
Mi Escuela es Su Escuela,
Teachers and Parents as Invested and Equal Partners
for the Education of Language-Minority Students

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Abstract

The changing demographics in schools mandate that teachers acquire new skills to successfully negotiate with parents who have different cultural assumptions and expectations from schools and teachers. This paper describes a literacy project that evolved from a course requirement in an add-on English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement program. It delineates the process through which this project, which revolved around bookmaking of personal narratives, forged a home-school partnership within the context of transformative education. It shows how a teacher education program transformed negative attitudes and stereotypes towards “strangers or foreigners” into good will towards neighbors through a successful and rewarding literacy partnership project.

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Mi escuela es su escuela means my school is your school, reflective of teachers and parents’ partnership and shared ownership of the bookmaking project described in this paper. Inspired by the old Mexican adage, *Mi casa es su casa*, it conveys the same heartfelt offer and invitation for guests to feel at home; in this case, for parents to develop a sense of ownership of the school where they know their voices will be heard, *revelando voces calladas*. Through the suggestive power of words that go beyond the lexical meanings, participants of this bookmaking project hoped to evoke similar community spirit and familial values associated with the aphorism.

Parent involvement in their children’s education has been a strong indicator of students’ academic success (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein et al., 1999; Fashola et al., 1999; Rosenthal & Sawyers, 1996; Wlazlinski, 1998), yet it is sorely untapped. A review of 49 studies of parent involvement programs reported several benefits which include “higher grades and test scores, long-term academic achievement, positive attitudes and behavior, more successful programs, and more effective schools” (Henderson, 1988, p. 60). The special role of parents in the academic success of their children is recognized by the government and provisions for their involvement are legislated. For instance, government publications resulting from the recently passed No Child Left Behind legislation provide specific information about how parents can become involved in the education of their children and provide parent involvement resources. Also, important home-school connection resources are available at <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu>

for resources and information on the education of limited English proficient (LEP) students and <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OELA/techasst.html> for technical assistance. These resources endorse bilingual forums where schools can inform parents of their rights and responsibilities and where parents can make suggestions and recommendations regarding their child's education.

Several studies recommended ways of increasing parental involvement (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Ribas, 1998; Rosenthal & Sawyer, 1996; Smrekar & Vogle-Cohen, 2001). In the four-year Carpenteria study, Delgado-Gaitan (1991) found that unconventional ways of involving parents in the schooling of their children were more successful than conventional ways of asking parents to visit the school to talk about their children's progress or bad behavior. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) wrote about the Preschool Program where the teacher used an unconventional way to bridge the home-school gap by asking parents to assist her in planning and selecting activities for her students. She found that the parents became more involved and committed to their children's education because they had personal investment in the education process. Chavez (2003) wrote that involving parents in the schools must go beyond "more than a meeting to share information... The process must respect and welcome what families perceive to be valid educational and social needs. Educators must provide the forums for dialogue and a genuine listening to parents and their concern" (p.1). Unfortunately, the partnership between teachers and parents is not, however, formed without opposition from either party. There is a long history of adversarial relationships between parents and teachers from America's colonial period to the present. While schools declared parents as unfit to provide moral discipline and literacy training, parents accused teachers of being incompetent (Tyack, 1967).

Similarly underscored in home-school partnership studies is the importance of teacher preparation on parent involvement. In a study conducted by Tichenor (1998) on pre-service teachers' attitude towards parental involvement, she found that the majority of her participants felt that education majors should be required to take at least one parent involvement course, and programs should do a better job of teaching students how to design and implement parent involvement programs. Lazar and Slostad (1999) argued that pre-service programs for new teachers do not include trainings on parental involvement. Consequently, they enter school without knowing how to relate to parents as education partners. This problem becomes more complicated when teachers do not have training or experience with racial, ethnic, or language group different from their own.

This paper describes a literacy project that evolved from a course requirement in an add-on ESL endorsement program. It delineates the process through which this project, which revolved around bookmaking of personal narratives, forged a home-school partnership within the context of transformative education. It shows how a teacher education program transformed negative attitudes and stereotypes towards "strangers or foreigners" into good will towards neighbors through a successful and rewarding literacy partnership project. Finally, as this paper describes the process in order to inform similar initiatives, it also describes the products of such partnership.

Rationale for the Home-School Literacy Project

Indisputably, there is a critical need for pre-kindergarten through to 12th grade (P-12) teachers to learn new skills to effectively deal with the changing school demographics. By 2060, it is predicted that 42% of our school children will come from language-minority groups. In fact,

the Bureau of the Census predicts that in 2030, one in four children will be Hispanic. Consequently, parent demographics change as well. This means that schools have to make provisions for the needs of linguistic minority parents who may have different sets of cultural assumptions about education as well as expectations from teachers. The "business as usual" attitude no longer holds. New skills from training in cross-cultural understanding, intercultural sensitivity, and communication in order to negotiate and mediate intercultural conflicts have to be acquired before teachers can become cultural bridge persons. Cummins (1996) exhorted that it is not enough to learn new instructional approaches and best practices; what is "fundamental is the recognition that human relationships are central to effective instruction" (p. 73). In the research of Franquiz and de la Luz Reyes (1998), successful teachers shared a common quality, they "are not paralyzed by their own monolingualism" (p. 217). Lack of a common language between homes and the school must not prevent parents and teachers from communicating. The opportunity to know and understand the language-minority group by the general society and vice versa must be created. This is important for academic and social success of English language learners (ELLs). After all, schooling does not happen in a vacuum. It is set in a sociopolitical context, and as such, the attitude of the general community towards language minority groups matters (Nieto, 2000).

Moll (1992) has written extensively about rich resources or funds of knowledge that should be used to design curriculum that values and validates the rich backgrounds children bring into the classrooms. Such funds of knowledge come from the children's lived experiences, those of their parents, and their communities. Unfortunately, these funds of knowledge remain untapped as many school curricula across the nation have not been multiculturalized. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) wrote about schools implementing exclusionary activities that require specific cultural knowledge and behaviors, but not making them explicit to those who do not have the same cultural knowledge. Many teachers decry the lack of involvement of language minority parents; what they fail to recognize is that home and school for language minority families are worlds apart. Trumball et al. (2001) argued that, "Social and cultural differences between home and school are rarely investigated as a reason for lower involvement, unless they are invoked as a source of deficiency in parenting" (p.32).

My interest in implementing this project grew out of my own experience as an ESL teacher educator and as Director of an ESL teacher training program. I have been teaching the three-course ESOL endorsement sequence for the last seven years in Georgia. Currently, I teach in the School of Education and Human Sciences (CSEHS) of Berry College, a private comprehensive liberal arts school with a strong community service focus, in Floyd County, 56 miles northwest of Atlanta. The issue of poor, if not lack of, participation from language minority parents in the educative process is as current and critical as it was seven years ago.

As it is with the rest of the nation, Georgia reported a 670.7% growth from 1992-2002 in LEP students in kindergarten to 12th grade. Floyd County alone has seen a steady rise in the Hispanic population, which increased by 500% from 1990 to 2001. These new residents came from Mexico, Guatemala, California, and Texas to work in Rome City's poultry processing plants and carpet factories. Children who are non-English speaking or low English proficient are becoming increasingly visible in area schools. A school principal describes how in her school the need for a full time ESOL teacher rose from one to two and a half time teachers (from 1 FTE to 2 1/2 FTE) within one year.

Results of a survey given to 890 Georgia teachers show that teachers are in urgent need of strategies to effectively communicate with parents of ELLs (Wlazlinski, 2000). Seventy eight percent said that they would like to learn how to communicate with ESL parents. If schools and

homes cannot work together, the number of disempowered teachers, parents, and students will rise, and schools will be less adequate to serve as agents of change. Long-term negative consequences can be expected such as children who are socially and academically lost in the classrooms, increased student attrition, morale problems, uninformed and disconnected parents, and high rate of teacher attrition (Cummins, 1994; Lucas et al., 1990; Moll, 1992; Valdes, 2001; Wong Fillmore, 1991).

