Mothers’ Intimate, Imaginative Literacy Practices as Pushback

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores literacy practices in homes of Latino families in a low-socioeconomic Rio Grande Valley city. Participants included 14 recent immigrant Latina mothers whose children attended lower primary grades. For the first data set from 2013 to 2015, we collected data through semi-structured interviews. For the 2016 data set and in a different neighborhood of the city, we conducted open-ended survey questionnaires. Both data sets involved participant observation. We drew from a sociocultural framework, specifically New Literacy Studies and Funds of Knowledge. Results showed that mothers were imaginative, intentional, resistant, and resourceful in teaching their children to read and write in Spanish. They shared different resources and strategies routinely implemented at home to maintain their children’s heritage language. Additionally, the mothers recognized the importance of maintaining their children’s heritage language and they felt powerful as they compensated for inadequate Spanish instruction in local schools. We discuss implications for empowering Latina mothers’ in teaching first language literacy to their children.

Keywords: Literacy, Sociocultural, Funds of Knowledge, Spanish Instruction, Pushback

Introduction

Because of Title III of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001 and its 2015 revision, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), most U.S. schools promote English-only instruction and abandon emergent bilinguals’ mother tongues (García & DeNicolo, 2016). It does not appear that these acts have helped this group. For instance, foreign-born students have significantly higher dropout rates than their English speaking peers. Specifically, the dropout rate among Latinos/as nationwide remains relatively high at 12%, compared to 5% for Whites and 7% for Blacks (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2015). The Latino/a dropout rate is worse along the Texas-Mexico border. In the border city where this study occurred, 64% of residents 25 years and over have a high-school degree or higher, and only 16% have obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 27% in Texas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Next, out of six possible levels, U.S. Latinos/as scored at level two, lower than the overall U.S. and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) averages on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Fleishman, Hopstock, Pelczar, & Shelley, 2010). The NCES and OECD may relate literacy to reading, mathematics, and science scores, but we define literacy as socially-situated, ideological practices (Gee, 2012). Thus, storytelling (Cline & Necochea, 2003; White-Kaulity, 2007) and sharing resources (Moll, 1992) can be literacies. In addition, we perceive reading and writing as sense-making processes around print, non-print, and electronic texts (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 2005). Broadening literacy, reading, and writing definitions invite non-dominant people to the feast (Smith, 1987).

Indeed, the literacy challenges of emergent bilinguals represent a critical issue requiring resolution. Using emergent bilinguals terminology highlights other languages people may have, instead of focusing on a second language (L2), English language learner (ELL), or deficits, e.g., limited English proficient (LEP) (García & Kleifgen, 2010). Yet many policymakers do not understand how one’s first language (L1) and culture influence academic learning (Reyes, 2011). Since emergent bilinguals receive little L1 instruction in schools, out-of-school literacy practices
can help minority-language children’s biliteracy development (e.g., Bauer & Gort, 2012; Reyes, 2006). Because literacy learning takes place within social and cultural contexts (Barton, 2007), it is important to determine how literacy develops within the family (Rodríguez-Brown, 2004).

The discourse about minority families’ lack of involvement is a weapon that can maim non-dominant families who feel unaccepted in schools (Murillo, 2012). Contrary to myths, Latino parents are passionate about their children’s education (Zalaquett & López, 2006) and many want their children to maintain their L1 (Reyes, 2011). In particular, Latina mothers immerse themselves in numerous academic and social practices, supporting literacy and their children’s school achievement (Durand, 2010). However, few scholars have examined Latina mothers’ resource allocation and strategies to support L1 development (Reese & Goldenberg, 2006; Reyes, 2006). Thus, our research questions for the present study were: (1) What are the family literacy practices of recent immigrant Latina mothers? and (2) What strategies and resources do mothers utilize to support their children’s L1 development? We investigated these questions among Latina mothers in two low-income neighborhoods of a Texas city along the U.S./Mexico border.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Theoretical frameworks were New Literacy Studies (NLS) traditions and Funds of Knowledge (FOK). Both fall under the umbrella of sociocultural theory, which focuses on social learning and interaction to develop cognitive skills (Vygotsky, 1978). NLS and FOK involve a conscious effort to understand family and neighborhood situated practices and contexts and to view their languages and cultures as resources.

**New Literacy Studies**

We draw on NLS traditions, which refer to ideological, socially situated practices (Barton 2007; Luke, 2005) or “patterns of activity around literacy” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, p. 155). Within this definition, storytelling and creating art are literacies. Proponents of NLS traditions believe literacy practices relate to social, cultural, historical, economic, and political contexts. Most of NLS work focuses on people’s everyday literacy practices. We define practices as activity patterns (Pahl & Rowsell). These family engagements also include literacy events, or moments of reading and writing print (Heath, 1983) and the cultural values, attitudes, and feelings that shape and give meaning to those events (Street, 2005). Semiotic resources, such as drama and art, connect to these literacy events and practices.

We do not focus so much on skill acquisition, but rather on literacy as a social practice that varies from one context to another (Barton, 2007). When we move discussions of literacy from neutral skills to situated, ideological practices and events in out-of-school settings, we draw attention to the content, motivation, purposes, resources, and contexts of non-dominant actors (Street, 2005). These actors have been ignored in family literacy research (Edwards, Paratore, & Roser, 2009).

