Bank Street Occasional Paper Series

Occasional Paper Series

Volume 2018
Number 39 *Supporting Young Children of Immigrants in PreK-3*

Article 10

April 2018

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Recommended Citation

Melzi, G., Schick, A., & Scarola, L. (2018). Building Bridges Between Home and School for Latinx Families of Preschool Children. *Occasional Paper Series, 2018* (39). DOI: https://doi.org/10.58295/2375-3668.1177

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Cover Page Footnote

This research was supported, in part, by grants from the Brady Educational Foundation and the Brooke Astor Foundation to the first and second authors.

This article is available in Occasional Paper Series: https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2018/iss39/10

Building Bridges Between Home and School for Latinx Families of Preschool Children

Gigliana Melzi, Adina R. Schick, and Lauren Scarola

All children, regardless of their backgrounds, enter the classroom environment with a set of cultural and communal resources known as funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Educators can support children's learning and achievement by incorporating these funds of knowledge – which include, for example, cultural and familial values and traditions, family activities, and home language – into classroom learning experiences. All too often, however, educators fail to take advantage of these resources, and instead draw on mainstream values, traditions, and practices that have historically been embedded into classroom culture and protocol. Even the most well-intentioned intervention programs seeking to support children from ethnoculturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds typically do so by offering parents training to help adapt their home activities and practices to align with those expected by and supported in U.S. schools.

We strongly believe that for intervention efforts to be effective, they must rely on an approach that acknowledges and integrates the cultural knowledge and resources of children and their families. Building solid home-school connections requires adopting a bidirectional approach – that is, initiatives should also target the school by bringing salient home and community practices into the classroom setting. In this essay, we share findings of an intervention program we developed and implemented to help teachers incorporate Latinx children's funds of knowledge into their everyday classroom routines. Our program trained preschool teachers to use cultural forms of oral language in the classroom as a way to support children's reading readiness skills.

The Importance of Home-School Connections

We begin with the story of Margarita, a four-year-old child from East Harlem who recently began preschool. Margarita lived with her parents, both of whom were immigrants from Puebla, Mexico. Margarita's mother described her as *una niña tranquila* (a well self-regulated child) who made friends easily and who readily adapted to diverse social situations. She was *obediente* (obedient), *cariñosa* (affectionate), and *occurrente* (fun and creative). Margarita's mother also shared that Margarita was muy platicadora (quite chatty), but mostly around speakers of Spanish, her home language. As she was just beginning to

learn English, she was a bit shy among English speakers. As we listened to Margarita's mother describe her daughter, it was evident that she was really proud of the way her daughter was developing.

The way Margarita's mother described her daughter was in contrast with the way her teacher described her. While Margarita's teacher was impressed by her self-regulation and social skills, and also noted her love for stories, she was concerned that Margarita recognized few letters in the alphabet and could not identify all the numbers between 1 and 10. Although Margarita could write the letter M, her teacher was worried that Margarita could not write any other letters in her name and did not show much interest in learning them. The teacher was surprised that Margarita did not draw or color much, as this was the favorite activity of most children in the class. So, while Margarita's teacher cared deeply about her and recognized her student's well-developed socio-emotional skills, her attention was focused on Margarita's less developed literacy and numeracy skills.

The teacher's expectations of what skills are important to bring into the classroom are endemic to the value the U.S. educational system places on a predetermined set of pre-academic skills over the strengths that individual children bring, especially children from immigrant, ethnoculturally, and linguistically diverse communities. The negative perceptions that result when children do not meet these expectations are exacerbated by the negative discourses around immigrants and immigration in the U.S., as well as by the deficit lens with which our society has historically viewed children from non-English speaking, immigrant, and low-income homes.

But the problem is more complex than failing to notice individual children's strengths. Early childhood educators, like Margarita's teacher, are trained to rely on cultural and linguistic continuities between the home and the school to support children's learning. However, these cultural and linguistic connections favor monolingual, English-speaking, middle-class White families.

Preschool teachers often encourage parents to look for opportunities to make connections between oral language and literacy within their everyday home life as a way to support early reading. Teachers might suggest to parents, for example, that when taking their child to the local supermarket to buy groceries (e.g., eggs), they should point to written signs to encourage the child to make connections between oral and written language, thereby supporting emergent literacy skills. When Margarita goes grocery shopping with her mother, she goes to buy "huevos," but sees a sign that spells "eggs." For Margarita, a different set of opportunities are afforded through this experience (e.g., that there are two different words for one concept), but these connections are not the ones encouraged or used as a foundation for the child's learning at school.