Consequently, I raised several research questions: What is it that I can do, both programmatic and curricular, to assist in creating a partnership between homes and schools? What activities will develop in the parents a sense of belonging to the school? What will promote change in the attitudes of my students? If these teachers were to be prepared for the changing school demographics, I wanted them to question taken-for-granted assumptions and develop interests in learning about the culture and language of their ESL students and their parents. This provided the impetus for the bookmaking project in life histories. It aimed to serve various functions: (1) teachers would learn to work with parents; (2) teachers and parents would cease to be threatening strangers as they get to know each other through working and sharing their life histories together; (3) parents and children would participate in literacy activities in English, Spanish, or both; and (4) compiled life histories would provide a connection between past and present, more important, between generations.

Context of the Home-School Literacy Project

In spring 2001, I offered seven teachers who were taking my Methods of Teaching English in ESL and Bilingual Settings course to participate in a home-school bookmaking project for a grade. They were teachers in a local elementary school (with 37% Mexican and Guatemalan, and 4% Chinese and East Indian students), and they expressed skepticism over the parent involvement requirement of the course because of parents' poor participation in school programs. These teachers were seriously concerned about what they perceived as lack of interest in and support for education by parents of ESL students. Specifically, this lack of parent participation equated to not showing up at parent-teacher conferences, not volunteering in school, not responding to school notices, and not helping with homework.

Please tell me what to do. We gave out awards to honor ESOL students who did well for the year, and my students and their parents didn't show up -- not even for awards. They are not interested. I don't understand. (personal communications with a 3rd grade teacher)

"I've tried sending letters home telling parents of parent-teacher conferences or events in my school, but they never show up!" complained one teacher. Another, expressed disbelief with a hint of sarcasm,

Parents show up one hour late with their younger children—the whole family comes, you know. We just don't have enough chairs! or They didn't go to school, so school is not important to them. To them, we are just babysitters for their children. (personal communications with teacher)

One teacher complained at what she perceived as lack of concern, "They work at different shifts, so don't count on them to come to meetings. They won't come.... they just work!" One teacher offered a solution, "Serve food and they will come."

Such comments are disconcerting. They sound harsh and mean-spirited; however, some are genuine cries for help. They suggest an underlying fear of the unfamiliar and frustration over behavior teachers cannot comprehend. Interestingly, while teachers regard linguistic minority

parents as disinterested and unsupportive of teachers, parents feel disenfranchised by teachers who thoughtlessly send notes home only in English.

Believing that this project was a great opportunity for self and social transformation (Wink, 2000) to teachers and families and that it would prove to my students that home-school collaboration could be meaningful, I offered to become a co-participant myself. Three teachers agreed to be co-participants. To these teachers I boldly promised that if we worked together, we could successfully entice some parents to partner with us, that we could make them feel welcomed, and that we could make them believe in themselves as partners in education. This began an action research project—the process of acknowledging a need or problem, exploring the problem, and planning a possible course of action (Johnson, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

Informed by the literature on transformative education, the bookmaking project was designed to encourage all participants to embark on a journey of becoming and realization, and of transformations and growth. It prompted action in the teachers to step out of their comfort zones, explore possibilities, reflect on them, and learn from their experiences in order to connect their teaching and learning with their students' homes and communities (Wink, 2000).

The work of McCaleb (1997) which focused on helping educators build community and build books inspired this project. McCaleb (1997) argued that "classroom teachers can help foster feelings of admiration and respect in their students by promoting activities such as book development in which parents can share their experiences" (p. 109). My assumption was that with a deeper sensitivity, understanding, and appreciation of diverse cultures resulting from dialogues and working together, teachers would restructure the teaching and learning process while parents gained confidence in their important role in educating their children. Many of our language-minority parents and children have tragic, horrible things happen to them before and after they got to the U.S. Many, being dislocated, do not know how to navigate the system. They knock at doors that stay shut or continue to push revolving doors that do not stop to let them in; it is no wonder that they feel, and later believe they are social outcasts.

Teachers have critical roles to play in their schools and in their communities. They can open doors of access to community resources, to schools, and to possibilities. Teachers can design course work and choose materials that will allow their students to locate their experiences in the school curriculum. They can include their students' language and cultural heritage in their lessons, so students feel validated as persons. Being empowered, teachers should be able to talk to their students and their families about respect, change, and the power of change. Nieto (2002) recommended Freire's perspective (1970) "that teachers need to become students just as students need to become teachers in order for education to become reciprocal and empowering for both" (p.126). Just as I recognize that teachers and students can learn from each other, parents are very important teachers as well. They can teach teachers and students about survival. In an unfamiliar surrounding, unable to communicate, suffering from the loss of the homeland, and a changed socioeconomic status, these parents may appear inadequate and less able even to their own children. McCaleb (1997) wrote, "Children need to know that their parents are problem solvers. They need to hear about their struggles and to find out what knowledge and reasoning process their parents used to solve a problem. In this way, they can gain greater admiration and respect for their parents, even though their parents had little formal schooling" (pp.108-109). Teachers can honor these parents and their families by providing the space for all voices to be heard. This is empowering.

Similar studies affirmed the significance of family literacy activities and trust-building activities in promoting collaboration among teachers, minority parents and students, and the general community (Ada & Campoy, 1998; Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001). Such collaboration resulted in the empowerment of teachers, parents, and students (Auerbach, 1990; Cummins, 1989; Heath, 1983; Giroux, 1983; Freire, 1970, 1973).

The project was designed to be transformative; it challenged participants to open their minds to the full range of possibilities (Ayers 1998). Participants had to think, analyze, and understand not only what they think and what they do, but also to understand why others think and act differently from them (Corson, 1993; Cummins, 1995; Darder, 1995). Finally, it emphasized the deep connection of participants' identity to their language and culture (Nieto, 1996; Walsh, 1995). This project encouraged participants to embrace the centrality of language and culture to the essence of who they are as they were all encouraged to speak, write, and draw in whatever language they were comfortable in. Participants encouraged each other to act on their beliefs and make them a reality. Consequently, this project took on some of the characteristics of an action research.

Methodology

Participants

Seven teachers, who were enrolled in my course, Methods of Teaching in ESL and Bilingual Settings, participated in the initial planning stage of this home-school partnership literacy project. However, only three teachers committed to completing this project: a science 6th-grade male teacher, a pre-k female teacher and a 3rd-grade female teacher. All teachers averaged seven years of teaching. I took a leadership role in the planning phase, but gradually eased into a less active role of a mentor during the implementation phase. All teachers planned with me, but one took a more active role. The other two chose to focus on implementing the plan.

Not all parents who agreed to participate came and only four completed their narratives. Two parents were from Mexico and two from Guatemala. One parent had one child while the others had two or three children each. The program started with seven children. This number grew to 17 as friends of the children heard of the project and asked their ESL teacher, if they could participate. Since the project promoted literacy skills in ESL students, all the participants, parents, teachers, and I agreed that all the children who would like to participate should be allowed to join the activities.

Procedures

Agreeing about the importance of parents getting involved in the education of their children was easy; it was how to get them involved and how to keep them involved that posed challenges. Guided by action research principles, teachers and I did much pre-planning and we observed and noted parents' and students' reactions to the activities we had scheduled. After each session, we shared our observation, reflected, and made changes, if necessary, in the approaches we took that day. For instance, when children did not want to write, we experimented with writing materials and this change produced exciting writing samples. When a mother failed to attend one day, we did not leave it to chance, one teacher made a phone call and also sent a letter in Spanish that we missed her. If we assumed that this was typical

behavior, we would not know that she did not have transportation to get to the school. This led us to call the night before a meeting to find out if a ride was available. On another occasion, we found out that the father's work shift was changed, so we encouraged him to continue his story at home after work.