**Funds of Knowledge**

Another important concept from sociocultural theory, FOK, relates to culturally developed knowledge and skills for households or individuals to function effectively (Vélez-Ibáñez, 1988). These funds involve resource exchanges as strategies to compensate for limited material goods,
e.g., books (Moll, 1992). Since our study focuses on Spanish language use, we also refer the concept of linguistic FOK to address language resources and practices (Smith, 2002).

Although Hinton (2015) has questioned using a capital metaphor to discuss culture, we believe a FOK framework can talk back to deficit perspectives of non-dominant people. In this sense, FOK raise the ante to demonstrate not all funds relate to financial capital. Many Latinos/as in poverty have home resources, invisible to those focused on finances or blinded by racism (Moll, 2015) and linguicism (Anzaldúa, 2007).

**Methodology**

These NLS and FOK frameworks, under sociocultural theory, were fundamental in our research methodology because we highlight non-dominant participants in everyday settings and we attempted to respect participants’ time and contexts. Our ontologies, or connection to others, and our epistemologies, or what we count as knowledge, guided our inquiries (McGregor & Murname, 2010) and informed our research settings, participants, procedures, our positionality, data sources, and data gathering.

**Our Positionality**

Our sociocultural beliefs and bilingual, bicultural natures enabled cross-cultural understanding (Street, 1994). María, educated in South America from kindergarten to college (K-16) schools, immigrated to the USA as an adult. Additionally, she was a bilingual educator for eight years in the same school district that participants’ children attended. Kathy, a native English speaker but fluent in Spanish, has volunteered and conducted research in a local tutorial agency since 2006. Additionally, she taught and lived in a Spanish-speaking Honduran village for two years as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer and taught in Spain for a year. As with María’s context in the same school district, Kathy served as a remedial reading teacher for three years and has continued to volunteer in the district. Because we had personal experience with local schools’ English and testing emphases, we connected with the mothers and understood schooling and language contexts.

**Settings and Participants**

This study took place in a low socio-economic Rio Grande Valley (RGV) city along the U.S.-Mexico border, with about 175,000 inhabitants and 93.2% Hispanics. The high school graduation rate for adults over 24 years of age in this city was 63% and the per capita income was $14,000; 36% of residents live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Participants were 14 mothers, ages 25 to 40. We selected mothers whose L1 was Spanish, who were recent immigrants, and whose children attended early grade levels (kindergarten and first grade). However, some mothers also had older elementary and secondary school children as well. The mothers, from Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala, were economically disadvantaged and they lived in the two poorest neighborhoods of this RGV city (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). María gathered data in Este [East] neighborhood homes for data set one, involving eight mothers. Kathy gathered data in an Oeste [West] neighborhood after-school tutorial agency for data set two, involving six mothers. We attempted to build confianza [trust] and did not want to embarrass the mothers by asking about their educational levels. One mother worked outside of the home; she had a service job. All reported attending non-U.S. schools before arriving in the USA.
Most mothers were married. Although fathers helped their children with homework in English, we focused on mothers because we were primarily interested in Spanish practices. Children of the mothers attended public elementary schools in a school district providing free and reduced breakfast and lunch to all children; over 90% of the district’s enrollment was Latino/a (The Texas Tribune, 2010).

María chose to interview mothers in their homes versus in public settings because of her sociocultural framework. At home parents could show print resources. For example, participants often walked to other parts of their homes to retrieve children’s writing samples and reading materials. Kathy chose to conduct research in Oeste’s neighborhood setting versus a school because of this sociocultural framework, also. She observed the mothers interact with their children at the after-school tutorial agency, where neighborhood children, their mothers, pre-service teachers, and tutorial staff participated in a service-learning project.

**Procedures**

For the first data set between 2013 and 2015, María approached a kindergarten teacher to ask her which children were strongest in Spanish literacy in her Este neighborhood classroom. The teacher recommended a few children. This essential selection criterion demonstrated the children’s literacy abilities in Spanish. Next, María asked the teacher to mention the study to these children’s mothers informally before or after school, when the mothers dropped off or picked up their children. If the mothers expressed interest in being interviewed, the teacher said María would contact the mothers. María called the mothers, explained the study, and invited them to participate before visiting their homes.

To respect their time, María asked the mothers when she could come to their homes. All preferred to be interviewed when their school-age children were away so they could concentrate on the interviews. Thus, she could not observe interactions between mothers and their school-age children. María interviewed each mother once and questions focused on Spanish literacy practices and resources. She used a digital audio recorder and transcribed the interviews. Since participants were L1 Spanish speakers, she interviewed them in Spanish.

For the second data set in 2016, Kathy gathered data at an after-school tutorial agency in the Oeste neighborhood of the same city. The purpose of the non-profit tutorial agency, ran by Mexican-heritage staff members, is to assist Oeste school-aged children with homework. Mothers and pre-service teachers help the children with homework, read and write with them, and engage them in literacy lessons. Tutorial staff and mothers prepare meals and serve meals to the children. Kathy, a researcher and tutorial assistant for many years, invited the mothers to participate in a survey.

