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Home to School Transitions: A Guatemalan Family Portrait

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Abstract

This study applies a sociocultural perspective to examine the home to school transitions in literacy achievement of three low-income children from Guatemala. Through participant observation and informal conversations with the family during home visits, two factors appeared to influence the literacy development of the family's young children: bilingualism and cultural assimilation. Investigating the home literacy environment of an immigrant family provides an insider's perspective of the life experiences of children from non-mainstream homes. Understanding their home reading and writing experiences, and their transition to school literacy, is valuable for reading teachers facing increasingly diverse students from multicultural backgrounds.

Immigrant families face many issues when they transition from one culture to another. Learning to read, write, speak, and understand a new language is one of the factors immigrant families must grapple with as they enter a new social and cultural world. This study examines the home literacy environment of a low-income family of five from Guatemala. The three children—ages three, seven, and ten—face daily challenges as they navigate between two worlds, namely the culture of their Spanish-speaking home and the English-dominant culture of their community and school in South Florida.

The purposes of this study are threefold: 1) to share an insider's point of view of the home literacy experiences of a non-dominant culture family; 2) to address the sociocultural influences that shape the reading attitudes and motivation of low-income, Hispanic children; and 3) to offer ways schools and teachers of reading can adapt to meet the needs and experiences of immigrant, bilingual children. To situate this study, the theoretical background on sociocultural influences of the home, community, and school are first discussed in relation to immigrant, Spanish-speaking families. Second, the methodology used to examine the family's home literacy environment is described. Third, the context of the study is described with details of the parents, children, their home, and lifestyle. Fourth, in the findings section, two distinct areas of influence are described in relation to the home literacy environment of the family—bilingualism and cultural assimilation. Finally, educational implications for teachers are discussed.

Theoretical Perspective

Sociocultural theorists view literacy acquisition as occurring in the midst of specified social environments and cultural landscapes. The quality and quantity of social interactions, as well as

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the construction of the literacy atmosphere in home, community, and school contexts critically influence the reading and writing behavior and attitudes of young children. A sociocultural perspective defines literacy in cultural terms and views children as becoming literate within the cultures of their homes, communities, and schools. From this view, knowledge is constructed by the interaction of the individual with the sociocultural environment; higher mental functions such as reading and writing are social and cultural in nature; and members of the culture can assist and mediate others while learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). This “situated knowledge” constructed in particular situations refers to the idea that language and literacy forms can only be understood in terms of context and function (Gee, 2001). The following theoretical background offers a review of literature concerning the social and cultural aspects of literacy development in three sections: 1) the influence of the home on bilingual literacy development; 2) the influence of the community on bilingual literacy development; and 3) the influence of school on bilingual literacy development. Specific emphasis is placed on low-income, immigrant, and Hispanic children's literacy experiences in the home, community, and school.

The Influence of the Home on Bilingual Literacy Development

Perhaps the most important social environment for literacy development is the home, and Ryan (2000) calls the home the single most significant reading environment for children. Cultural and social factors have been shown to influence the home literacies of Spanish-speaking immigrant families who are making language and literacy transitions in the home. Vasquez, Pease-Alvarez and Shannon (1994) found that in everyday exchanges and social situations, even in the personal space of their homes, four Spanish-speaking Mexican families living in California were required to negotiate their new culture and language with the predominantly English-speaking surroundings. Similarly, social and cultural factors in the home contributed to Delgado-Gaitan's (1987) findings of the functions and meanings of literacy in four Mexican immigrant families. Despite the fact that the parents had little prior schooling and did not perceive themselves as readers, Delgado-Gaitan found that each family used a range of text types in both English and Spanish in a variety of ways that went beyond school-related reading. Even among demographically similar families, a diverse set of constraints and variables are at play which significantly impact children's reading motivation (Rueda, MacGillivray, Monzo, & Arzubaga, 2001). Furthermore, Janes and Kermani (1997) found that family literacy events among recently immigrated, low-income, Latino families did not occur and are not scaffolded in the same manner as in middle-class, mainstream families. Instead, their literacy events are likely to happen in a variety of time frames and locations, routinized in culturally specific ways. The family is also influenced by the community where the family lives.