Paving the Way – Pre-planning

The teachers and I adopted the theme *Mi Escuela es su Escuela* (My School is your School), reflecting partnership and shared ownership. A teacher and I crafted an invitation letter in English informing the parents of *Mi Escuela es su Escuela* as a program for parents and children to improve their reading and writing. We did not specify which language. This letter was translated into Spanish by a Puerto Rican parent who originally agreed to participate, but relocated four days before *mi escuela* began. The letter included a statement, which specifically stated that the meetings would be private and no public officials would be present. This was important to allay fears of undocumented parents that they could be reported. We added that there would be fresh baked pastries and drinks for everybody, and that a bilingual interpreter would be present at all meetings. We stressed the importance of parents' commitment to attend all the meetings. This letter described that teachers and an interpreter would help parents and children write stories in Spanish and English. Participating teachers then sent the letters home with ESL students who were instructed to bring the letters back after their parents had signed them. Two parents from the pre-k teacher responded positively, two from the 2nd-grade teacher and three from the 6th-grade teacher. In an attempt to increase parent participation, another set of Spanish letters was sent home. The number increased by three.

Once teachers and I identified parent-participants, we polled them through a survey on their most conducive times and dates. The parents' choice, which was after-school hours was not honored because of teachers' family commitments. Four parents, the teachers, and I agreed to meet from 9:30 to 12:30 a.m. on Tuesdays for three months in the school's media center. The Principal allowed the teachers to make arrangements to have colleagues teach their classes while they attended the sessions.

Before the first meeting with the parents, we set the parameters for our collaboration. We all agreed that a comfortable and respectful relationship should be established first before we could start with the bookmaking activity. I proposed the agenda for the first meeting and encouraged teachers' feedback.

- Introduce the goal of this project, *Mi Escuela es su Escuela*, which is to promote family literacy activities, through bookmaking. In our project, parents, children and teachers will work together in *reading* Spanish and English story books, *sharing* their stories about their lives in their home country, why and how they came to America, family heritage and tradition, their old home and community or neighborhood and *writing* about these.
- We will make a memory book of personal narratives.
- Parents will tell their stories and a Spanish translator and the teachers will help with writing the stories if the parents wish.
- The bilingual community liaison would help with translation.

- Immigrant stories will be read and shared: I will start with Amy Hest's *When Jessie Came across the Sea* to start them walking down the memory lane.
- We will give bilingual storybooks to parents and children as tokens of appreciation for participation in the project.

Mi Escuela es su Escuela started the first Tuesday in February. On the eve of our first session, the teachers called up the parents to make sure they remembered our session. I have to mention here that a professional development grant from the provost office paid for materials used in the project and printing cost of the book we made.

The First Encounter

At 8 o'clock in the morning, I was already in the Media Center to help set up the materials for our meeting. The teachers and I waited with great anticipation; we worried about parents changing their minds and choosing not to show up. Then at 9:20, a father and three mothers walked in at close intervals. The teachers, the bilingual liaison from Mexico, and I welcomed and talked with the parents. Two parents spoke fairly good English, and one did not speak English at all. We invited them to have some snacks with their children who were brought in to the media center by their teachers. After this, the teachers invited the parents to sit down.

I started the session by introducing myself, then explaining the objectives, and describing how the project would benefit everybody. The bilingual liaison translated to Spanish. I reassured them that if their stories were told, the community would know why they left their country and what they sacrificed by coming to the U.S. I described how many immigrant parents bemoan the lack of communication between themselves and their adolescent children who have grown up in the U.S. I added that parents yearn to reach them, but their children not only do not understand them, but they also know little about their country of origin. The liaison picked up from where I left off and continued to explain to the parents in Spanish. The parents agreed earnestly that they would like the children to be proud of them and not forget where they came from.

The father, who was 32 years old, worked in the dyeing department of a local carpet mill. One mother, about 35 years old, did not speak English and did not work. The other mother spoke fairly good English, was born in California, and had to move around constantly until she was 15; she also worked in the carpet mill. The remaining parent said she worked in the poultry processing plant. As the parents got to know everybody at the table, they became more relaxed; gradually, our conversation became more animated. Then, one of the mothers teased that it was not fair to share their stories without me sharing mine. Everybody was smiling at this time, waiting for my reaction. I smiled. Addressing this mother, I asked, "What do you want to know?" Showing real interest, she asked me about my immigrant experience. "Did you face discrimination?" "Why did you come to the U.S.?" "How long have you been in Georgia?" The other parent asked, "Was it difficult to study in America?" and "How did you learn to speak English so well?" were some of the questions.

I happily answered their questions. Then, I began to elaborate on the reading component of the project. The bilingual liaison translated what I said, "We will send home bilingual books which you and your children will read. We chose these books because the teachers could have the English translation while they had the Spanish translation." The books were Alma Flor Ada's *Amigos, Friends; I don't Want to Melt, No Quiero derretirme! How Happy I would be, Me Gustaria Tener; El Canto del Mosquito, The Song of the Teeny-Tiny Mosquito; Rosa Alada, A Rose with Wings; How the Rainbow Came to Be, Como Nacio el Arco Iris; Who*

is *Afraid of Ghosts, El Susto de los Fantasmas*, and so on. The teachers handed out the books to the parents and children who quickly checked them out. Then we moved on to explaining the writing activity.

A Children's Book about a Story of Immigration to Promote Dialogue and Writing

One of the teachers introduced *When Jessie Came across the Sea* by Amy Hest and held it for everyone to see. Following along, she leafed through the pages as the bilingual liaison read her Spanish translation of the book to parents and children. Shortly after, another teacher read the book in English. All the parents understood that the book was about Jessie, a 13-year old girl who experienced the pain of being uprooted.

Jessie left her homeland and came to America on a big boat. Separated from her grandmother, her only family since her mother passed away, she felt fear, sadness, and loneliness. Day after day, she worked hard, so she could save enough money to pay for her grandmother's voyage to America. (p.#)

After the story was read, we talked about the sadness of leaving home, the grief of disorientation in an unfamiliar country, the fear of not being able to fit in and not having friends, the loss of identity, the uncertainty of maintaining the old language and culture, the insecurity of not being able to speak the new language, and the search for happiness and security in the new country. We all brainstormed and talked about topics the parents could write about. I asked them about their concerns. All the parents expressed inadequacy because of their English. All of them, however, would like the best for their children. The first session ended on a high note. Everybody promised to be back the following week.

Participants' Past and Present Coming Together, Reviving the Spirit

In the following sessions, more autobiographical stories evoked silenced memories in the participants. For example, we read in both English and Spanish *Momma, Where Are You From?* by Marie Bradby *Quilted Landscape* by Yale Strom, *En mi Familia* by Carmen Lomas Garza, and *Honoring our Ancestors* edited by Harriett Rohmer. Teachers and parents decided to begin to write. After 20 minutes, one of the teachers read his personal narrative. He digressed from the text as he read and interjected some other events in his life. His life history generated much interest in the parents. Feeling comfortable, the parents asked several questions. A lively discussion ensued. Hence, the teacher's story not only served as a writing model to parents but it also served as an icebreaker. The excerpt of the teacher's story follows:

My Autobiography

My name is Stephen Leon Price and my ancestors came from Europe. Mary Johnston described one of my early ancestors, the first Lord Baltimore (George Calvert, c. 1580-1632) as being of Flemish origin, yet having been born at Yorkshire, England. He was an Oxford scholar and a "man of worth and weight" who became a member of the Virginia Company. King Charles I gave him proprietary grants first to Newfoundland (Calvert's "Avalon") and later to what is now Maryland, Delaware, and part of Pennsylvania (1918, pp. 116-122).

