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“Want to hear my story?” Developing Latino children’s written narratives through culturally relevant family photographs

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Abstract

Research supports the importance of developing early literacy skills through culturally relevant activities and school/home partnerships as essential ingredients in high quality early learning environments (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019; Gay, 2000). Educators, however, frequently dismiss the significance of honoring a child’s first language, family, and culture when developing early literacy skills (Purcell-Gates, Melzi, Najafi, & Orellana, 2011). Integrating children’s linguistic and cultural understandings, however, is valuable and meaningful for their academic success and overall development (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). The purpose of this study was to explore children’s narratives as a culturally relevant practice that promotes early writing. Using student data from a prekindergarten dual language classroom, we found that using family pictures from home provided multiple iterations of children’s stories and demonstrated how Latino families’ cultural experiences are significant for the development of children’s emergent writing development. Implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords: emergent writing, dual language learners, narratives, culturally relevant practice

Latino children are the fastest growing group of the U.S. population and account for approximately 25% of all children in the U.S (U.S. Census, 2019). In this article, we use the broad term Latino for people (male and female) who self-identify with terms such as, but not limited to, Hispanic, Mexican, Cuban, or Puerto Rican. More than two-thirds of Latino children between the ages of 3-5 participate in early childhood education and show greater gains than other groups when enrolled in high quality early childhood contexts (Phillips et al., 2017; National Institute for Early Education Research, [NIEER] 2019). Research by the National Early Literacy Panel [NELP] (2008) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC] (2009, 2019) indicates high-quality early learning experiences for children are factors that lead to future academic success. Research also supports the importance of developing early literacy skills through culturally relevant activities and school/home partnerships as essential ingredients in high quality early learning environments (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019; Gay, 2000; Lonigan, & Shanahan, 2009). Educators, however, frequently dismiss the significance of honoring a child’s first language, family, and culture when developing early literacy skills (Purcell-Gates, Melzi, Najafi, & Orellana, 2011). Additionally, early childhood teachers often focus on discrete literacy skills and do not recognize children’s unique cultural and linguistic practices (Bauer, Presiado, & Colomer, 2017; Soltero-González & Reyes, 2012).

Integrating children’s linguistic and cultural understandings, however, is valuable and meaningful for their academic success and overall development (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2014). When children bring their cultural practices to school, they are reflecting on their personal experiences and sharing their funds of knowledge (D’warte, 2014; García & García, 2012; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Through their writing, for example, children share their cultural, linguistic, and literacy strengths (Bauer et al., 2017; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). Thus, examining culturally relevant practices related to children’s acquisition of early writing skills is important if educators are to meet the needs of this burgeoning population. The purpose of this study was to explore children’s narratives as a culturally relevant practice that promotes early writing. We provide a succinct review of the literature on emergent writing development, the use of children’s stories for early literacy, and the inclusion of families in children’s early writing development. We follow with our analysis of classroom observations and children’s written artifacts that developed into three identified themes. Finally, we offer a discussion on the implications for practice.

Theoretical Perspectives

Two frameworks guided our understanding of how teachers can use children's narratives to develop early writing skills in a dual language classroom. We used a sociocultural framework that considers the social nature of literacy. Derived from Vygotsky's (1978) view of learning, sociocultural theory views meaning making as a social and cultural phenomenon. According to Vygotsky, children's development is supported by more competent others within a social context known as the Zone of Proximal Development [ZPD] (1978). The zone refers to support provided within the space between independent work and that which is too challenging. When children engage with others, whether it is with their families, teachers, or their peers, they are using language as a tool to make meaning (Rowe, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). Supportive interactions among adults and peers can lead to development of early writing skills (Bauer et al., 2017; Mirzaei, & Eslami, 2015; Nolen, 2007).

Culturally relevant pedagogy was our second framework. Based on the work of Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2000), the use of culturally relevant pedagogy provides teachers with a process of including instructional practices that are connected to a child's experience and background knowledge (Howard, 2003). Teaching and learning are viewed from a cultural context that includes a home-school-community and cultural collaboration for deepening and extending knowledge. Culturally relevant teachers recognize how children express their cultural knowledge in the language they use, the manner in which they play, and the stories they tell (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Salinas-González, Arreguín-Anderson, & Alanís, 2018). Effective teachers use children's cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and frames of reference to make learning more meaningful (Gay, 2002).

Literature Review

Children's Early Writing Development

Emergent literacy consists of the skills of reading, writing, and oracy (listening and speaking) (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Most emergent literacy models include oral language skills, phonological awareness, and knowledge of the reading and writing systems (Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003). We focus on the term "emergent" because young preschool children have not yet developed conventional writing and reading skills. Research indicates emergent biliteracy development also refers to the ongoing development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing but in two languages

(Reyes, 2006). Emergent bilinguals have the potential to develop biliteracy in supportive contexts including the classroom and home (Bauer, 2003; Gort, 2006).