The Influence of the Community on Bilingual Literacy Development

The extent to which the community where children live can influence their literacy development has been examined by several researchers. For example, Neumann and Celano (2001) studied the access to print in four neighborhoods and found striking differences between neighborhoods: middle-income children have a large variety of private and public resources from which to choose, whereas low-income children are limited mainly to public institutions. Another study which examined children's literacy from the sociocultural context of the community was

conducted with culturally and linguistically diverse children in the U.S.-Mexico border area of Texas. Quintero (1993) found several aspects of Hispanic culture and community life that point to the existence of diverse cultural norms. Specifically, parental authority is an important value in Hispanic culture, and cooperation of group members, whether in the family or community, is a significant part of children's social experiences. Community contexts also influence the messages embedded in social interactions. Delpit (1995) examined literacy in Native Alaskan villages and found parent/child relations were different in these communities than from mainstream, Anglo communities. For example, Native Alaskan parents do not make their children go to school or do homework: "In the parents' view, children were not to be coerced with authority, but were to be treated with the respect that provided them with rationales, stated or unstated, to guide them to make decisions based on their own good sense" (Delpit, 1995, p. 101). Communities with diverse socioeconomic, language, and cultural backgrounds appear to influence the quality of children's literacy experiences in the home and at school.

The Influence of the School on Bilingual Literacy Development

Another key sociocultural context that influences children's literacy development is the school. McGee and Richgels (2003) discovered that children from low-income families who are likely to attend schools with low reading performance are also less likely to have acquired certain literacy knowledge prior to the initiation of beginning reading instruction in kindergarten. Dyson (1997) studied children's literacy in school and found that cultural categories or socioeconomic status did not define the children, but that "it was in the interplay of institutional structure and sociocultural circumstances that "differences" from the assumed norm most often emerged as "problems," the "problems," for example, of children speaking varied languages, having an employed single parent, and not entering school with institutionally expected expertise in print conventions" (p. 122). To counteract the inherent discrepancies in children's home backgrounds and school expectations, Kirk (2001) suggests that educators must appreciate home culture as a key factor in school success by considering the social context of learning to read and by utilizing instructional approaches that culturally diverse learners can relate to.

This theoretical background was intended to illustrate the various ways home, community, and school contexts influence children's literacy development. Researchers have examined a wide range of home, community, and school environments with children from diverse socioeconomic, language, and cultural backgrounds. Examining the home literacy environment of a low-income family from Guatemala will provide another perspective of the influences of the home environment on bilingual literacy development.

Method

The research questions guiding this study are: 1) What roles do literacy activities play in the culture of the home environment?; 2) What are the functions and uses of reading and writing in the daily life routines of the family members?; and 3) What types of print information and reading materials are available in the home? These questions were examined as I spent two years observing and interacting with the family during home visits. In the course of this time, I held several roles in the family dynamics. I provided child care, tutored the children in English,

helped with homework, and served as an English language interpreter for the parents. Through participant observation, collection of fieldnotes and artifacts, as well as interviews and informal conversations, a portrait of the home literacy environment emerged. I analyzed the events in the home by coding, memos, patterns, and vignettes. I shared my observations and stories with the family. They trusted me and were open about their home environment and experiences. I was invited to the children's birthday celebrations, holiday get-togethers, and dinners. I was given traditional Guatemalan food made by the family to take home. As the patterns of their home literacy environment and lifestyle emerged, I was able to notice factors that were influencing the literacy development of the children.

Context

The sociocultural context of this study is described in the following section in four parts: 1) the parents; 2) the children; 3) their home; and 4) the family's lifestyle. This background is intended to give the reader detailed descriptive knowledge of the participants and their home environment that sets the stage for literacy learning.

Jose Diaz (all names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants) moved to South Florida in 1995 with his wife Catarina and young daughter Anna. He moved to this particular community because there is a large immigrant Guatemalan community where they would be near relatives and have contacts to find employment. He works as a landscaper, planting trees, maintaining gardens, and doing yard maintenance at wealthy, suburban subdivisions. "I love my job," he tells me. He is the crew leader and supervises ten other Guatemalan immigrants in the landscaping business. He works six days a week from 7 am until 4 pm. His wife gets ready to go to work when Jose comes home. At 5:30 pm Catarina leaves to clean offices until 10 pm. During the day, she stays home with their three-year-old son Junior. She also takes care of her sister's two young children, does housework, gardening, shopping, and cooking.

Anna Diaz is the only child in the family who was born in Guatemala. She came to South Florida eight years ago when she was two, and she has never been back to her home country. Anna's role in the household is to watch after Junior and her other younger brother, seven year-old Miguel, each evening. She is responsible for child care, cleaning, cooking, laundry, and shopping while her mother is at work. Miguel, as the oldest boy in the family, has privileges his sister and brother do not. He gets preferential treatment in terms of toys and freedom. "Miguel never has to do anything," Anna tells me. "He always gets presents and can do whatever he wants." when he's not at school, Miguel spends his time watching cartoons on television, playing Yu-Gi-Oh and Pokemon card games and video games with neighbors, and climbing trees in the yard. Anna and Miguel ride the school bus that stops at the corner by their house each morning. They both receive free lunch at school based on their family's income. They leave at 7:30 am and return home at 2:30 pm. They do not participate in after-school activities. As the baby of the family, Junior is showered with attention and affection. Jose printed a decal on the back window of the family truck proclaiming "We love you Junior!" He plays with toy cars in the yard, goes on bike rides with Jose sitting on a bike seat, and practices riding his bicycle with training wheels in the driveway.