Dad

After college, Dad began working as a skilled laborer and supervisor in a yarn mill. He then changed vocations and began work which was more consistent with his upbringing and his personality. At Lancaster Associates, he began making cabinets, installing office partitions, library furniture, exclusive drapes and custom-made cornices, carpet, linoleum, acoustical ceilings, as well as special computer flooring and furniture.

At Lancaster Associates he became the warehouse and installation manager until the time of his retirement in 1989.

My Childhood

My childhood and youth bring back fond memories. I remember playing “cowboys and Indians,” climbing a favorite hemlock tree, and eating delicious apples from a tree my Grandpa Price (an agriculture and industrial arts teacher at Piney flats and at Washington College, Tennessee) had grafted. Until I was in the third grade (1961), we lived in one of the old Price farmhouses, the one on College Heights in Johnson City, Tennessee, only about half a mile from what is now East Tennessee State University. Our long gravel driveway, bordered on either side by a honeysuckle-laden fence, turned down beside an old church (now an apartment house) and passed along its cemetery. Our driveway ended above the house at a free-standing garage from which I hauled coal about fifty yards to burn in our old pot-bellied stove during cold winter months. My black cocker spaniel, Inky, was usually close by and would often go exploring with me into the woods on one side of the house, into the fields below the house, into the old barn and the old chicken house.

Dad was a natural born “ridge runner.” He liked to spend time in the wild of the mountains and woods. Although only about 5 feet, seven inches tall, he could be at the top of a ridge waiting, while any who dared go with him were still plodding along, wondering where he had gone. Many of the teenagers who dared venture with him can attest to his ridge running superiority and to his adventuresome tactics and antics.

As a result, my brother and I began to go with him, sometimes on daylong treks across the ridges. As we got older, we ventured with him to pick wild blackberries in the fields or to Rattlesnake Ridge to pick huckleberries in a snake infested area full of rocks and danger. On one particular hike, we ran upon a moonshine still (quite a dangerous predicament) and slowly eased along out of the area in hopes that the whiskey man would not shoot us....

As it happened, every Tuesday for three months, at the elementary school’s media center, adults talked, read, and wrote around a large round table while children sat around several round tables or lay on their stomachs on the orange mat reading books. At other times, children wrote at tables with one or two teachers guiding or just watching them. Still on several occasions, children sat with their parents conferring over a writing task: this could be a search for the right word or for a past event that escaped memory. The parents began to write their stories and took breaks whenever they wanted to. We encouraged the parents to write in the language they were comfortable in. For the mother who wrote in English, we were on hand to provide the English word she was looking for. During these meetings, parents and children taught each other, and the traditional roles of parents and teachers were not distinctly played out; statuses were ignored as parents and teachers happily talked about their life experiences and explored books. At last, the boundaries between school and home became blurred!

Parents shared that at first they came out of respect for teacher’s request and a sense of obligation, but later they came for the pleasure of being able to tell their stories, so their children, we all agreed, would not forget where they came from. They wanted to share with their children their memories of home and childhood in the country they left behind. These parents would like their children to be proud of their resilience and determination to provide a good future for their family. This intergenerational connection, according to these parents, would keep the children grounded as they create their own memories in their new home. Teachers, on the other hand, experienced a similar transformation. They pushed their classroom duties to the side. For three hours every Tuesday, they enjoyed coaching the parents and children to write

their stories. With each meeting, parents, teachers, and I grew closer, united by a common purpose of finishing our stories and making sure the children did the same. Besides, we were already planning to invite several classes to watch a presentation by the children.

Results

Products of Collaboration – Stories to Listen to and Watch

Partnership success between teachers and families was evident. Personal narratives and filmstrip stories reveal emotions and experiences that could not have surfaced and been shared if not for *mi escuela*. Teachers and parents let their past merge with their present in their personal narratives. Here are some excerpts.

Teachers' personal narrative

Teachers wrote and read their life stories to provide more models to parents. The following excerpt describes a teacher's near-immigrant experience, that of being uprooted and losing familiar surroundings and people.

Growing Up in Floyd County

By Allison Skeen

My life began on May 14, 1965 in Rome, GA. I was born to a young married couple, Buddy and Trena Jones. My dad worked at a local bank and my mom worked at a clothing store until I was born.

My first home was in a small house on Marshal Lane. I lived there happily with my parents until I was about a year and a half years old. We then moved to Meadow Lake Circle, which is on the north side of town. While living there, when I was almost 3, my sister was born. Her name is Tiffany.

We lived on Meadow Lake Circle for about 8 years. I had a wonderful time there. Our neighbors had 2 boys, Todd and Eric. We would play all day. We would pretend to be Batman and Robin. We would ride bikes and play in the sand box. Life was really fun.

My parents decided to build a new house. There was only one problem, it was on the "other side of town." I had to change schools.

I was in the fifth grade when I started the "new" school. I hated it. It was awful being the new kid. I did not know very many people. I wanted to be back where I felt comfortable...

Parents' life stories. Historias de la vida de los padres: aprendiendo sobre ellos y de ellos.

Parents wrote about their lives in their home countries and coming to America during the succeeding meetings. Teachers were on hand to help with vocabulary if the parents asked. The writing served as a catharsis for the parents; relieved that they were able to get them all out there or *pudieron sacarlo todo* (as a parent told us in Spanish). Following are unedited and edited sections of two life histories (*Algunas de las historias de la vida*).

(1) My name is Maria. I was born in Jalpan Sierra de Queretaro which is in Mexico. My home town is very small place but is a very beautiful place. The house are made of dirt or adobe. We had a very small church and the river was the best of all.

My mother was a single parent. We live close to the road. My house was made out of woven branches and covered with dirt with grass. We had 2 rooms and a kitchen. We also had chickens, pigs and one goat. In the hot summers my mother and I went to

the river to wash clothes and swim. We had to carry the water home because we didn't have water or electricity at home. We had to go to the woods to use the restroom. Every morning I heard the birds singing and the smell of the morning rosio. The weather was very nice because it was not hot or cold even during winter season. I love living in a very small town because we didn't have to worry about anything. What I mean is that we didn't have car accidents or smoke. I live there for 6 years then we move to a big city. The life there was very different because life went very fast. I had friends and we use to play in the street. We play baseball, or soccer. In the city we had water and electricity. And that last but not least restrooms. I went to school in Mexico until fourth grade. When I was 12 years old we moved to Texas.

The edited version of Maria's store follows:

My name is Maria. I was born in Jalpán Sierra de Querétaro, which is in Mexico. My hometown is a very small place but is a very beautiful one. The houses are made of dirt or adobe (sun-dried clay bricks). We had a very small church and the river was the best of all.

My mother was a single parent. We lived close to the road. My house was made out of woven branches and covered with adobe. We had two rooms and a kitchen. We also had chickens, pigs, and one goat. In the hot summers, my mother and I went to the river to wash clothes and swim. We had to carry the water to the house because we didn't have water or electricity at home. We had to go to the woods to use the restroom. Every morning I heard the birds singing and caught the smell of the morning dew. The weather was very nice; it was not hot or cold, even during winter season.

I loved living in a very small town because we didn't have to worry about anything. What I mean is that we didn't have car accidents or smoke. I lived there for six years, then we moved to a big city. The life there was very different, it went very fast. I had friends and we used to play in the street. We played baseball or soccer. In the city we had water and electricity, and, last but not least, restrooms. I went to school in Mexico until fourth grade. When I was twelve years old we moved to Texas.