**Data Sources**

Data sources consisted of interviews, surveys, and participant observation. Data were collected during two phases and each phase occurred in a different neighborhood. Interviews took place during 2013-2015 in the Este neighborhood. Surveys were conducted during 2016 in the Oeste neighborhood. Participant observations occurred during both phases.

**Interviews.** María gathered the first data set through one- to two-hour semi-structured interviews. She began with general questions, such as, “How many children do you have in school? What grades are they in? Which language do you use mainly at home? Who speaks which
language?” As the conversation progressed, María asked language and literacy questions, such as, “Which language do you use to help your children with school-work? Do you teach your children to read and write in Spanish? If so, how do you teach them to read and write in Spanish? Where do you get Spanish materials to teach your children? How often do these literacy practices take place?”

Surveys. Kathy surveyed parents for the second data set. The survey consisted of demographic questions and open-ended questions that pertained to this study. Kathy provided hard copies of surveys in Spanish and English; all participants completed the forms in Spanish at home. The questions pertaining to this study were, “How have you taught your child/children to read in Spanish?” and “How have you taught your child/children to write in Spanish?”

Participant Observation. The next data source involved participant observation, which Spradley (2016) defined as inferences from people’s cultural behaviors, what they do, and their cultural artifacts, and what they make and use. Different levels of participant observation are passive, moderate, and active. According to Spradley’s criteria, our form was moderate because we kept careful field notes, with dates, locations, participant names, and what occurred, and we attempted to strike a balance between outsider and insider perspectives. As insiders, we were volunteers, parents, and former teachers in the school district and neighborhoods. As outsiders, we were university researchers.

In the present study, María worked with parents and their children at the school where participants’ children attended. As a university volunteer in this program, she trained parents how to read to their three-year-old children in Spanish and English; program participants were different from research participants. She also substituted-taught kindergarten in that same school. María engaged in participant observation in the mothers’ home. The mothers would often show her examples from their children’s writing at home.

Participant observation also occurred during Kathy’s 2016 data gathering at the after-school tutorial center. She observed three mother participants speaking in Spanish with their children and working with them for schoolwork and reading Spanish trade books to their children from the agency’s library. Kathy watched the mothers asking the tutorial staff to translate certain words from the children’s English homework into Spanish, and then the mothers would explain the homework to their children in Spanish. Like María, Kathy served as a volunteer. Kathy has been involved with the after-school tutorial program for over 10 years and has promoted Spanish literacy teaching and Spanish children’s books in the program.

Data Analysis
We based data analysis on grounded theory and looked for patterns across interviews and surveys (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We color-coded relevant information and identified themes by making comparisons and looking for similarities and dissimilarities across data vis-à-vis the research questions and NLS and FOK frameworks under sociocultural theory (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Initially, themes focused on speaking and listening, reading, and writing, but we realized major themes focused on mothers’ reported actions regarding their language and literacy practices.
Results and Discussion

The following themes emerged from data analysis: creative resource usage; feeding L1 oral language and reading – intimately and passionately; imaginative reading practices; teaching writing in Spanish; and brokering practices.

Creative Resource Usage

U.S. Print Resources. Mothers described imaginative resource gathering and usage to develop their children’s L1 literacy. Since participants could not afford to buy books, they checked them out from public libraries and the schools their children attended, borrowed from others, found materials in their churches, and used tutorial center materials. Sofía (all names are pseudonyms) said, “Cuando íbamos a la iglesia ahí también nos daban libros en español” [When we would go to church, there they would also give us books in Spanish]. Also, once their children became advanced in their Spanish reading skills, mothers read with their children magazines, newspapers, and the Bible to maintain and grow the children’s L1. Thus, they were creative in what they considered to be a text. According to Fernández (2001), a text is anything a human creates. It does not necessarily need to be a book or even print. As we will explore later in this paper, we can create meaning from oral and artistic texts.

Print Resources from the Diaspora. Additionally, the mothers convinced friends and family to bring books from Mexico. Sofía continued, “Mandaba traer los libros de México” [I asked them to bring books from Mexico]. In addition, Rosa used her social knowledge to tap into another resource: a migrant woman who had more material resources, “Tengo una amiga migrante que le regalan muchas cosas. Y pues como sus hijos crecieron, ella se los regala a los míos” [I have a migrant friend who receives many things. As her children have grown up, she gives their things to my children]. This resource sharing is important in the FOK framework. “The less access to formal sectors, the greater the reliance of households on reciprocal networks for survival” (Moll, 1992, p. 228). Thus, knowing other migrant women who had more resources and who were Spanish speakers facilitated resource exchange for Rosa and her children.

Additionally, Rosa’s resource sharing demonstrated an important literacy process in the diaspora: relationship-building. Diaspora is when people leave their homeland and settle in other places. They often maintain diasporic processes and practices, such as building and maintaining personal connections (Rolón-Dow & Irizarry, 2014). Our participants used these diasporic practices to help their children to learn to read in Spanish and to maintain Latin American ties (Ember, Ember, & Skoggard, 2005). Also, resource sharing, which can range from exchanges clothes to books, is a literacy (Gee, 2012).