Jose bought the two-bedroom, one bathroom mobile home where they have been living for the past five years for eight thousand dollars cash. He could not finance a home because he has no credit history and no bank account. All transactions are cash only for the family. When Jose and Catarina get paid from their jobs, they cash their paychecks at a check-cashing business. The family has no insurance on their home. The parents sleep in one bedroom, the boys sleep in the other, and Jose has made a bedroom on the porch for Anna. With some plywood and curtains, Anna has some privacy from her little brothers. The porch was destroyed during Hurricane Frances in the fall of 2004, and all of Anna's possessions were ruined by flooding water. The family received emergency assistance from FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) to fix their porch roof.

There are four televisions in the home: one in the living room, one in each bedroom, and one on the porch. Also in the living room is an entertainment center with a combination VCR, DVD, and music cassette player. Stacks of children's videos, DVD's, and Spanish music cassettes line the shelves of the entertainment center. Photos of the children at different ages and symbols of Jesus Christ adorn the walls of the living room. There are no books in the living room. In the boys' room, there is only enough space for two twin beds, a closet, and a dresser where the television sits. Toys and clothes cover the floor. The only rooms in the house with reading material or print are in the kitchen, where the refrigerator door is covered with school announcements and the school lunch menu, and on the porch, where a cardboard box is filled with old toys, coloring books, crayons, and school worksheets. Junior chooses a toy from this box and takes it outside to play with. When he gets bored with it, he drops it on the ground and goes to the box to retrieve another. Anna and Miguel discard their school worksheets in this box as well.

When the parents are not working and the children are not in school, the family life centers around several entities. Jose and his sons spend time daily maintaining, washing, and fixing the family's two vehicles—a minivan and a pick-up truck. The entire family participates in mending and watering the large garden of flowers and vegetables in the front of the house. Also, the family spends considerable amount of free time visiting their numerous Guatemalan relatives who live nearby, as well as hosting the relatives at their home during barbeques, informal meals, and celebrations. Jose played soccer with a team of Guatemalan immigrants before an injury made it difficult for him to run. Television is also a daily fixture in the family lifestyle. The children watch between four and five hours of programming a day. The parents watch Spanish programming at night after work.

By discussing details about the parents, children, home, and lifestyle of the Diaz family, their social and cultural world is presented. This background is intended to give the reader an insider's view into their lifestyle. To what extent reading and literacy experiences were observed in the household is discussed next in the findings section.

Findings

Two factors that influenced the home literacy environment of the Diaz family emerged from the data analysis. The first, bilingualism, created tension in the home between parents and children.

The second, cultural assimilation, was evident as Anna and Miguel embraced and emulated the popular, cultural entities they watched on television programs and commercials.

Bilingualism

Jose and Catarina do not speak English in the home or at work. Their lack of English speaking and reading abilities causes stress and confusion in daily interactions with the English-speaking world. For example, Jose cannot read the tax forms, bills, and other pertinent information that arrives in the mail. He asked me to read them to him and explain their meaning. The only mail he does try to read are coupons, advertising, and catalogs for car parts, Home Depot, K-Mart, and Walmart. When Jose's sixteen-year-old niece came from Guatemala to live with the family, Jose was able to get her employment as a dishwasher at a Mexican restaurant. The restaurant took advantage of the fact that neither Jose nor his niece knew English well enough to know that she was not being paid fairly for the work she was doing, or to understand wages and tips in the socioeconomic realm of restaurant culture. Subsequently, the niece stayed at the job for only a few weeks. Catarina interacts primarily with her Guatemalan relatives. "She wants to keep her Guatemalan culture," Anna tells me. She does not speak English to her children and only said words such as hi, hello, how are you, and thank you to me.

Anna and Miguel, on the other hand, are fluent in both English and Spanish. They speak English with each other and watch only English-speaking television. When their parents speak Spanish to them, they answer in English. Junior navigates between his Spanish-speaking parents and English-speaking siblings. "He doesn't talk very good," Jose tells me. The family is concerned that Junior is confused between the two languages. The only words I heard Junior say are in English, such as car, Spiderman, ball, candy. When I asked Anna and Miguel about Guatemala and their relatives, they did not want to talk about it. They said they will never go there. "I don't want to go there, I like it here," Anna told me. Both she and her brother have many friends in the neighborhood and at school who are not from Spanish-speaking families. Their interactions are with African-American and white neighbors and schoolmates, as well as cousins, neighbors and schoolmates of Hispanic families. During all of the social interactions I observed, the children spoke English. They appeared to have embraced popular American culture not only in language use, but also in their clothing styles, music preferences, food tastes, and hobbies.