Clay’s seminal research highlighted the connection between learning to read and write and described how children learn both skills simultaneously (1991). Ultimately, children’s confidence in their reading and writing ability helps them develop a solid foundation in early literacy (Love, Burns, & Buell, 2007). A significant amount of early literacy instruction, however, focuses on the reading process and often neglects emergent writing skills and the environments needed for effective writing instruction (Bingham, Quinn, & Gerde, 2017). Research highlights the significance of pedagogy, a print-rich environment, and consistent writing routines to promote children’s early writing attempts (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011), as well as multiple opportunities for children to engage in meaningful writing that is connected to their diverse backgrounds (Bauer, et al., 2017; Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Research by Gerde, Bingham, and Pendergast (2015) found teacher modeling promoted children’s desire to write. Building on this work, Bingham et al. (2017) examined preschool teachers’ practices in supporting early writing development. They found that many teachers focused on handwriting and spelling skills and provided few opportunities for children to engage in authentic writing. From an early age, however, learning to write should include an understanding that text has meaning and that marks communicate a message (Dyson, 2009; Myhill, 2011). Young children are eager to discover what they can do with print and arrive at school wanting to mark the page as writers (Graves, 2013; Tolchinsky, 2003). As preschoolers develop a concept of how to write, they acquire the understanding that (1) writing is a form of communication, (2) writing involves letters and words, and (3) writing has many purposes (Otto, 2008). Children learn this through observation, exploration, and interaction with other writers (Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

The Value of Story Telling for Early Literacy

Seminal work by Dyson and Genishi (1994) revealed that children arrive at our classrooms with the ability to tell stories. Because language learning is a socially embedded process, when children tell a story they use skills they have learned through personal experience (Flynn, 2016). Most likely, adults have exposed young children to a range of storytelling episodes at home and their communities (Billings, 2009; Delgado-Bernal, 2001; Rogoff, 2003). These experiences provide children with information about story structure, style, and purpose (Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Flynn, 2018). Additionally, when children tell their stories, they meet their “basic need to organize their

knowledge and experiences” (Gupta, 2009, p. 1049; Zentella, 2005). Telling stories provides the opportunity to appreciate the world from their cultural perspective and their funds of knowledge, rather than solely from traditional forms, or from one single view (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995). These personal narratives offer a bridge between the child’s family life and school—providing voice to the children and their families (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019; López-Robertson, 2012). Moreover, culture provides children both with material for the content of their stories and with the tools to shape the format of their narratives (Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva, 2011; Khimji & Maunder, 2012). Thus, children’s narrative capabilities are entwined with their personal experiences that are culturally and socially situated.

Sharing stories (memories and life experiences) promotes children’s learning and development in a variety of academic, social, and linguistic domains (Barone, 2013; Farver, Xu, Lonigan, & Eppe, 2013; McCallister, 2008; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008) and is common in many minority communities (Gardner-Neblett, Pungello, & Iruka, 2012). Storytelling in Latino families has been identified as a form of cultural wealth where families engage in pedagogies of the home (Delgado-Bernal, 2006; López-Robertson, 2017; Yosso, 2005). It is through storytelling that families share generational and cultural knowledge as they use stories to strengthen interpersonal connections, teach family values, and cultural lessons (Valdez, 2015; Zentella, 2005). As a result, children become holders and creators of knowledge (Delgado-Bernal, 2001). Additionally, oral storytelling is a culturally valuable pedagogical strategy that supports children’s story narrative, language, and socio-cultural development (Curenton & Craig, 2011; Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008).

Teacher and peer interactions also support students’ writing as a social process (Bauer, et al, 2017; Kissel, Hansen, Tower, & Lawrence, 2011). Through the ZPD, teachers scaffold students’ background knowledge and support their writing development (Donovan, Sekeres, & Kerch, 2020; Flynn, Hoy, Lea, & García, 2021). Social construction of literacy helps children understand about writing for an audience and the value of becoming an author (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019; Graves & Hansen, 1983). For example, a child’s curiosity about their peers’ stories helps them delve deeper into their own writing by adding details and answering questions the listener wants to know more about (Mayer, 2007). To be a good storyteller, children draw on many skills including the use of diverse vocabulary, complex grammatical structures, and overall narrative organization (Bitetti & Hammer, 2016). Consequently, a child’s ability to tell stories is associated

with their level of oral language complexity (Fiorentino & Howe, 2004) and builds a solid foundation for emergent writing skills (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015).

Children and Families Engaged in the Literacy Process

Families, communities, and culture shape children’s learning. Research with Latino bilingual children demonstrates the ways specific learning experiences in their community, home, and school influences their literacy and biliteracy development (Moll, Saez, & Dworin, 2001; Reyes 2006; Reyes & Azuara, 2008). Scholars have also documented the formal and informal ways children's interactions with parents at home and in their communities, scaffold children’s language and literacy learning in two languages (García-Alvarado, Arreguín, & Ruiz-Escalante, 2020; Reyes & Azuara, 2008). These include writing cards and letters, reading religious texts, and conversations about book reading in general (Smith & Riojas-Cortez, 2010; Volk & de Acosta, 2001).