Current pedagogical practices are not designed to take full advantage of the rich cultural and linguistic experiences of children from immigrant and ethnoculturally different families. As a consequence, the default practice is to create programs that encourage Latinx families to change their practices and align them with those expected and valued by the U.S. educational system (Sheridan & Kim, 2015).

One way in which educational policies have attempted to bridge home and school disconnects for ethnoculturally and linguistically diverse children is to encourage family engagement. Family (or parental) engagement is understood as the multiple ways parents and other key family members support children's learning and development across home and school settings. Empirical evidence shows that high levels of family engagement support children's academic achievement and act as a protective factor against the negative effects of risks, such as living in poverty. As a consequence, many efforts at the national and state levels have been aimed at increasing families' participation in the activities shown to support children's academic success.

The New York City Department of Education, for example, has in recent years renewed its commitment to strengthening family engagement in children's schooling by creating welcoming environments at schools and district offices, allotting weekly times when teachers can meet with parents, having student-led parent-teacher conferences, organizing parent forums or inviting parents to curriculum committees, and rolling out initiatives to encourage parents from diverse language backgrounds to run for council seats. Though initiatives like these are clearly valuable, often underlying these efforts is the idea that there is one path to effective involvement: bringing families into the school.

While these efforts have been met with some success with regards to building teacher-parent communication and educating parents about school expectations, they fail to recognize that school-based activities, even those that are implemented in the home setting (e.g., increasing reading to children), might not be effective for all families. In fact, for Margarita's family and other immigrant families like hers, working multiple jobs to make ends meet and having long and inflexible work hours makes it difficult for parents to attend school events or meetings. Moreover, parents who are not documented might be reluctant to get involved in any leadership roles, as they experience fear of being identified, apprehended, and subsequently deported, especially in the current political climate.

These realities are further complicated by numerous other factors, such as language barriers, lack of familiarity with U.S. schools, and cultural differences in expectations about roles. Thus, participating in these and other recommended school-based practices are typically more challenging and require greater

effort for families like Margarita's than for families in middle-income communities. To strengthen home-school connections, especially for low-income, immigrant, and Latinx families, efforts must go beyond encouraging parents to participate in school and school-like activities.

Latinx Parents' Engagement in Their Children's Schooling

Research efforts employing sociocultural approaches have revealed the unique ways low-income Latinx families engage in their children's schooling (Delgado-Gaitán, 2004; Durand, 2011). In two recent investigations to uncover culturally relevant but generally overlooked engagement practices, we identified four components of family engagement unique to low-income Latinx families (McWayne, Melzi, Schick, Kennedy, & Mundt, 2013; McWayne & Melzi, 2014). Latinx parents' home-based involvement (typically captured among other cultural groups with a single component focused on ways of supporting pre-academic skills), was represented across three distinct components of engagement, and their school-based engagement was represented by one component, highlighting the importance of home-based engagement for Latinx families relative to their school-based engagement. These three home-based engagement components – foundational, supplemental, and future-oriented teaching – reflect both the cultural values and socio-economic realities of U.S. Latinx families from low-income communities. For instance, the foundational education dimension reflects the dual focus of the Spanish term *educación* (education) and cultural concept of being *bien educado* (well educated). Rather than seeing education as solely based on academics, *educación* and, in turn, foundational education, acknowledges both socio-emotional and basic academic skills as being important, but places higher value on socio-emotional abilities, as Margarita's parents do.

The supplemental educational dimension is in line with more mainstream and expected forms of engagement, such as reading with children and visiting libraries and museums. Finally, the future-oriented teaching dimension involves talking with children about the importance of education as a way to get ahead and *"ir por el buen camino"* (be on the right path). Thus, the unique combination of economic, cultural, and linguistic factors shapes the ways in which parents encourage and support their children's learning and educational success.

Recognizing and capitalizing on what parents do rather than on what they fail to do is a critical step in building meaningful home-school connections. We must also incorporate the knowledge, expertise, and traditions that children like Margarita and her family have into the classrooms, and do so in an authentic, integrated manner (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Indeed, there is increasing empirical

evidence showing that doing just that – bringing children's home knowledge and experiences into the classroom – is an effective way to encourage their learning (Rodríguez, 2013).