Cultural Assimilation

The extent to which Catarina holds on to her Guatemalan roots by not learning English, interacting only with relatives and making traditional meals for her family is in direct contrast to the extent to which her children have assimilated to American culture. Anna showed me the lyrics to a popular rap song she had copied from an African-American friend at school. "I'm trying to memorize this rap," she told me as she sang the rhyme over and over with her African-American neighbor Vanessa. They danced and sang the lyrics, asking me to explain some of the words in the song like M.C., strut, and filet mignon. Anna follows all the popular teen series on the cable television networks Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, and the Disney Channel. She watches the series targeted for pre-teen girls on a daily basis and asked me each time I visited if I'd seen the latest shows. Anna loves to eat at fast food restaurants and wears jeans and T-shirts with sayings printed on them such as "Angel" or "Pretty in Pink." Anna enjoys cooking and I

observed her reading the directions and recipes for her EZ-Bake oven that she received as a birthday present. For a few months, she was keeping a diary where she wrote about her friends and family. Miguel stole the diary and, as a result, she never felt like writing in it anymore.

Miguel has also embraced the figures and hobbies of American popular culture. He spends his free time playing the card games of Pokemon and Yu-Gi-Oh. He reads the cards, collects them, and trades them with his friends. He also follows television series and discusses them continuously. His shows of choice are Power Rangers, Spiderman, and Japanese animation cartoons. Most of his clothing proclaims his enthusiasm for cartoon characters, action figures, and super heroes. All of my interactions with Miguel centered around his interests in these facets of television.

Even three-year-old Junior has his favorite super hero, Spiderman. Most of Junior's clothing and his bedding are covered with Spiderman images. Whenever I came to visit he said "Spiderman" to me and then did karate chops in the air. Jose is concerned about the excess television viewing of his children. "They watch too much T.V." he told me. Reading books did not appear to be an aspect of life that interested the children. I often observed Anna trying to motivate her little brother Miguel to practice his reading. He would systematically whine and refuse to do so.

To summarize, the home literacy environment of the Diaz family was influenced by two key factors—bilingualism and cultural assimilation. The parents in the home held on to their Guatemalan culture by keeping their language and cultural traditions alive. The children, on the other hand, spoke English and embraced popular American children's culture. Reading books or writing for communicative purposes did not appear to be a priority in the home. In the next section, I discuss educational implications for teachers who teach students like Anna and Miguel.

Educational Implications

Children from non-mainstream homes with language, economic, and cultural factors influencing their school success need schools and teachers who respect their diverse backgrounds. Schools need to reflect the literacy learning that occurs in diverse homes to provide opportunities for children to build upon their existing background knowledge (Campbell, 1998). Similarly, Janes and Kermani (2001) demonstrate ways in which a school's responses to nontraditional forms of literacy can be accurately identified and program implementation effectively modified to better serve non-mainstream children in school. Comber (2000) contends that schools and teachers need to make "ready" for different children, not only in terms of individual differences, but also in the kinds of differences in children's linguistic, social, economic, and cultural capital. Schools that value certain forms of knowledge over others create a cultural elitism that hinders alternative constructions of literacy:

Some cultures, and consequently the children representing those groups, do not believe in the autonomous, self-contained individual. The behavior, knowledge, and beliefs associated with individualism will not be valued or exhibited by all children. When institutions, such as schools, favor individualism over multiple views of human beings, a cultural elitism emerges for those younger human beings who are part of the group that values autonomy. (Cannella, 1997, p.39).

It is important that the words which become the starting point for learning to read and write come from the student's ideas, not from the teacher's reading book (Freire, 1970). By creating literacy experiences in schools that build upon student life experiences, teachers can make schools more open and inviting for children from diverse language, economic, and cultural backgrounds.

Conclusions

The literacy experiences of bilingual, immigrant families are influenced by various sociocultural contexts. Home, community, and school environments impact the reading and writing experiences of children growing up in Hispanic, low-income homes. To what extent the home literacy environment of the Diaz family is typical of other Guatemalan immigrant families remains to be examined. By investigating the roles literacy activities play in the culture of the home environment, what the functions and uses of reading and writing are in the daily life routines of the family members, and what types of print information and reading materials are available in the home, a portrait of a family's literacy environment emerged. The factors influencing the literacy development of the Diaz children were bilingualism and cultural assimilation. By sharing an insider's point of view of the home literacy experiences of a non-mainstream culture family, teachers can more fully understand and appreciate where diverse students are coming from when they hop off the school bus each morning. When teachers know who their students are in terms of their home environments, interests, hobbies, and routines, they can adapt the curriculum accordingly with nontraditional literacy experiences that respect the diverse language, economic, and cultural backgrounds of children from multicultural worlds.

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