Another parent wrote:

(2) Yo Maria soy ija de David mi papa y mi mama Guadalupe Somos de Mexico iya uno segrea un poco pobre cuando ya era chica fui a la escuela ia i estude asta cuarto no abia mas maestros iya mas grande ayude ami mama alabar amano i asacar el agua del poso con un laso y cubeta somos 6 de Familia i yo le ayudaba amama a aser tortillas en la casina aser de comer la cuide de mi ermano el mas chico por que semiro muy mala i aya en Mexico la costumbre de aya cuando una muyer da aluz aya uno si se cuida 15 o 40 dias enreposito y comiendo pollo i chocolate oabena i a los 18 anos me case despues tube mi primer hijo Uriel mi esposo estuvo un ano conmigo de casados i despues sebino para ca aber que lo socorria Dioz por que eranos pobres tenianos solo un cuarto i despues me izo una cosina i yo estaba en Mexico con mis papas i luego el regreso a los 3 anos fue cuando conocio a nuestro primer ijo des pues yo ya me bine con el paraca esTubimos 5 anos en California en el 89 me bine de mojada sin papeles con mi ijo Uriel pero gracias a Dios no sufrimos en el comino yo sentia muy duro benirme i de jarar ami papas yo nunca sabio salido tan lejos yo no me abia separado de mis papas fue muy duro para ellos i para mi mama sufrio mucho a los 15 dias le escribi i fue mucho consuelo para ella saber de mi tenia mucha desesperacion i cuando yo le escribi fue un ganconsuelo saber de mi les cribi de Mexicali ai dure una semana con una prima

de mi esposo i despues como le digo con el favor de Dios nos isimos yegar aquí fue un poco duro para mi mesentia muy rara diferente sentia que oscuresia mas pronto yege en Julio o en los primeros de agosto asia mucho calor yegomos con un matrimonio conocido por mi esposo ai duramos como 2 semanas i despues rentamos una casa i mi esposo anda en la uva fui ayudarle unos dias despues sali embarazada de mi segundo ijo mepuse muy mala tenia muchos ascos no podia ni aser de comer mi esposo banaba al nino i ledaba de comer para poder irse atrabajar dure como 4 mese mala con mucho frio en el 1990 tuve al segundo ijo l menacio mali to del corazon con un soplo pero yo lotube 2 meses conmigo en la casa pero el era un nino normal no era Jerroso lo unico que lenoTaba era ... Tenian enCueradito yo locobijava i eyo melo descubijaban los doctores llo yoraba mucho mesenTia sola muy Triste solo yo imi esposo imi primer ijo Sin padres Toda mi Familia en Mexico ya Cuendo Murio en el Funeral uvo muy pocos amigos Tenian pocos conocidos esTabanos Recien yegados yo Ubiera querido yevormelo para CepulTarlo en Mexico pero no pudimos no Tenionos dinero mecobraba 200 dolares para Sacarlo solo ala Frontera ides pues los gastos paraya i no podianos aser esos gastos no Tenianos lo Sepultamos en Tulare ai esta mi Segunda ijo ides pues Tube amanuel i Semeponia muy malo Tenia problemas para Respirar iera en el Tiempo de calor i yo Tenia mucho miedo de que Sememuriera mi Otro ijo i despues bolbi asalio en barazada de manuel es de 1992 i Dalia pero yano nacio aquí meFui para Mexico en 1995 ...

In the following Spanish-edited version, only orthographical errors were corrected.

Yo soy María, hija de David, mi papá, y de Guadalupe, mi mamá. Somos de México y ya, no se crea, un poco pobre. Cuando yo era chica, fui a la escuela allá y estudié hasta cuarto, no había más maestros.

Y, ya más grande, ayudé a mi mamá a lavar a mano y a sacar el agua del pozo con un lazo y una cubeta. Somos seis de familia. Y yo le ayudaba a mamá a hacer tortillas en la cocina (y) a hacer de comer. La cuidé de mi hermano el más chico porque se ¿miró? muy mala y allá, en México, la costumbre de allá, cuando una mujer da a luz, allá uno sí se cuida, 15 o 40 días en reposo y comiendo pollo y chocolate o avena.

Y a los 18 años me casé. Después tuve a mi primer hijo, Uriel. Mi esposo estuvo un año conmigo de casados y después se vino para acá a ver que lo ¿socorría? Dios, porque éramos muy pobres. Teníamos sólo un cuarto y después me hizo cocinar. Y yo estaba en México con mis papás (padres). Y luego él regresó a los 3 años. Fue cuando conoció a nuestro primer hijo. Después yo me vine para acá. Estuvimos 5 años en California. En el '89 me vine ¿de mojada? sin papeles, con mi hijo Uriel. Pero, gracias a Dios no sufrimos en el camino.

Yo sentía muy duro venirme y dejar a mis papás (padres). Yo nunca había salido tan lejos. Yo no me había separado de mis papás (padres). Fue muy duro para ellos y para mi mamá sufrió mucho. A los 15 días le escribí y fue mucho consuelo para ella saber de mí. Tenía mucha desesperación y cuando yo le escribí fue un gran consuelo saber de mí. Le escribí de(sde) Mexicali. Ahí duré una semana con una prima de mi esposo y después, como le digo, con el favor de Dios, nos hicimos llegar aquí. Fue un poco duro para mí. Me sentía muy rara, diferente. Sentía que oscurecía más pronto. Llegué en julio o en los primeros días de agosto. Hacía mucho calor. Llegamos con un matrimonio conocido por mi esposo. Ahí duramos como dos semanas y después rentamos una casa.

Y mi esposo anda en la ¿uva?. Fui a ayudarle unos días. Después salí embarazada de mi segundo hijo. Me puse muy mala. Tenía muchos ascos, no podía ni

hacer de comer. Mi esposo bañaba al niño y le daba de comer para poder irse a trabajar. Duré como cuatro meses mala, con mucho frío. En el 1990 tuve al segundo hijo. Y me nació malito del corazón, con un soplo, pero yo lo tuve dos meses conmigo en la casa. Pero él era un niño normal, no era ¿...? Lo único que le notaba era... Tenían ¿en ...? Yo lo cobijaba y ellos me lo descubijaban, los doctores. Yo lloraba mucho. Me sentía sola, muy triste. Sola yo y mi esposo y mi primer hijo, sin padres, toda mi familia en México. Ya, cuando murió, en el funeral hubo muy pocos amigos. Tenían (Teníamos) pocos conocidos, estábamos recién llegados. Yo hubiera querido llevármelo para sepultarlo en México, pero no pudimos. No teníamos dinero. Me cobraban 200 dólares para sacarlo sólo a la frontera y después de los gastos para allá y no podíamos hacer esos gastos. No teníamos. Lo sepultamos en Tulare. Ahí está mi segundo hijo.

Y después tuve a Manuel. Y se me ponía muy malo. Tenía problemas para respirar y era el tiempo de calor y yo tenía mucho miedo de que se me muriera mi otro hijo. Y después volví a salir embarazada. De Manuel es de 1992. Y Dalia, pero ella no nació aquí. Me fui para México en 1995...

I asked one parent-participant who was a bilingual to provide the following English translation.