Feeding L1 Oral Language and Reading, Intimately and Passionately

Taking Charge in Developing Biliteracy. Mothers proclaimed to be in charge of teaching their children informal and formal oral Spanish. Their efforts to teach their children Spanish literacy were intentional, rich, and resistant. Eliza knew her children would learn only English in school, so she envisioned herself as their Spanish teacher: “Yo me encargo de la educación en español, en la escuela es en inglés” [I’m in charge of Spanish education, and the school is in charge of English education.] Similarly, Natalia narrated her experience teaching her son and daughter to speak Spanish,
Y empezamos a hablarle (a su hijo) español, español, y entonces cuando el entró a la escuela, el inglés lo aprendió rápido. Entonces con mi hija hicimos lo mismo, puro español de chiquita [We talked to my son in Spanish, Spanish. Thus, when he entered school, he learned English fast. Then we did the same with my daughter. Everything was in Spanish since she was little].

Natalia appeared to understand L1 development helps L2 acquisition (Cummins, 2003). In a Canadian study, principals, teachers and parents realized children’s culture and L1 would help them to learn English literacy (Peterson & Heywood, 2007). Indeed, L1 reading ability predicts L2 reading ability (Chuang, Joshi, & Dixon, 2012). Vygotsky explained, “The acquisition of a foreign language differs from the acquisition of the native one precisely because it uses the semantics of the native language as its foundation” (Kozulin, 1986, p. 150-151). Many policy makers believe eliminating emergent bilinguals’ L1 will help the youth’s academic English. However, according to Vygotsky, children need time to become advanced in their L1: “While learning a foreign language, we use word meanings that are already well developed in the native language, and only translate them; the advanced knowledge of one’s own language also plays an important role in the … foreign one …” (Kozulin, p. 159).

Seeing Themselves as Educated and Powerful. The mothers perceived themselves as knowledgeable and powerful, an important NLS concept related to equity and ideology (Luke, 2005). For instance, Clara felt authoritative in teaching her children a formal Spanish, or the Spanish that they would see in the books and newspapers:

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\text{Trató de enseñarles lo más que pude mi idioma para que lo entendieran bien pero también trató de enseñarles un lenguaje más desarrollado para que no se estancaran en el lenguaje común...un lenguaje callejero que usa mucha gente que no tiene estudios. Por ejemplo, mucha gente utiliza la palabra “los biles” entonces cuando mi hija me dijo: “oh, escuché esa palabra” y yo le dije “pues esa no es una palabra y pienso que no es correcto que la uses”. Quise que ellas aprendieran un lenguaje más correcto pero es dificil pues la mayoría del tiempo ellos están en la escuela y ellos llegan conmigo sólo para hacer tarea. [I tried to teach my children the Spanish language, so they could move beyond mere understanding. I tried to teach them a more developed language, to prevent their use of a “current” language, or what they hear in the street. For instance, many people use the word “los biles” and when my daughter told me “Oh, I heard that word,” I told her “this is not a word and I think it is not correct that you use it.” Yet this is difficult because they spend most of their time in school and they are with me only to do their homework].
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“Biles” is Spanglish for bills and is commonly used in the border; the correct translation in Spanish for “bills” is cuentas. This is a frequent phenomenon along most international borders where different languages are spoken, but perhaps Clara’s avoidance of slang was an attempt to sound educated.

The mothers told María they did not believe their children would not learn Spanish in school. Similarly, a parent in Murillo (2012) said RGV schools’ attempted “to eradicate the culture and practice of speaking Spanish” (p. 23). Eradication of Spanish goes far beyond RGV schools. After all, the Office of Bilingual Education changed to the Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011).

The mothers in the present study also believed they played important roles in scaffolding academic L1 language. In a study of 56 Latino/a kindergarten children and their 56 mothers, 67% of mothers stated they provided their children academic practice and 75% reported speaking
mostly Spanish with their children (Durand, 2010). Thus, children can learn much with parental scaffolding. Vygotsky stated, “The discrepancy between a child’s actual mental age and the level he reaches in solving problems with assistance indicates the zone of his proximal development [ZPD]” (Kozulin, 1986, p. 187).

**Telling Stories to Reinforce Spanish.** Participants described daily L1 oral language practices with their children through storytelling, drama, explicit literacy instruction, and bedtime reading. In NLS traditions, these are literate practices because they are socially situated and meaningful to participants. These practices also served as oral texts (Fernández, 2001). Like the *Gallinita Roja* (Little Red Hen) Susana mentioned reading to her children, the mothers gathered their children under their wings to feed them their heritage language. Susana had a routine when her children returned from school. She would push Spanish back into them through storytelling, “Al momento que llegan de la escuela, les digo, ‘Les voy a contar un cuentito’ y se sientan en el sofá y quedan atentos ... luego lo quieren actuar” [When they get home I tell them, ‘I’m going to tell you a story,’ and they sit on the couch and listen … and then they want to act it out].