One of the most common practices educators use to encourage preschool parent involvement with early literacy has been through book reading, where interactive culturally relevant read alouds were used to promote children’s ethnic identity and pride of family and culture. Additionally, co-created ZPDs promoted children’s literacy development and engaged learners on a more meaningful level. As an example, Saracho and Spodek (2007) described the literacy practices fathers engaged in with their children and the positive effects on children’s early literacy skills through shared book reading. García-Alvarado et al. (2020) explored the development of preschoolers’ retelling and oral language skills as they engaged in culturally sensitive read alouds with their parents. Similarly, through personal story telling, Latino children made connections to the language of stories they heard in school (López-Robertson, 2012). Roessingh (2011) created a family book project that promoted children’s identity formation, pride of family and culture, and rudimentary technology skills. Similarly, Rowe and Fain (2013) conducted a backpack project with parents designed to tap into families’ existing literacy practices as resources for bridging the gap between home and school. These studies reinforce the need to integrate students’ previous experiences, language, and culture within the classroom as part of children’s biliteracy development.

Related to children’s early writing skills, Buell, Burns, Casbergue, and Love (2011) reveal the support parents spontaneously offer their children when writing personal letters. They assert that teachers must support families’ interactions with their children in the language in which they are most comfortable and encourage parents to write with their children to develop a host of

cognitive skills, including associating sounds with letters, creating narratives, and developing a concept of how to write. Pole (2015) found kindergarten children who engaged with their family in letter writing had higher levels of engagement with the writing process and used various resources to improve their letters. This led to improved handwriting and spelling, as well as deeper thoughts and themes about their letters. Smith and Riojas-Cortez (2010) involved Latino parents in a weeklong session about connecting with their preschool children via *cartitas de cariño*, writing notes to children to express care. They found that parents' writing scaffolded children in creating their own meaningful forms of literacy. Thus, effective teachers promote culturally relevant early writing opportunities for young Latino children by engaging children and families in narratives about cultural and familial experiences. Given that both oral and written language skills are fundamental for literacy development and develop within socially and culturally embedded contexts, the following study contributes to our understanding of how the use of personal narratives facilitate the development of Latino children's emergent writing skills.

Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The premise for this qualitative study evolved from our understanding that learning is a socio-cultural process (Vygotsky, 1978) and that early literacy development, within a culturally relevant framework, enhances future academic success for children (Gay, 2000; NAEYC, 2019). As such, we focused on the following two research questions:

- (1) How does the use of family pictures promote the development of personal narratives by bilingual four-year olds within a writing center?
- (2) What emergent writing skills are evident through students' personal narratives?

Background to the Study

This work is part of a larger year-long study focused on the use of purposeful social interactions within one two-way dual language (DL) school. St. Pious Catholic School (SPCS) [a pseudonym] is a pre-K-8th grade Catholic school located in a large urban city in south Texas. SPCS is located in a densely populated urban neighborhood with the median income and median house value significantly lower than the national average and the average for Texas (City-data.com, 2019). The neighborhood is well established with Mexican bakeries, restaurants, pre-owned auto dealerships, and mechanic shops, juxtaposed with a Starbucks coffee house and a Ross clothing store.

SPCS is a Federal Title I campus that receives federal dollars to serve the 213 students from predominantly Latino, working-class families of Mexican descent. SPCS receives tuition assistance that enables many low-income families to meet the monthly tuition requirements. According to the campus principal, families are predominately third or fourth generation who want their children to regain their Spanish language. As young Spanish heritage language learners, children arrive at SPCS with a strong command of English in the process of regaining their native Spanish through the DL program.

Participants

Our study focused on one pre-k, Spanish/English DL classroom of 24 children and the classroom teacher (from which we selected a fragment of the data including three focal students to report in this article). Mrs. Benavides, the classroom teacher, was in her second year of teaching (all names are pseudonyms). She identified as a Mexican-American bilingual with English as her dominant language. As the English-speaking model in the two-way program, she taught English language arts to the English dominant children while the Spanish dominant children went to a partner teacher for Spanish language arts instruction.

All children had varying levels of Spanish and English bilingualism. Based on a Home Language Survey and the Woodcock-Muñoz Language Assessment Survey, the class consisted of 16 English-dominant students and eight Spanish-dominant students. Parents of all children provided consent to participate in this study as outlined in our IRB protocol, which included details about audio and video recording. For this article, we draw from the larger study to examine the writing practices of three focal students, Gina, José, and Marco, who visited the writing center weekly.

Researcher’s Roles

The first author of this study has been an elementary teacher for over 20 years and served as an academic coach (at another district) for the last 10 years. At the time of the study, she was in her third year of an early childhood doctoral program where her dissertation research focused on family involvement for children’s early writing development. For the purpose of this study, she visited the prekindergarten classroom one to two times a week to audio/video record children and their interactions, document her observations through observational field notes, and interview the teacher. She is a bilingual Spanish/English speaker.