(2) My name is Maria. I'm the daughter of David and Guadalupe. I was born in Mexico. When I was a little girl I went to school. I only went to the fourth grade because my family was poor. At a very young age I had to help my mother with chores. I had to wash clothes by hand and get the water out of the well and the last thing was to make the tortillas for the family. When my mother had the last child I had to help her with the cooking and the cleaning because of the tradition is to stay in bed for 15 to 40 days after you give birth to a child. When I turn 18 years old I got married. Me and my husband stay together for years. After that he come to United States for a better life because we didn't have any money. He stay U.S.A. for 3 years. When he come back he met his son for the first time. My husband and I decide to come to U.S.A. It was hard because I didn't have any kind of papers. When we cross the border to U.S.A. Thanks to god we didn't have any problems. It was hard to live my parent in Mexico. I wrote a letter to my mother about 15 days after we left. She was so happy when she read the letter. We were living in California with a couple that my husband knew. We live there for 2 week. After that my husband found a house that was for rent. The weather was very hot because it was at the end of July. My husband was working in the fields cutting grapes. I tried to help him but I was so sick because I was pregnant. For 4 months I had the chills and I didn't cook. My husband did all the cooking and the cleaning. In the year 1990 my second child was born. He looked like a very healthy child. For 2 month that I had him at home he was find. When I found out that he had a heart problem was when I took him for his shots at the hospital. The doctor said that he had the heart problem. I took my child home and I was very upset. From that day my son stayed in the hospital. The name of the town was Fresno California. My son died 2 months later. In the year of 1992 I had Manuel. He was born in Mexico. In 1995, I had Dalia. Then my last child, Jennifer, was born in 1998. I was living in Mexico when I had my children. Five years passed and my husband was trying to get passport for all of us. He came to Rome GA. We went to see my parents and my husbands' parents last year. We don't know when we will be able to see them again. My parents are 65 years old. I have 4 brothers and 2 sisters. My husband's parents are 80 years old. God will give us the opportunity to see them alive again. Mexico is a very beautiful place to live when you got money. The weather is very nice. It not very hot or cold. My children are learning more and living a better life here. Well that's what I think. I'm the mother of Manuel and Dalia. They go to school here.

To corroborate the parent's, I asked a native Spanish-speaking teacher to translate the story.

(2) My name is Maria. I'm the daughter of David and Guadalupe. I was born in Mexico. When I was a little girl I went to school. I only went to the fourth grade because my family was poor.

At a very young age I had to help my mother with chores. I had to wash clothes by hand and get the water out of the well and the last thing was to make the tortillas for the family. When my mother had the last child, I had to help her with the cooking and the cleaning, because the tradition is to stay in bed for 15 to 40 days after giving birth to a child.

When I turned 18, I got married. My husband and I stayed together for one year. After that he came to United States for a better life because we didn't have any money. He stayed in the U.S. for three years. When he came back, he met his son for the first time. My husband and I decided to come to U.S. It was hard because I didn't have any kind of papers. When we crossed the border, thank God, we didn't have any problems.

It was hard to leave my parents in Mexico. I wrote a letter to my mother about 15 days after we left. She was so happy when she read the letter. We were living in California with a couple that my husband knew. We lived there for two weeks. After that, my husband found a house that was for rent.

The weather was very hot because it was at the end of July. My husband was working in the fields cutting grapes. I tried to help him but I was so sick because I was pregnant. For four months, I had the chills and I didn't cook. My husband did all the cooking and the cleaning. In the year 1990 my second child was born. He looked like a very healthy child. For two months I had him at home and he was fine. When I found out that he had a heart problem I took him for his shots at the hospital. The doctor said that he had a heart problem. I took my child home and I was very upset. From that day on my son stayed in the hospital. The name of the town was Fresno California. My son died 2 months later.

In the year 1992 I had Manuel. He was born in Mexico. In 1995, I had Dalia. Then my last child, Jennifer, was born in 1998. I was living in Mexico when I had my children. Five years passed and my husband was trying to get passports for all of us. He came to Rome GA. We went to see my parents and my husbands' parents last year. We don't know when we will be able to see them again. My parents are 65 years old. I have four brothers and two sisters. My husband's parents are 80 years old. God will give us the opportunity to see them alive again.

Mexico is a very beautiful place to live when you have money. The weather is very nice. It is not very hot or cold. But my children are learning more and living a better life here. Well that's what I think. I'm the mother of Manuel and Dalia. They go to school here.

The following story was written by a parent-participant.

(3) En el año 1995 mi hija que ya estaba aqui en Dalton me hablo para decir me que se iba a casar, fue duro para mi proque era un momento especial para mi hija por lo que decidi irme aunque no tenia ningun documento para poder ir legal/ tome la decision de aventurarme, para entonces mi nieto que tenia escazos 10 años tambien se queria ir con su papa para estar con el. Mi hija me envoi dinero el cual utilize para pagar un "coyote" (persona que ayuda a cruzar el rio) llegamas a la frontera y pronto comenzo la aventura nos llevo a la orilla del rio y cruzamos con la ayuda de ellos despues de ahi

teníamos que caminar por el campo abierto según ellos decían 15 o 20 mn. Pero en realidad fueron horas interminables, cansada y con sed mis rodillas se doblaban por varias veces caí, gracias a que iba a mi nieto y me ayudaba a levantarme seguí adelante. Era un 25 de Nov. cuando llegué a Texas y de ahí fue mi hijo mayor por nosotros.

El 9 de dic. Mi hija contrajo matrimonio y yo pude estar con ella (ilegible)... de un obtener mi residencia porque mi hijo mayor es ciudadano. Ahora puedo ir y venir cuando yo quiero. Recuerdo algo muy gracioso, “cuando íbamos a pasar el río nos agarró migración, yo le dije a uno de ellos déjanos pasar que tú quésta el dijo vengan mañana, porque no estare aquí y así fue!

The following is the edited Spanish versión.

(3) En 1995 mi hija estaba en Dalton. Me habló para decirme que se iba a casar. Fue duro para mí porque era un momento especial para mi hija, por lo que decidí venirme, aunque no tenía ningún documento para poder venir legalmente. Tomé la decisión de aventurarme.

Para entonces, mi nieto, que tenía escasos 10 años, también se quería venir con su papá, para estar con él. Mi hija me envió dinero que utilicé para pagar un “coyote” (persona que ayuda a cruzar el río). Llegamos a la frontera y pronto comenzó la aventura. Nos llevó a la orilla del río y cruzamos con su ayuda. Luego teníamos que caminar a campo traviesa unos 15 o 20 minutos, según ellos, pero en realidad fueron horas interminables. Cansada y con sed, mis rodillas se doblaban y me caí varias veces. Gracias a que mi nieto estaba conmigo y me ayudaba a levantarme, seguí adelante.

Era un 25 de noviembre cuando llegué a Texas y de ahí fue mi hijo mayor por nosotros. El 9 de diciembre mi hija contrajo matrimonio y yo pude estar con ella...(ilegible)...de un obtener la residencia, porque mi hijo mayor es ciudadano. Ahora puedo ir y venir cuando yo quiero.

Recuerdo algo muy gracioso. Cuando íbamos a cruzar el río, nos agarró migración. Yo le dije a uno de ellos, “Déjanos pasar ¿Qué te cuesta?”. Él dijo, “Vengan mañana porque no estaré aquí”. ¡Y así fue!

The English translation follows.

(3) In 1995, my daughter, who was in Dalton already, called me to tell me that she was getting married. It was very hard for me since it was a very special moment for my daughter. so I decided to go even though I didn't have any legal documents to enter the country. I took the decision of going to an adventure. At that time my grandson, who was 10 years old, also wanted to go to be with his father. My daughter sent me money which I used to pay a “coyote” (person who helps to cross the river). We arrived to the border and our adventure began. We went to the bank of the river and crossed it with their help. Then, we had to walk on open prairie. They said it would be 10 or 20 minutes. Actually, they were endless hours. I was tired and thirsty. My knees gave out; I fell down several times. It was good that my grandson was with me. He helped me to get up and go on. It was on November 25 when I arrived in Texas. My oldest son picked us up. On December 9, my daughter got married and I could be there for her. A year later, I got my residency because my oldest son is an American citizen. Now I can come and go whenever I want. I remember something funny; when we were going to cross the river

immigration officers stopped us. I told one of them "Let us go, you can do it." He said, "Come tomorrow. I won't be here." And he was right!

Children's Personal Narratives

Two teachers were assigned to work with the children. In the beginning, the children were either given a book to read or the teachers read to them. Because our sessions were held in the media center, the children had access to books and they chose whatever book they cared to read at any given session. Bilingual books were also made available to the children.