Susana’s children dramatized her stories. These storytelling and dramatization practices may assist children in developing emotional and cognitive functions, such as empathy, reflection, imagination, prediction, and visualization (Braxton, 2006). For example, Vygotsky’s research with Russian children demonstrated that youth can function at higher levels when they interact with adults (Kozulin, 1986). Furthermore, participating in family stories helps to build oral language development and reading skills in children (Cline & Necochea, 2003). The intimacy of children sitting close to family members during literacy events can help children to become life-long readers (White-Kaulaita, 2007). Like our participants who created stories in Spanish from incomprehensible English books, White-Kaulaity discussed a similar Native American practice:

An Apache graduate student … got his passion for books from his grandfather, who could not read but often took Henry on his knee and turned the pages of a book, making up his own stories to go with the pictures. Later Henry learned this technique, and his mother thought Henry was reading (p. 567).

In addition, mother-child interaction while reading books at home has a positive effect on Spanish vocabulary development among bilingual preschool children (Quiroz, Snow, & Zhao, 2010). Parents’ reading storybooks to their young children promoted vocabulary development (Roberts, 2008). Caspe (2009) discovered Latino/a four-year-olds made statistically significant gains in reading if their Latina mothers had a storytelling style of book sharing, e.g., narrating a detailed story instead of asking labelling questions or providing scant details.

**Continuing Diasporic Practices.** When asked how they taught their children to read, the mothers discussed continuing intimate family literacy traditions from their home countries in the diaspora. This intimacy is essential in helping youth to internalize and appreciate their L1 (Reyes, 2011). Laura related her own childhood experience of extended family members teaching her to read in Mexico, “Yo también aprendí con mi mamá, y mis tíos. Tuve mucha convivencia familiar, y esa fue la manera que a mí me enseñaron. ... y así yo le enseñé a mi niño” [I also learned from my mother and my uncles and aunts. I had a lot of family closeness and this was how they taught me. And this how I taught my child]. Second generation L1 maintenance in the diaspora is more likely through L1 reading and writing (Bartolomé, 2011). Also, the extended family members’ close-knit practices were socially situated, and thus were literacies. Having family members teach
her to read was so heart-warming for Laura that she continued the tradition by teaching her children to read.

**Finding Time.** One mother, Eliza, worked outside of the home and struggled to find time to teach her children L1 reading. For instance, because Eliza was working full-time, she had to teach Spanish during her children’s vacations, on weekends, and in the evenings:

*Pues lo hago en las vacaciones, y cuando me queda un poco de tiempo, pues mi horario es de 8-6 que trabajo, y ya me pongo un rato en la cama a ayudarlos. Me enfoqué muchísimo y en las vacaciones también a que aprendieran a leer en español* [I do it, teach my children, during vacations and when I have time, because my work schedule is from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. I help them when we are in bed. I intensively focused during the vacations to teach them how to read in Spanish].

It was obvious Eliza was impassioned to teach her children L1 reading because she did so almost in every free moment. Also, bringing the mother tongue and reading to bed demonstrates the intimate role both had in Eliza’s mind, heart, and lips.

Other examples of how mothers devoted time to their children’s literacy and education were through Kathy’s participant observation in Oeste’s tutorial program. Three of the six participating mothers helped their children with homework almost daily. Although the homework was in English, Kathy observed that the mothers used their schemata to determine the tasks. One mother said she looked at lines and spaces between questions to provide answers on worksheets and that she used page numbers on her child’s assignment description from the teacher to ensure her child completed all tasks. Tutorial staff confirmed this practice, which was amazing because the participating mothers said they could not read in English. Additionally, all six mothers attended a college and financial aid information session in Spanish as part of the program, even though their children were not close to graduating college, which demonstrated their support of their children’s education. Last, Kathy observed three of the mother participants reading the tutorial agency’s books in Spanish to their children; these books were in Spanish.

These examples demonstrated that the parents were intimately and passionately involved in their children’s literacy and educational development. According to Durand and Perez (2013), many myths surround Latino/a parental involvement in their children’s education. However, from their interviews with Latino/a parents (10 mothers and two fathers), the Latino/a parents believed that spending time with their children and teaching them was central to their roles. “… These parents cast themselves as the most central figures in their child’s lives; put another way, they considered themselves as the true purveyors of the *educación* values …” (p. 62).

Durand and Perez (2013) posited that parent participants in their study, with little or no formal education, might appear more comfortable helping their children academically because the early-grade schoolwork was more manageable and because teachers provided explicit instructions and training on how to help the children. However, no participant in our study mentioned receiving direct instruction or training from teachers.

**Imaginative Reading Practices**

**Inventing Stories from English Print.** The children’s English books helped the mothers learn L2 reading. Silvia said, “*Llevaban varios libros [en inglés]. De hecho aproveche para practicar mi inglés entonces yo se los leía*” [They were bringing various books. In fact, I took advantage to practice my English]. Also, we learn to read by reading connected text (Smith, 2006).
Some mothers reported reading books written in English to their children. Susana explained how she used imagination and illustrations to create stories in Spanish,

Los libros que están en inglés yo se los explicó en español. Solamente explico las imágenes... Y entiendo sólo algunas palabras. Yo empezaba a decir algo que yo creía, les inventaba. Y ellos se lo creían, aunque estuviera en inglés [I explain in Spanish based on English books. I only discuss the images...I understand only few words. I began uttering what I believed. I invented. And they believed it, even if the texts were in English].