The second author of this study has been a university faculty member for over 20 years and an academic mentor for the DL program at SPCS for the last two years. She visits the school regularly, models lessons for teachers, and provides professional development for the teachers and

teaching assistants. Professional development sessions focused on peer-based learning, developmentally appropriate practice, oral language development, and play-based learning centers. Throughout the professional development sessions, teachers were frequently asked to reflect on children's oral language as a precursor for literacy development. For this study, she visited the prekindergarten classroom monthly and took observational field notes. She is a bilingual English/Spanish speaker.

Procedures

As part of their DL program, children participate in bilingual learning centers for a minimum of 30 minutes daily (Gómez, Freeman, & Freeman, 2005). During center time, Mrs. Benavidez followed the language of the day with Monday/Wednesday/Friday in Spanish and Tuesday/Thursday in English. The language of the day indicated the language the teacher would use while at the centers. However, all students had a choice of language and more often than not, chose to use their dominant language—English when interacting with each other and with the teacher. Prior to the study, Mrs. Benavides had intentionally partnered children with a student whose Spanish language skills were slightly above their level to create opportunities for children to learn language and concepts from each other through a ZPD (Alanís, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978).

Mrs. Benavides designated the writing center as a space to focus on writing by placing various writing tools (crayons, markers, pencils) in small containers and children's books in baskets (Roskos et al, 2003). The first author of this study created booklets with the front representing a book cover with a space for children to write their names as authors. These were placed in the writing center for children to use as often as they wanted. To facilitate children's writing, the teacher developed a Spanish/English word wall at the center where she created computer-generated pictures of family members, friends, and pets for children's reference (see Alanís, Salinas-González, & Arreguín-Anderson, 2015 for development of word wall). These teacher-created pictures were color-coded and labeled in English (blue) and Spanish (red) as outlined in the DL program requirements. Children chose the center(s) they would attend and traveled with their designated partners. Some pairs of children came to the writing center during the middle of their 30-minute center period while others, stayed in the center the entire time.

The first author of this study developed an invitational letter, written in both English and Spanish, for families explaining the study. In that letter, parents were asked to send personal family pictures that would prompt individual narrative topics for each child and explained that the children would be taking their booklets home every Friday to read their stories with their family.

Families were also invited to add written responses to the booklets. Mrs. Benavides received an overwhelming response from parents, as all submitted baggies with various personal photos for their child to use at the writing center. Photos represented children at different ages, celebrating holidays and special occasions.

The first author of this study used the process of Writer’s Workshop (Graves, 1983) to model writing a personal narrative. As demonstrated in Kissel and Miller (2015), Writer’s Workshop involves only three components: a focus lesson, writing time, and sharing. Our focus lesson demonstrated the telling of a personal story about the principle researcher’s pet dog-Hercules. Modeling the storytelling procedure allowed the children to emulate the process in describing the activities in their pictures. All children were encouraged to talk about and then write about their family photographs while at the writing center.

To facilitate the sharing of stories and as part of the Writer’s Workshop, we introduced an author’s chair and modeled its use and purpose. This was a child-sized chair covered with fabric and labeled, *Author’s Chair/Silla del Autor*. Introduced by Graves and Hansen (1983), the author’s chair celebrates children’s accomplishments as authors, as they receive feedback from their audience (McCallister, 2008). During their designated Language Arts block of time, the teacher encouraged children to sit in the author’s chair to read their stories to their classmates and invited comments and questions (see Graves & Hansen, 1983 for further description). Any child who wanted to share their story could sit in the author’s chair. This, however, was a voluntary process and children could decline to read their story to the class. Field notes indicate it was rare for children to decline. Children predominately read their stories in English, although they always had a choice of language. Audience members (peers), who were seated on the carpet in front of the author, predominately used English but occasionally used Spanish as well, as they asked questions, made comments, and praised the author’s work.

Data Collection

We engaged in classroom observations with detailed field notes and audio/video recordings of children’s conversations and interactions with peers and adults at the writing center, readings at the author’s chair, and student drawing/writing samples. Artifacts of children’s drawing and writing were documented through photographs. Audio/video recordings of children at the writing center, readings from the author’s chair, and interactions with peers and adults were transcribed.