Then we asked the children to write. From the older children, there was a lot of hesitation to write; many were unsure of what to write or if they could write at all. One student completely refused to write. The younger children drew their stories. One pre-K boy about five years old did not talk to anyone but his female cousin who, I suspect, was also five years old. In his drawings, I saw curved lines and asked him what they meant. That prompt was enough to bring a seemingly non-verbal little boy to a highly animated and very expressive expert. He was so excited that he dribbled, skipped sounds, dropped word endings in English, and made his speech more complex by adding Spanish words into the mix. His story was about a monster that would come to his house. He was afraid and he hid from him.

Although the children did not produce much without prodding, three students' personal narratives stood out. They wrote about their parents' life stories. I reproduced them here exactly as they were written.

(1) Life in Mexico by Jose Lopez

My mom's life was difficult in Mexico because my grandmother had to go to America to work and because familys problems. At the age of 8 my had to say goodbye to my grandmother because she was living to America to work for the family. My grandmother took my uncle. He was 23 years old he was the older one. They went June 12 at 2:03 p.m. and they arrive at 6:42 of the morning at June 13 and they stay for 3 months. They came back on August 23 at 5:17. They have money to pay the bills and the house. At the age of 18 one of my other uncles died because of drugs. At the age of 21 my mom marry my dad. My mom went to America with my dad at the age of 22. They move to different places. They dint know where they live. I was born in 1990 in September 25 in Callifornia. At the age of 27 my sister was born and at the age of 29 my sister was born in 1991 and my baby brother was born in Chicago 2000 June 10. And that is my mom's story.

(2) My Story by Juanita Reyes

Well I'm witting this story to tell you about my family. First of all I want to tell you something about my mom. You don't know how much she suffered in Mexico. Well let me tell you, when my mom was 10 years old she had to work very hard. Her job was to get up in the mornings and go around selling stuff. Like sweaters, food, candy and all sorts of stuff to sell so she could have money. Because back then my mom and her family didn't have a lot of money. They would do anything to survive so they would do all sorts of jobs. And while my mom grew bigger she had a little farm with lots of animals. She would have to sell the animals to other people. When she started to get money she started saving it so she could come to the United States. But she couldn't because when she was 18 years old she was getting married. So then after a couple of years she finally came to the U.S with my dad. It was kind of hard for her and my dad to get here because they did not have any papers. And it was also hard for them to come to the U.S. because

they did not know English. But they survived and they made it here. Did I tell you that when they got here they did not have nowhere to sleep at? Because they did not have any family members in the U.S. But this stranger offered them to sleep at his house. My parents didn't know if they should accept or not but they did. Because they didn't have nowhere to else to go so they had to live with a strange man they didn't even know. But after a long while they finally had a job, it didn't pay that much. But my parents thought it was a start and they finally afford to buy an apartment to live in. So their jobs were well my dad was a gardener and my mom was an employee. So these were my parents first jobs at Rome, Georgia. Right after two years they found better jobs. Also these jobs are well paid by they had to work 7 days a week. This is how my mom and my dad got here to the U.S.A. But I really can't write more because it makes me want to cry. Well I hope you liked this story I wrote with my parents good help. I hope you all enjoy reading this story.

(3) Hello my name is Rosalia Cornejo. I write this story for my mother. I will tell how much she went through. It started out when she was little about 6 years old. She already had to help her mother do chores around the house and help in the field. Every morning she had to get up at 4 in the morning to help out in the field and take the cows to the other side of the fields. She had to do a lot walking back. After that she had to do chores and help her mom cook. She had older sisters they helped too. The boys my mom brothers had to do farming work. Of course my grandfather made the girls help too. They just didn't do girls work. They also did boys work too. They did go to school but not every day because sometimes my grandfather need help out in the fields and farming. Sometimes they didn't go to school in a week or two weeks or about a month. Another reason is because they didn't have money to buy the school books and supplies they need. Sometimes they even didn't have shoes to wear or clothes. My grandparents bought their clothes whenever they really need clothes. They bought the most important things if they went shopping you see then only buying what they need not then they'll be wasting. All the girls sewed. My grandmother made all the girls sew. Then my brothers sell. My grandmother helped everyone if they were in trouble. My mother had lots of troubles but since the years past she got use to it. My mother was 12 years old now she had to quit school in third grade to help her parents work and have some food and money. Sometimes she had to go out and wash other people's clothes and do their chores just to get money.

Common to three children's stories were the poverty, vulnerability, and struggle experienced by their parents. Interesting was the reference of the children to several traditional values: hard work, thrift, perseverance, charity, and courage.

Filmstrip Production of Children's Stories

The first three sessions did not produce much writing from the children. The teachers and I assessed the situation, reflected, and decided that a better writing activity and prompt must be used. A different strategy was devised and tried the following session. To engage the children to write, read, and promote their creativity, I told them that they were going to produce movies about themselves and they were to present these to other children in the school. I introduced the idea of filmmaking. Igoa (1995) in her book, *The Inner World of Immigrants* wrote about the process of drawing and illustrating as a medium of communication and self-expression. Struck by an inspiration, she allowed Dennis, a small, serious, visibly frightened 12-year-old boy from the Hunan Province of Mainland China, to break his silence. She wrote, "If he

could make a filmstrip illustrating the story and read it onto a cassette tape, then he could see his illustrations on a screen and we could hear his voice... I knew he was expressing more than just a story about a gingerbread. It revealed to me much more than his command of grammar and syntax. There was hope in the story, and he was opening up to the world – coming out of his isolation into a world perceived as friendly” (pp. 23-25).

To model the filmstrip story activity that Igoa (1995) described, the teachers informed the children they should watch while they wrote their stories and illustrated them. The students agreed. Then the teachers, parents, and I distributed papers, pencils, laminating film, and overhead markers of varied colors. Ten frames of 8 1/2 by 11 were drawn on 4 feet of laminating filmstrip. This laminating film was unlike Igoa’s rolls of exposed films.

I began my instructions describing what to do and the bilingual liaison translated the instructions: “You can write a story about yourselves and draw your stories. *Pueden escribir una historia sobre ustedes y dibujar sus historias*. You can either draw first and write next or vice versa. *Pueden dibujar primero y escribir después o vice versa*.” I explained, the picture should be drawn inside the frame and they had to write a story line for each frame. Modeling the activity, the teachers drew and created storyboards. The completed teachers’ work samples were displayed on three tables, and the children were then invited to look at the samples. Some children rushed to the tables, while the older children hesitantly ambled to one table and then to another. Later, the teachers coaxed them to go back to their seats.

After everyone got quiet at their tables, I announced that we were going to watch a movie about their teacher. I chose Mr. Price’s storyboard. I lay the film on the glass plate of an old overhead projector; then, I started with the first frame, straightened it perfectly to fit the plate, and quickly, I flicked the switch on. Carefully, I advanced the filmstrip one frame at a time. Voila! Lights, camera, action—a movie with a teacher they knew as the star! (See Appendix A)

The filmstrip show generated heightened interest and the children got very excited. As I got closer to the last frame of the filmstrip, they jostled each other closer to the materials at the center of the tables. With great anticipation, they waited for the teacher’s signal to get started in making their own movie.

One teacher firmly reminded the children that they had to practice on paper before they wrote and drew on the laminating film. Then she said the magic word, start! And, everybody got busy! The children appeared really focused, like something clicked into place and they knew the path they were taking. With their little bodies crouched on their tables and little hands gripped around the markers, the children made one stroke and then another, then another and then more. Their inner voices surfaced.