Eliza shared a similar practice, but felt she was being dishonest, as if she could not embellish:

Ellos a veces me dicen, “Léelo, mamá,” y yo les digo, “No, yo no te lo puedo leer (en inglés)... Es que yo no puedo decirte una cosa que no dice allí ... Yo puedo decirte una historia guiándome en los dibujos” [Sometimes my children insist, “Mom, read!” I tell them, “No, I cannot read (in English)...I cannot tell you something that it does not say...I can tell you a story based on the pictures”].

In other sign or communication systems, dancers, musicians, and actors embellish to add their signature touches. This practice appears unacceptable to some in reading because they may not believe reading involves interpretation (Harste, 2013). According to Rosenblatt (1978), “The reader has tended to remain in shadow, taken for granted, to all intents and purposes invisible” (p. 1). Making up stories based on pictures demonstrated our mother participants’ resourceful and literate practice related to linguistic FOK (Smith, 2002) and NLS (Barton, 2007).

The syntactic (grammar), grapho-phonic (letter-sound), semantic (meaning), and pragmatic (context and schemata) cueing systems guide reading as a sense-making process (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 2005), but semantic and pragmatic cues may allow for imaginative storytelling. As such, when participants create stories based on illustrations, they use internal clues (the pictures and their sequence in a story) and external clues (background knowledge and story grammar/structure) to recreate a meaningful text. After all, reading involves a triadic meaning-making process between the reader, text, and poem or evocation (Rosenblatt, 1978). These images are just as important in a picture-story book as are the words; if not, the Caldecott book award would not exist.

Pretending to read based on illustrations, pragmatics, and story-order does not mean art and language are the same; even three-year-olds know the difference between writing and drawing (Harste, 2013). However, pretending to read does mean people attempt to make sense of books, in whatever language. Thus, as NLS scholars, we question a limited view of reading and we open the aperture to include pretending to read as a literate, imaginative practice. For instance, reading and pretending to read were skills to measure kindergarten readiness (Zill & West, 2001). Furthermore, we posit that making up a story based on illustrations requires more complex thinking processes than merely reading verbatim words on a page. This is because language and art are “representational” (Kozulin, 1986, p. 73) and texts can be drawings (Fernández, 2001). In addition, “thought must pass through meanings and only then through words” (Kozulin, p. 252).

Teaching Writing in Spanish

Scaffolding Instruction. Mothers made clear they were in charge of teaching their children how to write in Spanish and they appeared to have effective writing pedagogy in Spanish. As
various authors have demonstrated, informal instruction and guidance from parents on how to write in Spanish helps in maintaining the L1 and developing biliteracy (e.g., Reyes, 2011). One of our participating mothers, Natalia, taught her son how to write by providing support tailored to a child’s needs. Natalia started with a few words, so her son would not be overwhelmed. This scaffolded teaching is an important aspect of sociocultural pedagogy (Vygotsky, 1978). Natalia explained the way she taught her son to write in Spanish:

Y al niño estuve tratando de que aprenda a rayar [sic] el español. No más le digo, “Ponme esto o lo otro” no más así. No más así, unas tres o cuatro palabritas. Para que él vaya entendiendo, pues muchas cosas él no sabe rayarlas [sic] en español [When my son was learning to write in Spanish, I was only telling him, “Write this, or write that.” Nothing more than three or four words, so he could understand. This is because he does not know much writing in Spanish].

Natalia continued, “Fui yo la que le enseñé a escribir en español” [It was I who taught him how to write in Spanish]. As with the inadequate L1 reading instruction in school, mothers compensated for inadequate L1 writing instruction. Clara said, “Lo están perdiendo (en español), pues en la escuela solo lo rayan [sic] en inglés, entonces el español casi no lo rayan [sic]” [They are losing it because in school they write only in English. Thus, they are losing their Spanish].

Participants started by sounding out the alphabet and they scaffolded instruction until their children were able to write words. One mother explained how she taught her son, “Desde chiquito mi hijo puede escribir. Yo le digo, ‘Escribe mamá, pon la /m/, /a/’... Deletreando, si lo puede escribir ... porque yo le enseñé primero las cinco vocales y luego todo el abecedario en español y hasta que escriben las palabras” [My son could write since he was little. I told him to write “mother” and I sounded it out...He can now write because I taught him the five vowels first, then the entire Spanish alphabet, and now he is able to write words]. This subskills approach focuses on the grapho-phonetic cueing system, which may work better in Spanish than in English because many English words are not spelled the way they sound (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 2005). Also, knowledge of the five vowels in Spanish and how to teach them demonstrates the mother knew an important Spanish literacy concept.

Using Multiple Modalities to Teach Writing. Natalia understood that reading books in Spanish with her daughter helped her daughter’s writing skills, “Ella ya reconoce las letras, pues cuando era mas chica y le leía se las iba mostrando” [She knows the letters because when she was little I was pointing them to her]. Like Natalia, another mother (Luisa) connected oral language, letters, and writing. When asked how she taught her children to write in Spanish, Luisa said, “Escuchando como se pronuncian las palabras y escribiendo palabras y hablándolas” [Listening how to pronounce the words and writing words and saying them]. Luisa reinforced the importance of Spanish, as a phonetic language, in literacy acquisition and was using language skills, modalities, and oral and written language.