Researchers collected data in the classroom for twelve weeks, one to two times per week, from 1.5 to 2 hours per day during the spring semester. Observations focused on children’s

interactions with peers, language and gestures, word choices, and children's connections made to events portrayed in their personal pictures. We created observational field notes during and after visits that focused on the children's telling of stories and creation of written texts. For our field notes, we included the feelings and expressions of the children as they shared their stories (Stake, 2006). To gain insight into children's thinking, the researchers asked children questions such as, "What are you writing about?" or "What is happening in that picture?" Children's drawings and writings served as key artifacts. We made photocopies of all of the key artifacts and organized them into individual digital folders that helped us keep track of the children's progress.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved transcribing audio and video recordings, documenting students' writing skills from their drawings and writings, and reviewing researcher observational field notes. We organized weekly collections of students' written texts and drawings by date to document which children had attended the writing center during that week and determine developmental writing progression. Each researcher reviewed the children's work using a constant comparative method to capture broad patterns that emerged from student's writing including the topic and emergent writing skills (e.g., using letter-like forms, letter-sound relationships, concepts of print, use of left-to-right, and photo-to-text correlation). We coded children's writing based on these emergent skills. We noted changes in students' writing beginning with simple drawings, one-two word sentences, and then complete sentences. Coding included story conventions and alternation of English and Spanish language use. Transcriptions of children's oral responses, during their oral narrations and creation of written texts, were grouped together so that each child's oral response coincided with their drawings and writings. Independently, each researcher examined and reexamined the data for emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

We used open coding for the researcher field notes and transcriptions of the audio/videos, followed by axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). These codes developed into categories related to children's engagement with the writing process and with their peers, excitement about sharing drawings, words children used, recurring episodes such as use of the author's chair, and connections between home and school within the narratives. Although the data for the current study was collected over a three-month period, considerable amount of time was spent in the classroom before and after the data collection in an effort to build relationships with the children. We used this extended time to develop participants' trust in the researchers and contribute to the authenticity of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Limitations

As with all research, this study had some limitations. The short duration and amount of classroom opportunities to write does not allow us to measure the growth in writing attributed to the study or to what occurred outside the study boundaries. The children’s writing may be attributed to the natural growth and development of emergent writing over the period of the study. Although the study involved a small sample and cannot lead to causation, our findings can be generalized regarding emergent literacy with Latino preschoolers when their personal experiences are part of the writing process and provides insight into how educators can create supportive, culturally relevant environments that foster early writing development.

Findings

To explore the use of students’ narratives as a tool to develop early writing skills, we focused on two research questions: How does the use of family pictures promote the development of personal narratives by bilingual four-year olds within a writing center? and What emergent writing skills are evident through students’ personal narratives? Throughout this project, children’s positive engagement with writing was evident. Field notes document how at every visit, children would greet us and guide us to the writing center to show us their work. Enthusiastically they would say, “Look at my book!”, “Read my story.”, and “Look what I wrote.” Based on collection of students’ booklets, the majority of the children visited the writing center several times during the week. Initially, children filled their booklets with emergent writing represented through drawings, letter strings, and words they had copied from the word wall. Eventually, children used their own invented spellings to share their written narratives.

Data analysis revealed three findings categorized as follows:

- (1) children’s understanding of the written narrative,
- (2) oral stories as a bridge to school-based writing skills, and
- (3) writing as a socially constructed process.

Each section reveals the power of engaging children and families in narratives about cultural and familial experiences to develop Latino children’s emergent writing skills.

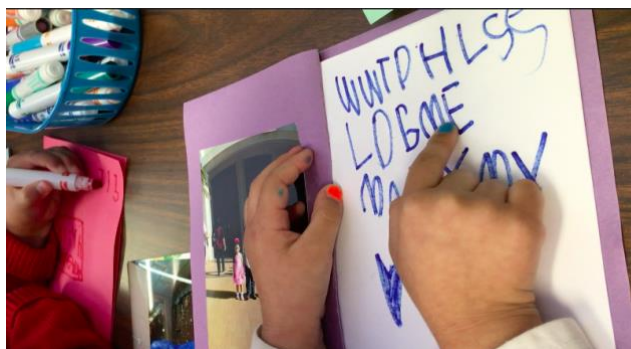
I Want to Write my Story! Understanding the Written Narrative

Young children are motivated to communicate with others. This communicative aspect motivates children to write. As children develop their concept of writing, they are acquiring the understanding that (1) writing is a form of communication, (2) writing involves letters and words,

and (3) writing has multiple purposes (Otto, 2008). In this study, children were encouraged to communicate the events in their family picture by first talking about it, writing it in their booklets, and then reading it to their peers.

Figure 1.

Sharing her story.



Children in this study composed oral and written narratives about familial experiences that portrayed key story elements (characters, setting) and revealed central facts about their cultural background and experiences. Examination of children's written artifacts and the video data showed that family pictures prompted children to develop their oral narratives as they described what was taking place in the pictures and then served as the basis for their written narratives using their emergent writing skills (Figure 1).

In the following excerpt, Gina orally discusses her family photo.

Me and my mom we were going to the ice cream shop. We were going to the ice cream shop because we wanted ice cream. I wanted chocolate.