The children pretended they were filmmakers. In each frame they drew and then wrote a script under their drawing. The children who were very tentative at first and who repeatedly claimed they couldn’t write their stories, excitedly looked at the film and with glee started to draw continuously frame after frame. Much conversation ensued as children walked from table to table to see what the other children were drawing. Spanish was spoken by many. Three of the youngest children spoke English. It was interesting to note that the children’s approach to the task varied. Many drew first then wrote the text. One wrote the text in each frame and then drew to match the text. Children interrupted their parents to ask help in spelling. They also asked parents and teachers for help with vocabulary. It was fascinating to watch parents, who were not very conversant in English, help their children with their English stories. Themes that the children developed were life in Mexico, their families, first day of school, and so on.

The filmstrip stories showed how language and images flowed out of children's invention. While some wrote in English, showing pride in their ability to write in it, others wrote in English and Spanish, possibly exploring the complementary roles of the two languages in their present lives. (See Appendix B.)

The next step was for the children to read their stories on an audiocassette recorder and choose the background music. Teachers brought CD music and so did the children. After all the equipment was set up and the music chosen, each child stepped into a small room in the media center to read his or her story on a tape recorder that Miss Skeen operated. Evidently, this was fun because every child who emerged out of the room had a big smile on his or her face.

Four meetings later, the children were ready for their big day. The tables and chairs in the media center were rearranged. In the middle of the room was an overhead projector. Three feet in front of the projector was a large screen. To one side, was a table of cinnamon rolls, soda pop bottles, five tall towers of plastic cups, and stacks of napkins. Then, the room got filled with three classes of 1st, 3rd, 5th graders, and their teachers. Some sat on the chairs while others sat on the mat. Then, the start cue was given. Everybody became quiet. A name was called. With his head bowed, a 10-year-old boy slowly walked towards the overhead projector. Then, Miss Minshew assisted the boy in advancing the frame on the projector. She made sure that the picture in the frame matched the sentence(s) on the audiocassette. It was over and everybody clapped. The filmmaker beamed and rushed back to his chair. Then another child was called. The teacher assisted him in the same way. Every filmmaker had his or her proud moment. Indeed, it was a day of celebration; it was the day we validated the students and their stories. It was the day of proud storytellers and filmmakers. It was also the day the parents were proud participants of a school celebration.

Reflections

Teacher-Participants' Reflections

All the teachers who participated were particularly happy with the results. The following quotes were gleaned from teachers' reflections on the project.

This was a very rewarding project. I was glad to be a participant. It was very interesting to hear the stories of the Hispanic people. As a native of this city, I have always wanted to know how they made it here to Rome, GA. I have always thought of Rome as a small little town that many people did not know was here. Hearing their stories has given me a little insight about their situations. I hope hearing my story will give them an insight on what it was like for me growing up here in Floyd County. I hope by hearing their stories, the people here in Floyd County, will welcome these families into our community. (3-19-02)

Everyone was quiet and filled with excitement as each story was read. The students felt pride as they read and wrote their stories. They wanted their drawings just right. One child wrote her story in both English and Spanish. When the students were asked to reflect and tell what they enjoyed most about the project they were silent, no response. If asked, "Did you like working on this project?" heads shook yes and a big smile spread across each child's face. (4-1-02)

As a teacher I enjoyed doing this project for it enabled me to see a little bit of each child's personality I had never seen before. It was exciting to see them turned on to writing, a subject they normally would sit and not produce. (4-13-02)

Teacher Educator's Observation and Reflections: Lessons Learned

Having worked with all the participants in this project, I offer insider's insights. Additionally, I offer unbiased observations, as I had also intentionally distanced myself from the project on several occasions.

1. Teachers and parents must be equally committed to the success of the project.
2. Classroom teachers must take the lead role in projects like this because the children know them and their parents respect them.
3. Working out a schedule that was convenient to both parents and teachers was the most difficult hurdle. A common time when both parents and teachers could attend was the most challenging to establish. For instance, after school hours were not convenient for teachers who had family responsibilities and during school hours was not feasible to many parents who worked several shifts. Teachers must be more willing to accommodate parents' schedules because parents work for wages under heavy exploitative conditions.
4. Schools must solicit companies, which employ their parents, to adopt their school. In this way, these companies become education partners; consequently, they will be more inclined to allow parents to attend school meetings without penalizing them.
5. Attendance from one week to the next was unreliable because parents changed work shifts.
6. Be flexible to allow parents to continue their projects at home, particularly when they will miss the school sessions.
7. Literacy activities can result in meaningful interaction and productive work if they are fun, creative, and purposeful (with an audience in mind).
8. Cooperative initiatives of teachers must be encouraged through tangible rewards. Delgado-Gaitan (1999) argued that "Neither schools nor the school districts as a whole view parent involvement as a priority because they have no real incentives to involve parents... School personnel must view the effort as cost effective and fund parent education as well as teacher-parent activities" (p.32).
9. The support of the principal was critical because he allowed the teachers to get substitutes to teach their classes while they participated, and for the entire duration of each session, we had the exclusive use of the Media Center.
10. Schools should be more proactive in their establishing connections with their students' homes. Different ways of bringing parents to schools or bringing schools to the homes must be explored. Innovative and creative initiatives must be tried. Schools must acknowledge that there can no longer be one standard to judge parent participation in schools against. From my conversations with language minority parents, I gathered that parents help teachers when they make sure their children attend school, make sure they do not join gangs, make sure they do their assignments, make sure older children help their younger siblings in their assignments because they, themselves, cannot.

Conclusion and Implications

The *Mi Escuela es Su Escuela* project built a bridge between two worlds: the world of the school and society and the world of the language-minority homes.

Parents and children, whose voices would have otherwise remained silenced and ignored, took the opportunity to educate others of their worlds and of their humanity. Through the power of narrative, specifically through their life histories and filmstrip stories, they hope to bring an awareness of their presence to the local community: who they are, why they left their country, and what they gave up in order to get into the U.S. Their stories will hopefully change prevailing cultural narratives and attitudes.

Similarly, teachers who would have otherwise remained skeptical of parents' interest in their children's education, agreed to put aside their biases, related to parents as equal partners in education, engaged parents and children in bilingual reading and writing activities, and modeled writing life histories. Obviously, they became informed and critically aware of personal, socio-political, cultural, and economic implications of teaching and learning from culturally and linguistic diverse students and their families as they reflected and responded to developments in each session. Satisfaction in what they accomplished generated great interest among the teacher-participants that they started conversation about expanding this project to involve Rome's non-minority parents and their children. Being able to work together in a friendly setting and learn from each other's life stories may possibly bring the local residents and the language minority groups closer.

This bookmaking of personal narratives project shows much promise as a catalyst for parents and teachers to know each other and be comfortable around each other. The delineation of the processes involved in setting up and implementing the project invites others to replicate it. *Mi Escuela es Su Escuela* resulted in many benefits for all participants as evidenced in the number of literacy artifacts produced and in the relationships that were formed. They serve as a testimony to the value of transformative education: teachers, students, and parents as invested and equal partners. The project shows that home and school partnerships do not happen by chance; they require cross-cultural awareness, sensitivity, determination, ingenuity, and creativity. Therefore, opportunities to participate in these collaborations must be formalized in teacher education programs. Several pedagogical implications and practical ideas may be derived from the experiences of conducting *Mi Escuela* or similar home-school literacy partnership initiatives:

1. Teachers will have a tool to empower themselves, and it will help parents and children in their English language development.
2. It is a means of validating the value of the first language in facilitating literacy development in English.
3. Parents may be assured of their important role in their child's education regardless of their lack of proficiency in English.
4. Isolation and marginalization of parents and children from diverse backgrounds may be alleviated.
5. A booklet on successful strategies on how to work with parents from diverse backgrounds may be published for distribution to schools.

6. A productive relationship among teachers, minority parents and students helps develop positive community relations.
7. Teacher, student, and parent-created books may be made available to the public (with authors' permission in local school libraries, area library, etc.); these books may be professionally published by a Web-based company which offers low rates to novice writers.

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