The mothers’ intuitive ways to teach Spanish writing using multiple modalities help Latino/a English language learners to make meaning of a particular topic, in particular those striving readers. This array of modalities may include a combination of visual, verbal, and print cues (Rubinstein-Ávila, 2006).

Writing for Authentic Purposes and Audiences. Mothers also had their children write letters in Spanish to family members or school teachers. For instance, Clara used the following
strategy, “Yo les digo que se pongan a escribir y se ponen a hacer cartitas para mí. Y dicen “Mami, te quiero mucho” y luego escriben y escriben. Y lo hacen en español” [I tell my children to write and they write short letters to me; they write: “Mommy, I love you very much,” and then they write and write]. Another mother, Natalia, walked from the living room couch to the kitchen refrigerator and returned to show María a note on lined notebook paper with drawings. Natalia said it was a love letter in Spanish that her child wrote to her. Similarly, Eliza shared with María a binder with a collection of her daughter’s work, in Spanish, that she did at home since she was in kindergarten. (Eliza’s daughter was in second grade during data gathering.) Eliza’s collection included short stories with drawings in the form of booklets. Parents’ authentic L1 writing with their children and saving their children’s L1 writing samples can build youth’s positive attitudes towards their heritage language and can promote positive ethnic identity (Martínez-Roldán & Malave, 2004).

The Push-pull of Supporting Older Children’s Spanish. Efforts to teach Spanish at home continued even when participants’ children advanced in grade levels. Mothers with older children persisted helping the latter who took Spanish as an academic course in middle or high school. For example, Rosa narrated the following,

Me han llegado con tarea que por ejemplo quieren diez palabras con la letra “h” (en español), o así, y entonces yo les digo las palabras. Pero el que está en sexto grado me trae una tarea en español y cuando les digo las palabras a veces no las entiende y ahí se las explico que quiere decir. Por ejemplo “higo” y no sabe lo que es. Y se confunde con “hielo” y yo le explico que no, que es una fruta. Y otro día tenía que hacer oraciones con las palabras, pero se confunde y por ejemplo yo le digo “el niño juega con la pelota” pero en vez de “jugar” pone “play” [My children bring homework for their Spanish class. For instance, they have to write 10 words with the letter “h” and I tell them those words. However, my son, who is in sixth grade, sometimes does not understand the words, and I have to explain the meaning. For example, he confuses higo [fig] with hielo [ice] and I explain that fig is a fruit. The other day he had to make sentences with the vocabulary words, but he was confused. When I said, “The boy plays with the ball.” Instead of jugar (for his Spanish course), he wrote “play”].

The Spanish difficulties of Rosa’s sixth grade son might give one the impression Rosa was inconsistent in her efforts to teach her son Spanish. However, this is an example of the push-pull of parent efforts and school pressures. The mothers were sincere and diligent in trying to teach their young children Spanish, but the children may forget much of what their mothers taught them because local public schools focus so much on high-stakes testing (Bussert-Webb, 2009) and English (Díaz, 2011). Parents may not continue to emphasize Spanish when the youth get older because the children try to succeed in school and assimilate into the U.S. culture (Rong & Preissle, 2009). Also, some local students have bought into the myth of English acquisition as their savior. In fact, one youth said his peer was dumb because the latter read books in Spanish (Díaz & Bussert-Webb, 2013).

State and U.S. curricular and language policies baffle us. We do not understand the logic of stripping children of their L1 in primary schools, but then requiring foreign language classes for older children. However, middle-school children, such as Rosa’s son, are required to take a foreign language in many U.S. schools. It is as if the foreign language requirements in secondary schools
are superficial. Instead, we should integrate language instruction (e.g., Spanish and other languages) back into language arts classes (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997).

**Brokering Practices**

When participants’ children knew enough English, they used their L1 and L2 FOK to translate English books into Spanish for their mothers. Silvia discussed how her children taught her L2 reading, “Cuando mis hijos crecieron me leían a mí (en inglés) y luego me explicaban lo que yo no entendía (en español)” [When my children got older they read to me (in English) and explained what I did not understand (in Spanish)]. Similarly, Ana tapped into her Spanish knowledge and her older bilingual son’s English to teach numeracy and literacy. When asked how she taught her children to read and write in Spanish, she stated that since she knew little English she would ask her older son for assistance when she was providing instruction to her younger child. She reinforced the numbers and letters in Spanish and once her younger son understood, her older child would teach the same concepts in English to his younger brother.

Often times, we think of literacy resources as print and non-print materials. However, children offer important literacy resources in brokering, or children translating into a second language for parents (Orellana, 2009). Mothers learning from their children relates to sociocultural theory because teaching is two-way; children learn from each other and their parents and vice-versa. This language brokering can help the youth’s self-esteem and to construct meaning during literacy practices (Baird, Kibler, & Palacios, 2015).