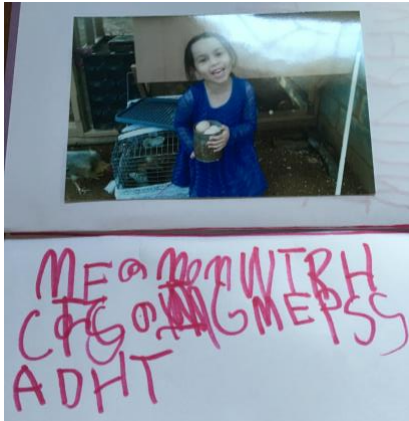
As Gina excitedly tells us her story, she shows a strong understanding of the story narrative such as characters and cause and effect (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015). On another occasion, she shared about a visit to a relative's house. This time, Gina told us her story using her written text and photo from her booklet. Below is the oral interpretation of her own writing (Figure 2):

My mom went to her tía's house and there were cats and my mom gave me breakfast.

Gina's writing reveals conventional spelling for the words *me*, *mom*, and *cats*. Mom and cat were words the teacher had added to the word wall. Her written narrative also reveals her understanding that writing involves a string of letters ordered in a linear fashion from left to right and is a form of communication. Her use of the Spanish word, *tía* (aunt) reflects the bilingual nature of her home language practices.

Figure 2.

Gina’s story.



Jose’s artifacts also reveal a new understanding of the written narrative. Field notes indicate that at the initial phase of this study, José, stated he did not “actually know how to write the words.” He was, however, an avid storyteller creating elaborate stories using rich oral vocabulary. José’s skills in oral narration evolved into sharing stories through written language. Field notes document how José, like Gina, regularly made use of the word wall or requested help from adults with the spelling of specific words. Eventually José filled the pages of his booklets with pictures from home and corresponding stories. By the end of the three months, we noted how José’s writing ability had expanded to include an author’s focused choice of language. For example, on one occasion José insisted that his story needed the “other word.” Unsure of what word he was looking for, the researcher suggested papa and grandfather. José, however, used the teacher-created word wall to find the Spanish word for grandpa and then wrote, “*abuelo* and I picking oranges”(Figure 3).

Figure 3.

José and abuelo.



José's writing reveals his understanding of writing as a form of communication that involves letters and words with letter-sound correspondence for several of his words (pikg, orgs). As an emergent bilingual child, José's language skills are developing across Spanish and English. He lives with his English-speaking mother and regularly has contact with his bilingual grandparents. Similar to Gina's use of *tía* (aunt), his desire to use the Spanish word for grandfather, *abuelo*, reveals the sociocultural aspect of language and personal significance language use has for individuals who grow up in bilingual contexts. In José's case, it also reveals the complex nature of an author's ability to complete an idea with the appropriate choice of vocabulary (or in this case language) for a story. By doing so, children learn about written narratives from their individual, specific, and diverse cultural and linguistic practices (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019; Purcell-Gates, Melzi, Najafi, & Orellana, 2011; Reyes & Azuara, 2008).

Later that day, we engaged in a conversation with children about writing stories. Allowing children to share their thoughts about the written narrative provides an opportunity to give children a voice in their participation in the writing activity, thus giving them agency (Rowe & Neitzel, 2010). Video data captured dialogue with the researcher, Alex, and Cindy as they share their sentiments and understandings of the written narrative.

Researcher: Do you like to write stories?

Alex: (nods head yes)

Researcher: Tell me why you like to write stories?

Alex: I like to write stories too much!

Researcher: Why do you like writing stories?

Cindy: Because they're... they're really, they're really like reading and words and everything. They're like just, they have people and in them and I like the decorations they just do something good.

Cindy's comment reveals her understanding that stories have purpose, use words to convey a message, affect the reader in different ways, and can be shared with others to 'do something good.'

Once Upon a Time Me and My Dad: Oral Stories as a Bridge to School-based Writing Skills

The second theme demonstrated the meaningful writing connections children made between home and school, as well as how their familial stories facilitated the acquisition of oral and written skills. Mrs. Benavides frequently read stories to children to provide access to new vocabulary, the structure of books, and more complex language. We use an example from Marco to reveal how children originally began their stories with the book language of traditional fairy tales. Initially, Marco’s oral stories included phrases such as, “Once upon a time a princess and three nights.” His stories evolved into “Once upon a time me and my dad.” On one occasion, Marco narrated his written story:

Once upon a time, me and my dad were getting a costume from Wal-Mart to pick when Halloween comes. We tried it on and it fit perfect. Then Halloween came and then when it got nighttime, we put on our costumes to go and get some treats. Then other kids went to the house. The end.

In his story, Marco and his dad participate in social interactions and cultural practices of celebrations and traditions. Although short, Marco situates his story in time, introduces the characters (me and my dad), and uses sequence to document the order of activities. Through personal story telling, Latino children made connections to the language of stories they heard in school (López-Robertson, 2012). In this case, the children’s written narratives used known language patterns of specific genres of story (once upon a time, the end). Marco used his book knowledge of fairy tales to organize his personal stories of home activities using his knowledge of story conventions. Eventually the fantasy stories of knights and princesses focused on moms, dads, and other family members as children had the opportunity to write about their home life and cultural experiences at school.

