of the teacher made the difference in the degree to which parents participated in classrooms. Of the eight elementary teachers participating in the project, six were engaged in each reading session that took place in his/her class. One worked at her desk and did not acknowledge the session at all. Another teacher interacted with her aides during the first two sessions in her room, but did participate in the other five sessions in her class.

The classrooms of those teachers who overtly welcomed parents into the classroom, who offered support by asking questions of the students, who made a point of thanking the parents for sharing their time and who spontaneously gave positive feedback to the readers were the ones in which parents chose to return for additional storybook reading sessions. In some classes, parents felt that the teacher appreciated their involvement and that they were truly collaborating with the teacher. The parents rated these sessions as more successful than those in which the teacher's participation was perceived as critical by parents or the teacher was uninvolved in the session. In two classrooms, the parents' perceptions of how the teachers viewed their reading were so negative that they refused to return to those classes.

When teachers became involved in the storybook reading sessions, they gained insight into the many ways parents support their children's literacy learning. Some teachers expressed surprise that parents' moderate proficiency in English did not prevent them from reading effectively in the classroom. This comment was representative of several: "Even though her English isn't perfect, this mother reads with a great deal of expression and got the children to say the words along with her."

Teachers often remarked on the strategies used by parents during storybook reading sessions and their students' resulting involvement throughout the story. One teacher commented on Melba's attention to the illustrations of *El Arbol Que No Tenía Hojas* (The Tree That Didn't Have Leaves) throughout the reading:

> The parent kept the students involved by encouraging participation in identifying pictures and colors. As the story progressed, the students were identifying the pictures and colors without first being asked. When story was over, the parent was interested in whether the children enjoyed the story. She encouraged responses from the students as to what parts of the story they enjoyed.

Conclusion

Despite different levels of formal schooling in their own countries, different levels of literacy proficiency in their first languages and different levels of English proficiency, every parent participating in this project had a successful experience as a classroom storybook reader. The ongoing training in storybook reading techniques that parents received, the opportunity for rehearsal of the reading in an informal setting with other parents, and the positive comments of the family literacy teacher throughout training combined to offer parents a network of support that helped them gain the confidence to enter the classroom. Once they had completed the first session, the

positive reactions of the elementary students, and the warm support of the classroom teacher, provided the strongest incentive for parents to return for additional reading sessions.

The development of a classroom read-aloud program for parents of elementary students can provide opportunities for parents who know little about American schools to acquire what Cornu (1989) referred to as "classroom literacy," increasing their ability to support their children's developing literacy learning at home and at school. As well, such a program can help teachers learn about the literate practices of parents and inform them about the many ways parents interact with their children. In such circumstances, children are likely to benefit not only from the storybook reading event, itself, but importantly, from the reciprocal learning of both the parent and the teacher.

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