**Limitations**

Data collection presented several limitations. For example, we did not observe the mothers-children interactions during literacy practices, which may have yielded richer data. Next, we conducted only one interview per participant in the Este neighborhood and we did not ask mothers’ educational level. Knowing mothers’ educational level might have strengthened the study by providing a deeper context. Furthermore, the interviews and surveys were self-reports and mothers may have said or written things because they wanted to please us because we introduced ourselves as education professors. At the same time, participants may have withheld information because we did not build enough rapport with some of them.

Another limitation was the small number of participants who completed the surveys (six). More participation in the surveys could have provided additional data to confirm or disconfirm the literacy practices trends observed in the surveyed sample. Due to the small size of the sample, we do not intend to generalize our findings to all recent-immigrant Latino families. Including a comment section at the end of the surveys and having participants write language experience essays could have provided richer data. Finally, although all 14 participating mothers were recent-immigrant Latinas and had a low-income status, we did not interview participants from the Este neighborhood and we did not survey those from the Oeste neighborhood.

**Conclusions**

Several researchers have documented inadequate L1 school resources and subtractive language education policies for linguistically and culturally diverse children (García & DeNicolo, 2016; Valenzuela, 2010). Despite obstacles such as these, many of our Latina participants taught their
children how to read and write in Spanish. Other Latino/a parents taught Spanish reading to their children, despite school pressure to learn English only (Reyes, 2011). Mothers in the present study used their linguistic FOK (Smith, 2002) and created quality engagements to teach their children Spanish. These experiences are essential for children, who realize literacy support from their mothers (Klauda & Wigfield, 2012). From a Vygotskian perspective (Kozulin, 1986) the mothers expressed openness to learn from their children. They realized their children could be language brokers who could teach the mothers and family members L2 reading (Orellana, 2009).

Authentic print, electronic texts, visuals, and storytelling can also teach people how to read and to love reading (Smith, 2006). This is because we use all of the cueing systems, e.g., semantic, grapho-phonetic, syntactic, and pragmatic to make meaning (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 2005). As NLS scholars, we recognize these types of resources can help children to read and write (Heath, 1983). The teachers in Heath’s study could not reach and teach low-income students until they realized the non-traditional texts their pupils used were important to the children’s literacy development. After this, Heath’s participants began to incorporate these texts into their classroom literacy events and practices.

Latino parents have high expectations for their children and make huge efforts to help them succeed academically (Murillo, 2012). Their parenting strategies include teaching children to get along with others and to be respectful (Bussert-Webb, Díaz, & Yanez, 2017). These socialization skills are essential in school and life (Janus & Offord, 2007). Based on her literacy study of low-income Latino families, Caspe (2009) argued, “families are foundational for their young children's development, regardless of their culture, economic status, or education levels” (p. 321).

Arzubiaga, Rueda and Monzo (2002) critiqued a deficit perspective related to parents’ “inability to provide a home socialization process” (p. 232). Latino parents reported that some educators devalued the parents’ experiences and cultural beliefs (Hill & Torres, 2010), particularly parents who struggled with English (Murillo, 2012). Thus, teachers who assign English homework with little success may believe foreign-born Latino/a parents are uninvolved academically (Hill, 2009). This erroneous belief exists among some RGV Latino/a teachers. In a RGV study, Hernández (2003) found most teachers believed low-income Latino/a parents of their students were disinterested academically, but most parents believed the opposite. Some teachers may not realize the rich literacy practices and events that take place in homes, perhaps due to assumptions about culturally diverse families of poverty (Heath, 1983; Moll, 2015). Durand and Perez (2013) found the opposite of uninvolved parents. Every parent “provided direct instructional support with homework and engaged in school-based activities with children that involved reading, writing, crafts, games, and counting” (p. 62).

Considering mothers’ roles in their children’s L1 literacy skills, teachers should incorporate resource-based pedagogy (Moll, 2015), which values to prevent school and home dichotomies. Non-dominant students make progress in school when teachers incorporate their home and community literacy practices (Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005), including storytelling. This is preferred to imposing “question-and-answer test-like items” (Caspe, 2009, p. 321), which may present a stumbling block to Spanish-dominant Latino children. Thus, we recommend programs that empower Latino parents to teach their children their mother tongue, instead of family literacy programs that focus on parents’ L2 development (Peterson & Heywood, 2007). These programs should consider minority families’ challenges in navigating the dominant “culture of power”
(Delpit, 2006, p. 24). Our recommendations relate to the cultural mismatch between schools and non-dominant learners and families (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

Last, we have much to learn from the mothers’ imaginative strategies. Albert Einstein (1931) stated, “Imagination in more important than knowledge” (p. 97). Imagination, like language and literacy, may be a tool to resist some policymakers’ hegemonic (controlling) language and education policies (White-Kaulaiti, 2007). Heath (1983) and González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) led NLS and FOK researchers to reexamine home contexts in which literacy practices were vastly different from those valued and rewarded at school. After all, realizing differences as strengths takes imagination and affirmation of non-dominant perspectives. Highlighting the language and literacy practices of Latino/a parents can help us to imagine a brighter future in the Latino education crisis (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).
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