When children have experiences with different types of narratives at home, church, or their community, their own narrative skills increase (Bauer & Mkhize, 2012; Gillanders & Jiménez, 2004; López-Robertson, 2012). Part of the procedure for this study entailed sending booklets home for families to talk about and write about family experiences with their children. Oral literacy activities such as storytelling play a prominent role in parent–child literacy-centered interactions (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019; Billings, 2009). Indeed, children’s booklets showed writings and drawings from adult family members. In one example, Gina’s mom wrote about Gina’s

special blanket. Video data captured Gina's excitement to tell us a story her mother had shared with her and written in her booklet (Figure 4).

My mommy told me this story. I was a baby and my tío Humberto gave me a pink blankee. I love my pink blankee. That is me and my pink blankee. I was a baby.

Figure 4.

Gina and her blankee.



From a young age, children are exposed to stories being told about them, with them, or for them (Delgado-Bernal, 2001; Dyson & Genishi, 1994). These home experiences provide children with skills related to story structure, style, and purpose (Flynn, 2018) as evident in Gina's narration. Her story also illustrates her conceptual development about time ("I was a baby"), emotions (love), family structure, and language practices (tío/uncle Humberto)—all significant concepts in early childhood development. Additionally, Gina's narration reveals her literacy engagement and excitement to read and share the stories written by her family.

Want to Hear my Story? Writing as a Socially Constructed Process

Learning to write is a social process and ways of making meaning with print are learned through social collaboration at home and at school (Reyes, 2006). Social construction of literacy also helps children understand about writing for an audience and the value of becoming an author (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019; Graves & Hansen, 1983). As part of this social process, we observed children write their story and story title and then rush to read it to their peers. As authors read, their peers engaged with the story by asking questions and making connections to their own experiences (McCallister, 2012). These questions prompted the children to add details to their stories.

“Want to hear my story?”

Perhaps the most exciting revelation of this socially constructed process was the writing confidence that developed within the children as they developed their writing skills through interactions with peers. José, if you recall, had expressed his inability to write at the beginning of the study specifically stating, “I don’t actually know how to write the words.” All children were encouraged to talk about and then write about their family photographs while at the writing center. Children shared their written stories with peers during their writing center time. Video data, however, captured this particular occasion when José emphatically requested time to read to the entire class at the author’s chair.

Jose: I want to sit in the chair and read my story.

Researcher: Great! Sit here and read it. [I pointed to the author’s chair and sat to listen.]

Jose: I want my friends to hear me too.

Researcher: Sure, read it to Diego. [boy standing nearby]

Jose: No, I want all my friends.

Researcher: This friend here will be great! Your friends are busy with a lesson.

José was not satisfied with this response and persisted in his request. Mrs. Benavides asked José to sit in the author’s chair and read his story to the entire class (Figure 5). The children eagerly gathered on the carpet close to the chair to listen. Beaming with pride, José began by showing the book cover to his classmates and reading the title, a strategy his teacher had modeled many times.

Figure 5.

José reads to the class.



He then turned to the first picture and read:

José: I was jumping on the trampoline. I fell down. And I got out 'cause someone was waiting for me to get out. I was with my friend and my brother. I was a little bit scared. I couldn't get off.

Classmate: Where are you José?

José: I have four brothers. One, two, three, four. [Points to the picture and counts his brothers.]

Classmate: You have four brothers?

Second classmate: He's right there with the hat. Don't you see him? You silly pumpkin!

José's insistence in sharing his writing with his classmates demonstrates the importance of socially constructed learning and writing for an audience, as he became more proficient and more confident with his writing ability. The social process of sharing his story with his peers contributed to José's belief that he was a reader and a writer. Reading his story as an author provided an audience that respected, but more importantly, valued what he had to say. These opportunities to interact with their peers provide children with a socio-cultural constructive experience that contributes to their foundational literacy development as children engage in talk surrounding the story (Volk & de Acosta, 2001). Social construction of learning also helps children understand writing for an audience and the value of becoming an author (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019).

Discussion

This research resulted in three key findings. First, the family pictures facilitated the progression of children's development and understanding of the written narrative as their oral stories evolved into written narratives. Second, children used these oral stories as a bridge to school-based writing skills as children made meaningful connections between home and school. Lastly, children's understanding that writing is a socially constructed process created a context for children to see themselves as writers who engage others in the process. All three findings reveal young children's strong dispositions for writing within authentic spaces and the ability for children's stories to bridge their cultural knowledge and writing development (Gort & Sembante, 2015; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

As children used cultural and familial stories for their written narratives, they provided a window into their lives, as they shared their after-school experiences within a cultural context (e.g., birthday parties and family gatherings) (Allen, Fabregas, Hankins & Hull, 2002). As indicated

earlier, families were invited to send personal photos for children to talk and write about. Using these photos, the children discussed family relationships, processed their experiences, and narrated stories of those events as they saw themselves and other family members. The connection to familial relationships is characteristic of many Latino children’s story production (Jimenez-Silva & McCabe, 1996). Comparable to Roessingh’s (2011) family book project, this study revealed how children reflected their pride of family and culture within their oral and written narratives. Essentially, they radiated as they shared the stories their parents had written. As holders of cultural knowledge, children were motivated to tell their stories to others and then to write them down on paper.