Capitalizing on Families' Funds of Knowledge

Luis Moll and his colleagues (1992, 2005) were among the first to propose a "funds of knowledge" approach to inform the development of classroom curricula. Their approach acknowledges that homes and communities "contain ample cultural and cognitive sources with great potential utility for classroom instruction" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 2005, p. 75). Funds of knowledge encompass a family's knowledge and expertise developed to function within their local milieu. By appreciating, understanding, and using the knowledge already available to students in both the home and the community, teachers can help establish meaningful and productive connections between this knowledge and the classroom curriculum. Often, however, educators neglect to build on children's funds of knowledge because they are unaware of these cultural and cognitive resources. Moreover, even when educators are eager and want to capitalize on children's funds of knowledge, they find few resources that model how to do so in an effective manner.

To fill this gap, we developed an intervention program that trains teachers of Latinx preschoolers to build on the cultural funds of knowledge the children bring into the classroom. *Reading Success Using Co-Constructive Elaborative Storytelling Strategies* (Melzi, Schick, & Scarola, 2017) supports young children's reading readiness by capitalizing on Latinx families' oral storytelling practices. The program also highlights the foundational role that oral language plays in children's reading development, especially higher-order reading skills such as vocabulary and comprehension.

Despite its increasing broadness, much of the research on young children's reading readiness has focused on the home literacy environment, especially caregiver-child print-related activities during the preschool years. As low-income Latinx families tend to engage in these practices less frequently than their more affluent and White counterparts, researchers have suggested a link between a more "impoverished" home literacy environment and children's poor preparedness for formal schooling (Padilla, Cabrera & West, 2017). Yet, whereas they might have less access to print at home, low-income Latinx children like Margarita are often exposed to rich extended discourse, another important predictor of reading and overall school success.

Among the forms of oral discourse shared in Latinx families are reminiscing about past experiences, personal stories that include *consejos* (advice), and stories marked by *dichos* or traditional sayings, such as

"Más sabe el Diablo por viejo que por Diablo" [The Devil knows more because he is old, not because he is the Devil], connoting that wisdom comes with age. *Dar consejos* or giving advice is a predominant oral practice that represents "a cultural dimension of communication sparked with emotional empathy and compassion, as well as familial expectations and inspiration" (Delgado-Gaitán, 1994, p. 300).

In Latinx communities, caregivers, and in particular mothers, use family and personal stories, *dichos* and *consejos* to transmit cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes from one generation to the next (Cortez, 2008; Delgado-Gaitán, 1994; Espinoza-Herald, 2007; Sánchez, Plata, Grosso, & Leird, 2010). The sharing of these oral forms of discourse serves to help caregivers and children bond, but at the same time encourages children to learn to think critically and make independent decisions (Delgado-Gaitán, 1994), both of which are integral skills to preschoolers' development and continued school success.

Using R-SUCCESS in the Classroom

Our program, Reading Success Using Co-Constructive Elaborative Storytelling Strategies (R-SUCCESS), draws on these oral discourse practices by asking teachers to incorporate oral storytelling into classroom circle-time routines as a supplement to their book reading activities. It relies on the assumption that successful reading is built upon a strong oral language foundation that underscores that reading is about the creation of meaning (Snow & Matthews, 2016). To develop R-SUCCESS, we began by holding focus groups with teachers and parents in a partnering preschool located in a low-income Latinx immigrant community.

Although the majority of the teachers were of Latinx background, 80 percent indicated that they did not incorporate oral storytelling into their classroom routines. By contrast, and as expected, Latinx parents discussed their use of oral practices at home with their children, including *dichos y refranes* (sayings and proverbs) to impart knowledge, to teach, and to advise, and *cuentos e historias* (tales and stories) to teach children about life, to entertain them, and to reminisce about life in el pueblo (the village). The prevalence of these oral practices was then corroborated during follow-up home visits with a subgroup of the parents.

The structure of the storytelling in R-SUCCESS follows that of classroom book sharing. It comprises a pre-telling segment in which teachers build background knowledge and vocabulary, a telling segment in which teachers share the story with the children, and a post-telling segment in which teachers support children's comprehension and reflection of the story. Teachers are encouraged to seek parents'

assistance in selecting *dichos, consejos, cuentos,* and other forms of discourse on which to base the story to be shared with the class. During their training, teachers are provided with models of how to elicit information from families about common practices in their home or lessons they impart to their children. In addition, teachers have access to sample stories that have been collected from community members and are also given resources to help them find additional stories that draw on these practices or lessons.