When children participate in oral narratives, they practice the skills necessary for storytelling, such as planning and organizing—significant while developing literacy skills (Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001). Cultural wealth provided children material for the content of their oral stories and with the tools to shape the format of their written narratives (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019; Khimji & Maunder, 2012). In other words, choosing Halloween costumes, jumping on the trampoline, or picking oranges with ‘abuelo’ provided the richness for their stories and the organization for their written story structure.

Learning to write is a social process. Children developed their understanding of the written narrative through social collaboration. As part of this process, children talked about their pictures, wrote their story, and eagerly read it to their peers. As authors read, their peers engaged with the story by making connections to their own experiences. Students made comments such as, “I’ve been to the park!”, “Yo voy a karate!” [I go to karate!], or “Me and my primo [cousin] do that too!” In some cases, they wanted more clarification and asked, “Why did you get scared?” or “Where are you?” Children discovered the things they had in common—emotions, pets, and family and saw events from multiple perspectives as they discovered what makes them similar or different. This leads to respect for each other’s practices, cultural heritage, and diversity (Gay, 2002). Cheatham and Jimenez-Silva (2011) assert that opportunities such as these provide children with a socio-cultural constructive experience that contributes to foundational literacy development as children engage in talk about the story.

When children express themselves through writing they begin to see meaningful connections to speaking, listening, and reading and the social aspect of the writing process. McCallister’s work (2008) reveals how sharing stories with peers through the use of an author’s chair can create strong confidence in writing for even the most reluctant writers. Supportive

interactions among peers helps children engage in writing tasks and can lead to development of early writing skills (Bauer et al., 2017; Mirzaei & Eslami, 2015). In this study, reading from the author's chair gave children an opportunity to practice their newly acquired skills and helped them build confidence and pride in themselves as readers and writers. As their author identity is developed, children see writing as an effective tool for expression. They receive the message that they have something important to say. Additionally, allowing children to select their family pictures as topics for their writing, gave them agency where they shared some of the power with the adults in their setting (Rowe & Neitzel, 2010). Using pictures from home provided multiple iterations of their stories and demonstrated how Latino families' cultural experiences are significant for the development of children's emergent writing development.

Implications

Although this study took place in a private school setting, all educators who work with Latino children can benefit from the findings in this study. The expectation of any early childhood educator, regardless of setting, should be to create meaningful learning experiences that are relevant and respectful to each child (NAEYC, 2019). These include experiences where children can draw on their cultural and linguistic repertoires (Alanís, Arreguín & Salinas-González, 2021). Effective early childhood teachers recognize that children need to engage in authentic writing that is connected to their various backgrounds and experiences (Bauer et al., 2017).

Young children's understanding of oral and written narrative is mediated through socio-cultural interactions at home with their families (Bauer & Mkhize, 2012; Rogoff, 2003; Rowe, 2010; Volk & de Acosta, 2001). Children's early writing development occurs when they engage in interactive writing activities that incorporate their cultural and linguistic knowledge. When teachers encourage children to write through culturally relevant literacy activities in collaboration with adults and peers both at home and at school, children learn that their cultural, familial, and linguistic knowledge are valued aspects of the learning process. Consequently, teachers should use these storytelling practices as an instructional strategy.

Second, learning to write is a socially constructed process where children learn from and with others. Parents and peers scaffold children's language and literacy learning through social interaction (García-Alvarado et al, 2020; Pole, 2015; Reyes & Azuara, 2008, Roessingh, 2011; Rowe & Fain, 2013; Saracho & Spodek, 2007). Additionally, children want an audience to hear their story. An author's chair provides a designated space where children are free to engage in their craft as storytellers among supportive peers. Teachers can also have students share their stories with a

partner (Alanís, 2011). When children express themselves through writing they see meaningful connections to speaking, listening, and reading. Children who are free to share stories with others will engage in increasingly sophisticated language use as they gradually progress from oral to written narratives. Children will extend their understanding of the written narrative if they are provided space and time for this interactive process (Cahill & Gregory, 2016; Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

The increasing number of bilingual families in our schools generates the need to investigate the meaningful culturally relevant practices teachers provide children to support their emergent writing development. Educators have an obligation and responsibility to provide foundational literacy development for all children (NAEYC, 2019). They must allow opportunities for the voices of children and their families to be heard via personal narratives and authentic writing that captures children’s funds of knowledge and language practices. The use of family pictures, in the case of this study, created a culturally relevant activity that children connected with at a meaningful level. These types of activities send a powerful message to children: your voice is important, your culture is important, and your experiences are significant to your learning. Similarly, teachers learn that children’s cultural, familial, and linguistic knowledge enhances children’s construction of emergent literacy development.

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