R-SUCCESS was first implemented with preschool teachers who were asked to incorporate it into their classroom circle time routines, twice a week. Teachers met weekly with a teacher coach over a three-month period to learn the co-constructive elaborative storytelling strategies. After completing the training, teachers demonstrated their acquisition of these techniques by modeling an oral story with their classroom children.

Teachers who participated in the first waves of R-SUCCESS were appreciative of the resources that were provided to them, particularly a list of common *dichos* and sample stories, which facilitated the creation of the stories they used in their classrooms. At the same time, teachers went beyond the resources that were provided to them and independently sought out stories that matched their teaching units, either by eliciting stories from parents or, more commonly, through internet searches. At the end of the school year, teachers reported feeling better equipped to bridge home-school connections. Results of teacher surveys also showed not only that children were highly engaged in the storytelling routines, but that teachers saw an increase in the children's higher order literacy skills.

Teacher reports were supported by our initial direct assessments of children's language and literacy skills. For example, findings of an initial study comparing children in R-SUCCESS classrooms to children in business-as-usual classrooms at the same school demonstrated that children in R-SUCCESS classrooms had more advanced narrative skill, with significantly higher conversational autonomy, story grammar, and literate language scores at the end of the preschool year (Melzi, Schick, & Scarola, 2017). Results of a second study comparing children in R-SUCCESS classrooms to children in classrooms in which teachers were trained using Dialogic Reading strategies (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003) showed that R-SUCCESS was as effective as Dialogic Reading in supporting low-income Latinx children's receptive, expressive, and academic language (as measured by vocabulary diversity, conversational autonomy, story grammar, and literate language). R-SUCCESS was more effective in supporting children's overall ability to engage in successful storytelling (Melzi, Schick, & Scarola, 2017). Results of a third study, which focused solely on English-speaking Latinx children, showed that

children in R-SUCCESS classrooms produced more coherent and contextualized narratives than children in the Dialogic Reading classrooms. In addition, results confirmed prior findings documenting that R-SUCCESS supported children's vocabulary diversity to the same extent as Dialogic Reading. Furthermore, children in R-SUCCESS classrooms tended to use more unique sophisticated language than children in Dialogic Reading classrooms (Schick, Wuest, Scarola, & Melzi, 2017).

As early childhood programs in low-income communities often lack the funding and resources necessary to provide teachers with high-quality training or coaching, in our most recent research efforts with R-SUCCESS we have trained teachers using an engaging web-based platform and tested whether training using a series of animated videos was as effective as training with an individualized in-person coach. Results of these studies showed that our web-based training was as supportive of teachers' use of oral storytelling in terms of number and types of stories told and richness of discourse used as the in-person training (Melzi, Schick, Schneebaum, & Scarola, 2017; Schick, Schneebaum, Scarola, Petrolekas, & Melzi, 2017). These findings have led to a number of initiatives to scale-up the R-SUCCESS intervention, including an adaption for teachers of African-heritage preschoolers and for teachers of Latinx and African-heritage children in kindergarten and first grade classrooms.

Making Difference a Source of Strength

Strengthening the connections between families and schools has a significant effect on children's learning success. For low-income Latinx families like Margarita's, the combination of socio-economic, cultural, and language factors leads to a unique set of knowledge and family engagement practices that are largely invisible to teachers in U.S. schools. We must find ways to train educators to understand, value, and be prepared to make use of differences without placing value-laden judgments on existing practices. Culturally responsive educational efforts, such as those that capitalize on families' funds of knowledge and practices, build meaningful bridges between teachers and parents as they partner in their work of educating children. If these funds of knowledge are not acknowledged and utilized, even the most well-intentioned efforts will become prescriptive, and we will continue to recreate the educational conditions that marginalize children from immigrant, ethnoculturally and linguistically diverse, low-income communities. In doing so, we will fail in our efforts to provide all children with enriching educational experiences.

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Lauren Scarola serves as the Project Manager for the Latino Family Engagement and Language Development lab (L-FELD) at New York University. Currently, she coordinates the implementation of a culturally salient oral storytelling intervention in preschool classrooms across New York City. She holds a master's degree in Human Development and Social Intervention from New York University.